

The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill is conspicuously silent on race

Mark Driscoll's megachurch radicalized White men by weaponizing the White nuclear family.

by [Sara Williams](#) in the [March 9, 2022](#) issue



The former site of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, the subject of a popular podcast. Photo by Joe Wolf (used via Creative Commons license)

It came to be known as the body parts chapel.

In spring 2004, I was a junior at Moody Bible Institute, the Bible college in Chicago founded in 1886 by famed evangelist D. L. Moody. When I was there, the college's culture was steeped in the "New Calvinism," a fundamentalist expression of Reformed theology as popularized by, among others, John Piper, Wayne Grudem, and a controversial young pastor from Seattle named Mark Driscoll.

At Moody, students were subject to social shaming if they questioned New Calvinist tenets such as five-point Calvinism (the rejection of theologies inspired by 16th-century Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius) and complementarianism (the assignment of distinct gender roles, with an emphasis on male headship of the nuclear family). I therefore found it both surprising and exciting when the school

scheduled a chapel service in which Jill and Stuart Briscoe, an egalitarian couple who led a teaching ministry called Telling the Truth, would debate Reformed pastor Tim Bayly and author Barbara Hughes, both outspoken complementarians.

The chapel was a lightning rod. Moody's Torrey-Gray Auditorium was packed, the front row filled with White male students electric with anticipation. As the debate went on, Bayly became increasingly agitated. Finally, having no biblical rebuttals left, he blurted out angrily, "Just think about body parts!" The front row of young men cheered.

Twenty years later, the body parts chapel still lives in infamy at Moody. Those critical of the college's culture of complementarianism link it to Moody's well-documented history of covering up sexual harassment and assault, which last year led to an independent investigation of Moody's Title IX practices and resulted in the early retirement of longtime dean of students Timothy Arens.

Bayly, however, believes he won the 2004 debate. In a 2018 blog post, he recalls the event and notes "the Briscoes' decadence," calling Stuart Briscoe a "pandering excuse for a minister of the Word." In the same post, Bayly writes of chastising Johnny Miller, then president of Columbia Bible College (now Columbia International University), for removing complementarianism from the school's doctrinal positions. In Bayly's telling, Miller defended the decision, saying:

The school was trying to expand its enrollment of African American students coming from churches and homes where male authority was denied. The school couldn't expand its reach into the African American community if it continued to teach the Bible's doctrine of sexuality.

Bayly's implication is clear: theology that doesn't affirm the moral superiority of the White, heteropatriarchal nuclear family is responsible for the decline in Bible college attendance because it is contrary to God's word.

There is no shortage of critiques of complementarianism. Scholars Jessica Johnson and Kristin Kobes Du Mez have devoted monographs to how it erases women's agency and cultivates aggressive attitudes and behaviors among men. Popular author Rachel Held Evans developed a huge following exposing the absurdity and harmfulness of New Calvinist images of "biblical manhood and womanhood."

Most recently, *Christianity Today's* 12-part podcast *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* reignited conversations within and outside of evangelicalism about the harms of complementarian theology. The podcast chronicles the 2014 collapse of Driscoll's Mars Hill Church, a White evangelical megachurch empire that recast the New Calvinism as punk within the context of Seattle's liberal secular culture.

In contrast to the ostensibly softer complementarianism promoted by New Calvinist leaders such as John Eldredge and Tim Keller, in the early 2000s Driscoll became known for "militant masculinity." He used violent street fighting imagery and military metaphors to offer the men in his congregation moral instruction, casting them as physical protectors of their wives and children. Men who did not adhere to this aggressive and authoritarian persona were shamed. Driscoll regularly called them "pussified" and "homo," simultaneously denigrating women and LGBTQ people.

Such aggressive complementarian teaching didn't just center men; it was *for* men. Women were flat characters for whom Driscoll had little direct concern. He would at times refuse to speak directly to women in his congregation, insisting he "reserved the right" to address only their husbands as the "head of household." Under his online pseudonym William Wallace II (*Braveheart* was another model for Driscoll's militant masculinity), Driscoll once claimed that God created women "to serve as penis 'homes' for lonely penises."

Mars Hill's exponential growth in the early 2000s seemed to prove that patriarchy with an air of nonconformity and aggression worked for antiestablishment Gen Xers. In the podcast's first episode, host Mike Cospoer notes that for most Mars Hill members, Driscoll's "language, his attitude, his views on masculinity and sexuality, and his general posture towards the world" were "features, not bugs." But these are not complementarianism's only problems. Bayly's blog post casting the White, heteropatriarchal nuclear family structure as biblically mandated and dismissing matriarchal African American family configurations as outside of God's will suggests the movement has a major race problem as well. On this, the podcast is silent.

It's a striking omission in our current historical moment, in which social media has awakened White Americans to how police officers profile, harass, and kill Black people with impunity, in which White supremacists organize violent rallies, in which we witnessed an angry White mob storm the US Capitol to attempt a coup d'état. While the behind-the-scenes role of women in the alt-right has been underexamined,

it remains true that the majority of racially motivated domestic terrorists in the United States are radicalized White men whose extremist views extend both to gender and to race. Mark Driscoll's calls to White men channeled not only male rage but also White rage.

Historian Carol Anderson coined the term *white rage* to describe White backlash to Black progress. "White rage," Anderson writes, "manages to maintain not only the upper hand but also, apparently, the moral high ground." It frames itself as blameless in the face of violence and chaos. It is hidden in the subtext of calls for "law and order" in response to the protests of the killing of George Floyd and in accusations of voter fraud when majority Black and Brown districts determine electoral outcomes. It is a mirage of the good and the just where there is rotten fruit, the same sort of mirage that masked the slow rot of Mars Hill Church.

"Racism," writes historian Anthea Butler in *White Evangelical Racism*, "is a feature, not a bug, of American evangelicalism," using the same turn of phrase Cosper used to describe the appeal of Driscoll's misogyny to Mars Hills members. Going back to Billy Graham's crusades (a racially charged word choice in itself), she reveals how the man thought of as America's pastor embraced a "color-blind Christology" and an "evangelical gentility" that acknowledged racial injustice as a problem while refusing "to break ranks with the white status quo." Graham also fervently promoted what Butler calls an "Americanist" Christianity that lifted up the United States "as a great and moral nation," without regard for any of our national sins.

These ideologies commingled and matured into a White evangelical nationalism that looked on its face to be racially benign. Evangelicals used "the color-blind gospel," writes Butler, "to affirm that everyone, no matter what race, is equal and that race does not matter." Meanwhile, religious right movements like the Moral Majority and later the Tea Party actively worked to undercut legislation that would protect racial minorities, supported policies that would deeply harm Black and Brown communities, and did everything they could "to keep African Americans and other ethnic groups out of positions of power." Butler shows how White supremacy and patriarchy have historically functioned as codependent ideologies masked by theological and moral norms. Slaveholder religion, she contends, morphed in expression but not character through the history of White evangelicalism.

The complementarian nuclear family has been a particularly useful tool for White evangelicals in this regard, because it preserves White male power along both

gender and racial lines. In the complementarian framework, a White woman is the innocent, nurturing foil to her husband, the family's strong spiritual leader. To maintain her purity, a woman must remain under the authority of her father until she is married, at which time she comes under the authority of her husband. Once married, a wife's confinement to the domestic sphere protects her purity, and her care work becomes a life source for the family. The godly, pure White woman at the heart of the household imbues the nuclear family with its sacred aura.

For such a construction to work, there must be something for White men to protect White women *from*. Their purity is only meaningful if it stands in contrast to what is dangerous and impure. White evangelical racism presents a ready-made bogeyman to fill this role. While the home of the White nuclear family is cast as the locus of moral virtue and safety, the inner city—a euphemistic reference to Black people—is a vile den of sin rather than a casualty of systemic disinvestment and racial discrimination.

Until recently there was a strikingly literal rendering of this on display at the Creation Museum in Kentucky. Until 2019, the conservative evangelical institution depicted the garden of Eden as a lush, idyllic environment populated by wax figures of a White Adam and Eve—for complementarians, symbols of innocence and the heteropatriarchal created order. Meanwhile, the Fall was a dark room stylized as an urban ghetto, with sirens blaring and graffitied walls resembling a dense public housing complex.

While such a portrayal points to a particular history of anti-Black racism in White evangelicalism, constructions of dangerous racial others have adapted with the times. After 9/11, Arab men were framed as “violent terrorists.” Recent anti-immigrant sentiment has portrayed Latin American men as drug dealers and rapists.

This commingling of patriarchy and racism found unique expression in the New Calvinism. The emphasis on total depravity and limited atonement creates a Christianity centered on self-loathing and constant anxiety as to whether one is truly “saved.” This is quite effective at keeping everyone in their place. Great pains are taken to adhere to the role God has ordained for you, lest your election come into question.

For White women, such adherence means becoming a virtuous and godly wife who exists to manage domestic life and serve her husband and children. For non-White

people, this means adhering to White norms, including gender roles, household configurations, and forms of worship. Any doubts that might arise in one's mind are quickly vanquished as evidence of the corruption of one's intellect. Because these demands are framed soteriologically rather than sociologically, they are justified as a color-blind morality system. Everyone—female, male, Black, Brown, or White—may be among the elect, the logic goes, evidenced by faithful living within a White heteropatriarchal social construct. The New Calvinism was built from the studs out to maintain White male dominance.

Given the influence of the New Calvinism, it is unsurprising that Moody Bible Institute has seen public scandal around race as well as gender. In 2015, flyers for an event on White privilege hosted by the African American student group Embrace were defaced on Moody's campus. In response, Bryan Litfin, then a professor of theology and church history at Moody, posted on Facebook that the term *White* is "unworthy of Christian discourse." The *Chicago Tribune* picked up the story, and Litfin responded in a letter to the editor in Moody's student newspaper expressing regret that he had snidely taken to social media but defending his critique of the phrase "White privilege" on theological grounds. He writes:

The term can contradict God's approval of the very things that convey historical privileges. Consider how some Americans of all races have reached privileged positions today: through stable family units that saved money and passed wealth to their descendants. Most Caucasians aren't the offspring of slave owners, but merely of hard-working forefathers who did what was right.

Litfin's letter received significant pushback from the Moody student body and even some faculty. Yet it points to how the White nuclear family is used as a subterfuge against racial truth telling in evangelical culture. At Moody, this has created space not only for blatantly racist acts such as the use of blackface or the waving of a police baton in a Black student's face but also for policies and subtle microaggressions that conflate White culture with morality and theological orthodoxy.

Mars Hill's militant brand of complementarianism was even more brazen, weaponizing the White nuclear family as a way to radicalize White men. For Driscoll, the heteropatriarchal nuclear family was not merely morally normative, it was an AK-

47 ready to mow down twin threats to male power in America: the threat from within posed by a feminized secular culture and the threat from without posed by foreign challenges to an “American” way of life. “Driscoll believed it was his task to keep Christian men battle-ready, an especially critical task in the wake of 9/11,” writes Kobes Du Mez in *Jesus and John Wayne*. “Mars Hill men watched war movies, spoke in a martial dialect, and participated in spiritual warfare ‘boot camps.’”

The podcast finale includes a clip of Driscoll preaching on Revelation 19:

And behold! A white horse. I love this! How many of you grew up watching westerns? The good guy always rides the white horse—it’s biblical! . . . This is the ultimate fighter Christ. A hip-hop buddy of mine calls it “thug Jesus.”

Following this clip is one from an interview with Chuck DeGroat, professor of pastoral care at Western Theological Seminary:

What we’re seeing today in our world is people gather around particular people, particular movements, and attach themselves to it for a sense of power: I feel small, I feel insignificant, I feel like I’m lacking, I don’t feel like people are taking my story seriously, I feel like I’m the forgotten man. But when I attach myself to the movement, to the figure, now I feel strong, I feel large, I feel important.

Jesse Bryan, Mars Hill’s former creative director, echoes DeGroat:

When you’re a young man especially, very few people actually challenge you, because usually they don’t know what to do with you. . . . And then you have somebody who challenges you and is like, “Hey! Stop being stupid. Put your pants on. Get your shit together. Stop being so selfish.” And then you start doing those things and you start going, “I feel better about myself.”

“That’s what we see in contexts where cult leaders, terrorist leaders, recruit young men for a particular kind of cause,” DeGroat concludes. “You’re really preying on the insecurities of young men who are longing to be plugged into something.”

Cosper draws all of these reflections together to answer the podcast’s central question, “Who killed Mars Hill?” The conclusion is that Mars Hill died at the hands of

its narcissistic, charismatic leader. But why do elements of this story continue to play out in evangelicalism like a bad rerun, from Ted Haggard to Bill Hybels to James MacDonald to Ravi Zacharias? This is a question the podcast, in its early episodes, promises to address. To do so would require an exploration not only of the story of one leader and the individual lives he affected but of how racism and patriarchy have sustained evangelicalism itself.

There are a number of moments when Coper almost takes up such a structural analysis. Episode 9, “The Bobby Knight Problem,” examines patterns related to abusive White men in power, comparing Driscoll to notoriously ruthless Indiana basketball coach Bobby Knight. Coper identifies how systems protect charismatic leaders because of their centrality to an institutional brand. He interrogates, to some degree, how capitalism requires this. But time and again, Coper retreats from the broader implications of the story he’s telling in order to focus on individual testimonies of the impact of Mark Driscoll’s toxic masculinity on the members of his church. Listeners are left alone with the unacknowledged elephant in the room: the toxic theology that brought down Mars Hill is also a feature, not a bug, of White evangelicalism. Unless evangelicals come to terms with this deeper sin, White male evangelical leaders will continue to radicalize men as foot soldiers in the battle to maintain White male supremacy in the pulpit and the nation.

Meanwhile, Mark Driscoll is still pastoring. In 2016, he planted Trinity Church in Scottsdale, Arizona, and launched a new brand, RealFaith. We might call him a spiritual predator, again radicalizing White men through his angry, heteropatriarchal, racialized messaging, adapted for the times. In the early 2000s, it made sense for him to make the “Muslim terrorist” the bogeyman. Now it’s critical theory, as embodied by university professors and Black Lives Matter activists. In a teaching video on the RealFaith website, Driscoll calls critical theory Satan’s “counterfeit” version of God’s constructive theological order:

The critical theory counterfeit of [our sinful nature] is that it is not the sin nature you are born with that is the fallen part of you. It is your race, it is your gender, it is your ethnicity. . . . We are accusing people, attacking people, maligning people, destroying people, and it is considered justice to destroy people and attack them.

It is hard to miss that by “people,” Driscoll means White men. These are, after all, the people whose power is at stake in telling the truth about race. It turns out Driscoll’s punk ethic is nothing more than evangelicalism’s White male rage warmed over. Taking up the hard truth about what killed Mars Hill would require more than individual repentance and healing. It would require a reckoning with the racism baked into evangelicalism itself.

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