

So What Do We Do Now With Mark Driscoll?

Seattle megachurch pastor Mark Driscoll has thrived on controversy since he began Mars Hill Church in 1996. His tough-guy image, in-your-face style and distressed jeans made him the ultimate Cool Preacher Dude, especially for young men who regularly enjoyed his non-religious gospel on YouTube. Driscoll became an evangelical celebrity, and his congregation—which is reaching one of the most unchurched regions of the country—quickly grew to 14,000 members among 15 locations.

But Driscoll's ministry hit hard times last week when leaders of Acts 29, a church network Driscoll founded, broke ties with him and charged him with “ungodly and disqualifying behavior.” Acts 29 leader Matt Chandler said Driscoll doesn't show signs of repentance. As a result, LifeWay Stores, a large network of Christian retail outlets in the country, pulled Driscoll's books from its shelves and website.

What did Driscoll do to trigger this reaction? Critics have been after Driscoll for years. Conservatives dislike the 43-year-old pastor because he uses crude language in the pulpit and he tells his young audiences there's nothing wrong with sex toys or tattoos. More liberal critics have denounced his views on women (he believes the American church is “chickified” by women and weak men, especially male worship leaders he considers effeminate).

Other critics were horrified that Driscoll's 2012 book *Real Marriage* endorsed oral and anal sex and encouraged wives to engage in such behavior even if they didn't enjoy it. In 2007, Driscoll preached a sermon in Scotland in which he told women it was their Christian duty to perform oral sex on their husbands.

Ultimately, former members of Driscoll's own church brought the most stinging charges against him. People who were once a part of Mars Hill began airing stories of spiritual abuse. They claimed that Driscoll consolidated power, mistreated people, and created an unhealthy culture in which questions weren't allowed. The pressure to ask Driscoll to step down intensified.

Now, Driscoll has been backed into a corner. Baptists have banned his books. Former members have mobilized public forums to denounce his leadership. And his closest associates have asked him to step down. But Driscoll is a fighter who loves martial arts, so it will not be unlike him if he comes out swinging.

I hope Driscoll resigns so he can find healing. Meanwhile, I'm concerned for the church. Here we go again: Another embarrassing scandal involving a high-profile leader, this time in a city where Christianity is viewed with intense skepticism. How could this have been avoided?

I want to get on my soapbox and remind everybody that there really are biblical requirements for leadership, and that we should not follow pastors who disregard those rules—no matter how popular they are on Twitter or how many books they sell.

As the Mars Hill saga unfolds, more and more former members and even former elders are telling how toxic the church became because of Driscoll's heavy-handed leadership style. Such behavior should never be tolerated—not by members of a congregation or by leaders who provide oversight. I'm glad the Acts 29 leaders had the guts to challenge it.

This is a good time to remind people of the warning signs of an unhealthy church:

1. Little or no accountability. When celebrity preachers seem eager to tell everyone else what to do but aren't willing to hear correction from others, prepare for a train wreck. There

is safety in the multitude of counselors (see Prov. 11:14). There is much less safety—even danger—when a leader does not seek counsel from a diverse group of his peers.

2. Spiritual elitism. If there is a spirit of control in a church, people are usually told their group is superior. If people choose to leave, they are shunned or branded as renegades. Sometimes, in extreme cases, people are even cursed if they leave. This cultic behavior inflicts unimaginable emotional suffering and also divides families.

3. An oppressive atmosphere. Authoritarian leaders control people through manipulation. This may come in the form of threats, legalistic demands, unreasonable requirements or false doctrines. In such a church no one is allowed to ask questions. Spiritual heaviness lies like a thick cloud over the congregation, and few believers manifest genuine joy.

4. Angry domination. Tyrants are surprisingly similar. Because they want to control their surroundings, they often blow up when people do not conform to their demands. Yet the apostle Paul taught that church leaders should not be “violent” or “quarrelsome” but “self-controlled” and “gentle” (see 1 Tim. 3:2-3). He also instructed Timothy that the Lord’s servant “must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone” (2 Timothy 2:24).

5. A low view of women. While churches today differ in their views on women in leadership, it should be noted that authoritarian churches almost always discourage women from pursuing *any* genuine role in ministry. Women are viewed as useful only in their functions as submissive wives and mothers, and they are not encouraged to step beyond these confines to pursue ministry opportunities.

Let’s pray that the healing power of Jesus covers this situation in Seattle—and that the people who left Mars Hill Church, the people who remain there, and Mark Driscoll himself

can recover from the trauma of spiritual abuse.

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