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Character, Charisma, Hope, and Healing: Reflections on The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill

Abstract

"In the face of giftedness, we can lose sight that the way of Christ is the way of the cross, of self-giving love."

Posting about the podcast *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Character, Charisma, Hope, and Healing: Reflections on *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*

Gayle Doornbos

September 13, 2021

Title: podcast *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*

Broadcaster: *Christianity Today*

Narrator: Mike Cospers

Start Date: June 21, 2021

End Date: August 30, 2021

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As I finished listening to “Who Killed Mars Hill?”, the first episode of the podcast series *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* produced by *Christianity Today* and hosted by Mike Cospers, I sat in stunned silence trying to process and metabolize all the lessons and questions raised by the episode. I, like many, am familiar with the Mars Hill story—its impressive rise to a church of more than 15,000 in the notoriously secular city of Seattle under Mark Driscoll and its meteoric fall in 2014. I lived in Seattle during the church’s heyday. I was also a college student when the evangelical ecclesial landscape in the United States was shaped by complex movements like the emergent church and the young, restless, and Reformed. I remember the way Mars Hill was held up as an exemplar of a kind of church and brand of ‘conservative’ Christianity that could succeed and reach America’s cities. I also remember how many (not all) detractors and critics displayed a certain amount of *schadenfreude* (pleasure or self-satisfaction from the troubles or misfortunes of another) when Mars Hill collapsed, as if the demise of the church represented a definitive verdict on Driscoll’s brand of Christianity.

Listening to the first episode, I was brought back into the story, but not simply as an analytical, academic observer doing a post-mortem on Mars Hill. Rather, the podcast invited me in as a fellow traveler within the complex and often marred landscape of American ecclesial life. As Cospers identifies in the first episode, this podcast is “the story of one church, who grew from a handful of people to a movement—and then collapsed almost overnight. 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.”¹ In other words, I and other listeners are invited to see the story of Mars Hill as a window into the devastating consequences of the misuse of power and the reality of spiritual trauma that occurs in churches across the spectrum—from large to small, denominational to non-denominational, urban to rural—as well as a

call to see how God's redemption can be found working in the midst of the wildernesses of abuse, trauma, and seemingly irredeemable catastrophes. Hence, my reaction of stunned silence. The podcast had done something surprising; it had made me wonder and reflect on more than just Mars Hill, but also on broader issues facing the church as a whole, as well as my own propensity to be caught up in systems or enamored by leaders whose ministries ends in waves of devastation.

As more episodes of the podcast are released,² there will be more to digest, analyze, and contemplate. And, if the responses on Twitter, Facebook, and other outlets are any indication, this podcast will be the impetus for many vital and vibrant discussions for months (and maybe years) to come over issues of theology, leadership, abuse, and church polity. Some of these will be more technical, such as whether Mark's brand of Reformed theology at Mars Hill truly represents the Reformed tradition or a weird cocktail the young, restless, and Reformed movement mixed with a shot of hyper masculinity and narcissism, and a dash of a particular subset of American evangelicalism, all put on the rocks of hipster, urban Seattle culture. Others will explore the particularities of church polity, examining how and why church structures can be built to propagate and promote toxic cultures and abusive leaders and whether denominational structures are actually able to provide safeguards and accountability.³ Along with these, there will also be frank and honest discussions about narcissism, leadership, and the place of story in the life of the church. While all of these discussions are worthwhile, it is the last set that has occupied my heart and mind since I started listening to the podcast, especially in terms of what it means for the church and our communal life together. My ruminations have led me to start exploring the following questions, which I hope to continue to ponder as the podcast continues.

1. WHY DO WE IN THE CHURCH SO EASILY CONFUSE GIFTS AND CHARISMA FOR LOVING, CHRIST-LIKE CHARACTER?

Throughout the podcast, one thing is clear: Mark Driscoll is incredibly gifted. Even if one does not agree with everything he teaches, his rhetorical abilities and capacity to teach cannot be denied. Previous members of Mars Hill interviewed in the podcast identify Mark's preaching as instrumental in their coming to Christ or their growth as believers. His ascendancy as a prominent voice—albeit sometimes controversial one—on the American Evangelical scene is due in no small measure to his charisma and ability to grow Mars Hill. However, behind the charisma, ability to grow a church, and teach clearly, the dark shadow side of Mark's leadership seemed to grow in tandem with his rising popularity. However, it seemed that until the end, those who were not within the inner circle continued to trust Mark and bestow authority on him in no small part because of his gifts.⁴ Thus, many within Mark's church saw him as a competent expert, growing a great church, but the fall revealed negligence and deep-seated, systemic issues.

Yet, this is not just a Mark or a Mars Hill problem. In her book, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*, Diane Langberg references Edwin Friedman, who identifies two qualities that American leadership often demands: expertise and charisma.⁵ Langberg, who was interviewed in the podcast, is a leading expert who works with clergy and survivors of trauma and abuse. In her book, she examines how the demands for expertise and charisma manifest themselves in American ecclesial life. Leaders are expected to be proficient and attractive, and their success is measured by external factors (like growth). When they are not, congregations can sometimes demand external excellence while ignoring character and growth in the fruits of the Spirit. Furthermore, when they are externally successful, not only is the inner life and character ignored or excused, but it is also assumed. In other words, we easily think that those who are externally successful and charismatic are also Christ-like and character-filled. In the face of giftedness, we can lose sight that the way of Christ is the way of the cross, of self-giving love.⁶

In some ways, this tendency may be novel given the unique combination of American culture and the way the internet allows for people's external capacities to be manifest (almost) completely abstracted from their inner lives. However, it is not new. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul identifies how it is possible to manifest incredible gifts of knowledge, speaking in tongues, prophesy, and even faith that moves mountains, but be absent of love. As Paul exhorts the Corinthians, void of love, one gains nothing from these gifts.

However, even if this is a novel expression of a perennial problem, it is still something we need to attend to seriously in the life of the church today. Why? Because as the Corinthians and the story of Mars Hill show, we are prone to excuse or assume character when gifts are evident. And, perhaps even more devastatingly, the combination of gifts without character is the ground in which abuses of all kinds (not just the ones at Mars Hill) can take root and grow. The wave of destruction that follows is incalculable, because it brings confusion, sorrow, and pain into the very core of the teachings one learned, trust one had, or life transformations that took place.

2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HEAR, HOLD, AND HONOR THE STORIES OF THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN ABUSED WITHIN CHURCHES?

The second question that has remained with me is one that has resonated throughout the podcast and Cosper's reflections on the rationale for CT taking up and telling the Mars Hill story.⁷ Cosper makes it clear that his intent is not to air the church's dirty laundry but to tell a complex story that forces us to listen with empathy and wisdom to the voices behind the headlines. This raises the important question, what does it mean to hear, hold, honor, and seriously attend to those how have been wounded? In some ways, one could see the podcast as seeking to present a model for what it means to listen, hear, hold, and honor the stories of those who not only left Mars Hill as 'the walking wounded' but others as well.

To be clear, not that every story needs a nation-wide podcast. But the podcast models how these stories need time, empathy, tender care, and wise responses of serious attention that do not seek to quickly cover the harm as if it was easily resolvable or not that bad. Why? Because silence can have devastating effects. As Diane Langberg in *Redeeming Power* once again illuminates, silence about abuse or quickly rushing past the pain is often done out of a good motive: “a desire to protect the name of our God.”⁸ However, while the impetus towards silence may be noble, results in more harm for everyone involved. First, it does not provide the space for true repentance and transformation. And, second the “victim assume that God is also silent.”² leaving the vulnerable to feel as though God is absent.

As 1 John 1:6-7 teaches us, all of us are called to bring that which is in the dark to the light. Sin brought to the Light reveals its true horror as its illuminating rays beam into every twisted and horrible spot. Sin kept hidden allows darkness to reign, perpetuating despair and cycles of devastation. In the light, the devastating consequences of sin are seen for what they truly are: dehumanizing and wounding. And, when brought to the light, we can also start to see how the God who is the light, slowly, faithfully, and truly brings restoration into the messiness and pain of life.

As the story of Mars Hill is brought into the light, we begin to see a little answer to what it means to hold, hear, and honor the stories of pain and abuse in our churches. We also see that this is not a simple process with a neat and tidy bow at the end of the journey. But it is a journey worth embarking on. The Mars Hill story shows that there are layers of complexity and pain that will take years to unravel and time to heal and understand. However, it also shows the power of these stories because they call us back to the God who can and does work mysteriously in the midst of brokenness, the God who heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds (Psalm 147:3).

What can and does this look like on the ground of the local church? For that, I think we are wise to head another lesson from the podcast, turn to experts who understand and know this kind of work well and can lead communities and individuals wisely through what it means to listen, hold, honor, and attend.

As with the podcast, my reflection on these questions is still in process. I am looking forward to discussions around these issues another other questions brought up through *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*. In our responses and discussions, I am hopeful that, in the words of the theme song to the podcast by King’s Kaleidoscope God will ‘paint the beauty we split.’¹⁰ In other words, that God will continue to paint stories of redemption, healing, and restoration into the beauty that has often been split and rent asunder in the countless churches who resonate in some small way with the kind of story the podcast tells.

1. "Who Killed Mars Hill?"
2. At the time of writing this reflection, four of twelve planned episodes have been released.
3. As a life-long member of the Christian Reformed Church, I have already witnessed some comments in personal conversations in response to this podcast within my denominational circles about how good it is to be a part of a denomination. However, recent church scandals and reports of abuses within the orbit of denominational churches show that having a different church polity alone does not resolve these problems.
4. The whole story is more complex than this, of course, but readers who want to know more will just have to go listen to the podcast
5. Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, 128
6. One must be careful here not to make the mistake of assuming that anyone who is gifted and charismatic is automatically void of love and Christ-like character. That approach would fall into the trap of assuming something about someone's interior life based on external realities.
7. Cospers reflects on this at the end of "Who Killed Mars Hill."
8. Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, 137.
9. Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, 137.
10. Kings Kaleidoscope, "Sticks and Stones."