

“The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill Podcast.” *Christianity Today*. Producer Mike Cospers. May–December 2021, 15 episodes.

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“The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill” is a podcast produced by *Christianity Today*’s Mike Cospers. It is a journalistic history of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington, which started with a handful of people in a living room in 1996, grew into one of the most influential cultural movements in recent evangelical history, and then collapsed in 2014 when its pastor Mark Driscoll resigned amid allegations of spiritual abuse, bullying and un-Christlike behavior.



Cospers spotlighted how the culture both inside and outside the church contributed to its growth as well as its ultimate demise. This story serves as a cautionary tale for churches today who fall prey to celebrity and don’t hold their leaders accountable, as well as leaders today who might seek celebrity and avoid accountability. He also aimed to create a safe public forum for those affected by the church’s 18-year roller coaster ride to talk about what happened, why we as a Christian community allowed it and how it affected us, and to give us space to collectively grieve together.

He expertly framed episodes, helping listeners understand the context that created the phenomenon. Episode 2, in particular, *Boomers, The Big Sort, and Really, Really Big Churches* turns the tapestry of Mars Hill upside down, exposing how the church reflected secular culture much more than Christian culture.

That view of the underside is what makes this podcast an invaluable asset for church leaders and missionaries. It is imperative that we ask the

questions: what kind of churches are we creating? Do they look like us? Do they look like the newest popular trend, or like the body of Christ?

Another invaluable take-away for missionaries and church leaders is to learn from the kind of transparency Cospers fosters. Churches in our lifetime have been rife with hidden sin, be it sexual abuse, power dynamics, or secret trauma. We are coming out of an age of cover-up. But Scripture shows a God who never protected his own reputation by covering sin. We need to stop protecting ours and call sin out.

Cospers did this and should be applauded, but we would be naïve not to question the motive and method just a bit, if only to give that accountability to CT that was remiss in Driscoll's ministry.

Although Cospers gave nuanced coverage to tough subjects and hurting people, we must remember that he is not an unbiased observer. As a young man, he was personally involved with the Acts 29 network that Driscoll helped popularize. In fact, it seems to be a bit of a personal healing journey, and we're along for the ride. Maybe that's what makes it so good. You feel his struggle with the "cultural phenomenon" that shaped his young Christian life.

But occasionally, it felt like Cospers and those he interviewed were enjoying themselves a little too much and the people listening were lapping it up. Cospers expertly showed how Mark Driscoll's celebrity led him to seek more celebrity instead of seeking more of God, how his persona and branding ran ahead of his character. But in that light, might CT have been seeking celebrity as well? The production was professional and polished, appealing and popular, celebrated and creative. In fact, it reminded me a bit of a church I once heard about.

As it rose in the charts, production slowed down and the intervening weeks were filled with bonus episodes that chased the rabbits that would draw in more listeners—what should have been 6 weeks turned into 6 months. Incendiary and provocative intro clips of Driscoll yelling at his congregation,

“Who the hell do you think you are?” served as a constant reminder of who the bad guy really was.

Why did we listen? Why did we become addicted to the point of pushing the podcast up to the #3 spot for multiple weeks in August? Was it for healing, or was it for the pure pleasure of the public spectacle?

These questions will prove invaluable as we head into uncharted waters. The popularity of this podcast will undoubtedly lead to copycats exposing other trauma in the church. We as the church culture need to make certain we aren’t too eager to hear, that we’re grieving and not gossiping. We need to do the hard work of keeping all of us accountable because whether we realize it or not, we are already blindly living the next chapter of the story. How are we letting our cancel culture, our love of public shaming, our obsession with calling out anything that hints of toxicity drive our churches? We must let only Scripture drive our churches, not culture.

I liked Cospers’s own description of what the podcast set out to be: “It’s a story about power, fame, and spiritual trauma—problems faced across the spectrum of churches in America. And yet, it’s also a story about the mystery of God, working in broken places.” Let’s remember that ultimately this is about God being at work in us, through us, despite us, and for His glory.