

## **Concerns and Critical Information for the Elders of Mars Hill Church**

### **Grace and Peace**

*"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." - 2 Thessalonians 2:2*

Fellow elders,

We love you, this church, and the people that Jesus has entrusted to our care.

Pastor Mark, we love you and have been immensely blessed under your preaching, and for that we are grateful.

Pastor Dave, we love you and we are thankful for the love you show to us and all those in your care, and also for your calm and clear-headed leadership in tough situations.

Pastor Sutton, we love you and are thankful that you care deeply for Mars Hill Church.

Additionally, we are thankful to the men of the BOAA for the time and energy they have given to love our church and our leaders well.

We are convicted that as we are all elders, pastors, shepherds, we equally share the responsibility for the care of the people God has entrusted to us. And it is because of this conviction and a love for the church that we are compelled to speak up. We are seriously concerned about the state of our church, especially the state our leadership at the highest levels and our continued lack of transparency in general. While the current bylaws greatly restrict our authority, we believe we must act like elders none-the-less. There is information in this letter that we believe to be important to the future of Mars Hill Church and our response to it may impact whether or not it will even have a future at all.

### **Come Into The Light**

In John 3:21 we read this: "...whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God." Brothers, have we been a church that is characterized by coming towards and loving the light? Do we welcome the light, trusting God's grace and mercy when our weaknesses and failures are exposed?

The media has been inundated, especially in the last two years and increasingly in the past six months, with controversies surrounding Mars Hill and Pastor Mark. While some of these accusations may be groundless or exaggerated, we believe that in many cases we have invited these controversies upon ourselves by not seeking the truth and not seeking to be in the light.

Where there is nothing to hide, there is no fear of being exposed. But, rather than seeking clarity, we have cloaked ourselves in non-disclosure agreements. We have become masters of spin in how we communicate the transition of a high volume of people off staff. We have taken refuge behind official statements that might not technically be lies on the surface, but in truth are deeply misleading.

At the retreat this week, Pastor Dave spoke about our church's credibility problem. Brothers, this credibility problem is directly linked to the fact that we have not loved the light.

This is not the fault of one person, or even a just a small group of people. We all share in responsibility for this in one way or another, and we must all repent of it together, together calling for our church to step into the light.

### **Exposing The Darkness**

It is out of a longing to come to the light that we began to look more deeply into certain issues when the answers that we were being given — answers that were being given to our people — continued to not add up. We sought clarity, which has been lacking. We do not believe that looking for answers, asking questions, and trying to discern the truth is a divisive or sinful thing. Rather, this is the responsibility we have as elders as we are called to lead our people and the church from a position of truth and love. To ask us not to do so would only be to further exasperate the "culture of fear" that we so desperately want to move away from.

We would like to share with you the following two examples, as they were both misrepresented this past week at our elder retreat before the Full Council of Elders. We are not inferring intent or motives, but rather we are attempting to call attention to discrepancies and to resolve them.

### ***BOAA/EE Statements Claim That We Had No Way to Interview Witnesses from Dave Kraft's Formal Charges***

We have been repeatedly told that we could not hear from the witnesses mentioned in the document. This did not add up, since the document clearly states that there were seven individuals who were willing to testify when called upon, and Dave Kraft stated clearly that he hoped that they *would* be called upon.

Through conversations separately with Dave Kraft and Michael Van Skaik, I (Dustin) finally got clarity on this on Tuesday morning at the elder retreat. The issue was not that the BOAA "*could not*" interview the witnesses, but rather that Michael Van Skaik "*would not*" open an investigation without Dave Kraft giving him the names first. This seems to be a completely unreasonable and unnecessary demand when the charges themselves reveal that the witnesses felt bullied and were afraid of the consequences of releasing their names outside of the protection of a formal investigation being opened. Mike Wilkerson, who helped prepare the charges for Dave, confirms that he recommended to Dave that the names of the witnesses be disclosed only after they were protected by a formal investigation process. Mike made this recommendation in part due to his perception of the danger and fear involved for the witnesses, and also because he had knowledge that a prior complaint had not been handled according to the complainant's expectation of confidentiality, resulting in further harm to the complainant. Furthermore, this charge was not coming from an unknown critic, but rather Dave Kraft who is a respected former elder and Christian leader. Because of his reputation we should have been willing to give greater credence to his charges and want to hear them out. Regardless of whether this was a wise or helpful decision by the BOAA, it is clearly misleading to state emphatically over and over that there was *no way* to talk to these people and hear their testimony, when clearly there was.

This is no minor issue as we have been consistently misled about the *key* reason the Kraft charges were handled the way they were. How can Van Skaik claim that "the formal charges that were filed were...taken seriously and were not dismissed by the board lightly," when he would not even open the case to hear from the actual witnesses? Sending out letters to former employees in an effort to find these people or others who experienced similar situations seems to be a failed effort from the start, for the same reason that the 7 would not release their names unless as witnesses in an official investigation. Because of this refusal, it

is misleading to claim that the charges were taken seriously when the witnesses were never even interviewed. Michael Van Skaik confirmed this week that no formal investigation was ever opened in response to Dave Kraft's charges filed last year.

### ***Public Statements Claim That There Was No Contact Between Mark/BOAA and A29 Board Prior To A29 Removing MH From Network***

We have been repeatedly told that no one from the A29 board talked to Mark or to our board prior to removing Mark from the network. This is only true if by "talk" you mean "told us beforehand that they were kicking us out," *and* if you dismiss contact between individual board members with Mark and with each other. The impression created by these statements was one where it seemed that the A29 board had made their decision having had no communication with people close to Mark or with Mark himself, with no actual insight into the situation, and with no care for Mark or Mars Hill. The truth is that multiple members of both boards had been in direct contact with each other, and with Mark, exhorting and rebuking him over the course of months and years, and to say or imply otherwise is deeply misleading. Paul Tripp has confirmed that he specifically was in contact multiple times, while on the BOAA, with Matt Chandler, Steve Timmis, and Eric Mason about the state of Pastor Mark's repentance.

To be fair, when specifically pressed on the issue at the elder retreat, Van Skaik did admit that he was sure that some members of the two boards had been in contact with each other individually, and clarified that they had not met together as full boards. But this does not change the fact that we have not corrected our public statements and rhetoric, nor does it change the fact that Van Skaik would not have admitted this without being pressed into by Pastor Miles during our first session at the retreat. As a whole, MH's communication surrounding this event is very misleading.

### ***An On-Going Pattern***

Beyond these two examples, there is no dearth of examples in the last two years of very questionable transparency and truth-telling, including the Mars Hill Global Fund, Result-Source, Strange Fire, ghost-writing/plagiarism, explanations for staff transition, the resignations of BOAA members, etc. Even this Thursday we put out a statement claiming that Wilkerson's formal charges were being "reviewed by the board and the elders." This is misleading as it gives people the impression that the elders as a whole are able to take part in reviewing and adjudicating the case.

There are many problems in our church, but the lack of transparency is itself a huge problem and keeps us from dealing with all the problems that it covers over. Christians have a biblical responsibility to speak plainly and clearly.

### ***"Mars Hill Needs To Deal With It's Sin Or It Will Die" (Dr. Paul Tripp)***

This talk of transparency leads us to share some staggering information that was shared with a number of MH elders by Dr. Paul Tripp.

Before going further, we want to make clear the following three things:

- 1. Paul did not seek us out, but rather was sought out by us.*
- 2. At every point in our communication with Paul, he was emphatic in expressing his deep love for Pastor Mark and for Mars Hill Church.*
- 3. At no time did Paul divulge any information from his private interactions with Pastor Mark, and made clear that he would not do so in the future.*

We are very grateful for Paul sticking out his neck to help serve Jesus' church and to care for his brother Mark.

Let's stop for a moment and anticipate what might be an objection here, namely that this is just the opinion of one man. Why should we listen to Paul Tripp at all?

- He is known internationally as a pastor to pastors.
- He has worked in a similar capacity as he did at Mars Hill with literally thousands of pastors and ministries.
- He has taught Re:Train.
- He has preached in our Best Sermon Ever series.
- He has taught parenting seminars at Mars Hill.
- We obviously trust him to the point that we elected him to our BOAA and we recommend and give away his book on what it means to truly means to be a pastor (*Dangerous Calling*).
- His book (*Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*) is foundational to our biblical counseling ministry.
- He had a level of access and involvement with the events of the last few months that exceeds that of anyone reading this email.
- He has absolutely nothing to gain personally by speaking to us on these matters, but is fully aware of this action potentially causing him much personal hardship.
- Above all continues to deeply love Pastor Mark and wants good for our church, evidenced by his willingness to continue to help.

All nine elders who were on the phone call were floored by the depth and clarity of the understanding that Paul had of the culture of Mars Hill and its leadership from his short time on the board. Below are some samples from our conversation:

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When asked about speculations that he might have resigned to protect the reputation of his ministry, Paul said this: *"I am not worried at all at burning my integrity for the real deal, but I won't burn it for something that's not the real deal. I don't think even now that there is the recognition of the depth of what Mars Hill Church and Mark is actually dealing with. **This is without a doubt, the most abusive, coercive ministry culture I've ever been involved with.**"* He continued on to communicate that Mars Hill's leadership culture was not shaped by the same grace that it says it believes.

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Paul informed us that at one point that during the time when he was setting up the reconciliation process, the EE, without asking the BOAA, met with their lawyers and added a slew of legal constraints to the process. Paul was emphatic in telling the EE that this was unacceptable, but they did not listen, and consequently hindered the process. Paul was disturbed that anything would be seen as more important in this process than being made right with man and with God. *"If your response to reconciliation is 'I want to cover my butt legally, then you're not interested in reconciliation.'"*

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Contrary to what we have been told, Paul not only expressed his opinion that the BOAA structure was flawed, he attempted to present a 9 point plan on how to help it and was shut down before he finished point 2. He also said that *"One of the problems with the BOAA is that they are getting their information from the people they are supposed to be holding accountable."*

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Paul characterized Pastor Mark's half hour video message as "defiant." It was specifically defiant in light of Mark saying he's going to be at MH in 30 years when Paul had clearly told him that he needed to step down. He clarified that this stepping down was "not forever. But given the depth of the heart issues that Mark needs to deal with, **he'll never deal with as long as he's in the saddle. It just won't happen.**"

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Paul also said, "I am a man who is living in grief at this whole thing...because Mark is an enormously gifted man. But he is broken inside. He doesn't see the world the way he should see it, and because of that, his message gets a twist to it. There is something amiss inside that comes out in a destructive way."

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Paul affirmed that he believes that Pastor Mark truly loves Jesus and the church and that if Mars Hill does what is right, the brightest days for Mark and MH are in the future.

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**"You can't have a church culture where you essentially have a very tight circle and everyone else is your enemy."**

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"Sutton is fundamentally unhelpful for Mark. Sutton plays to all of Mark's weaknesses and none of Mark's strengths." He pleaded with them saying that what Mark needs in an Executive Pastor is a "55 year-old seasoned godly man who watches over Mark's soul as he administrates the church, and who can pull Mark into a room and say 'you can't do that in a meeting' and you need to call another meeting and ask for forgiveness from the people you just spoke to. He doesn't need a man who is his trigger man." He made it clear that Sutton lacks the emotional and spiritual maturity to be where he is at in leadership.

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From behind the scenes on the BOAA Paul observed that "A statement that comes from somebody, through Sutton, to you guys, just changes dramatically." He followed this by saying that he did not think Sutton intended to be consistently untruthful, but that regardless he does end up spinning things constantly out of fear.

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Paul acknowledged some level of Mark acknowledging wrong and making some progress. But, he also feels that if Mark clearly saw the depths of his sin and the damage it had caused, he wouldn't even be able to preach because he would be so overcome with life-changing grief. "What happens with leaders often in these situations is that they give you one paragraph of acknowledgement of wrong, and 6 paragraphs of how they are a victim. If I'm counselling an adulterous man, and he sits in front of me and all he talks about is his wife, I know that man is far from confession and repentance. Because once he sees his sin it is devastating and you cry out for God... You think about your future, you don't think about how to manage it. **Until you get to that level of brokenness, what you do is manage a crisis, instead of dealing with the deep personal sin at the bottom of the crisis.**"

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I (Dustin) had a follow up call with Paul later to confirm that he was comfortable with us sharing all of this with the other elders in writing. Additionally, I confirmed that he would be willing to help us in the future. He confirmed that we could share the above with you, that he would be happy to fly out and meet with the Full Council of Elders if we asked, and would be willing to help in any kind of consulting role that we might deem helpful.

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The elders on the initial call with Dr. Tripp ended the conversation by asking him what advice he had for the elders of Mars Hill. He responded, *“Do you remember the event where Mark gave all the guys a couple stones? Find those and use them. This is what God ordained elders to do. You are going to risk your future - and I’m serious about this - by standing together and saying ‘It’s done. It’s over. We go no further. We’re done with skirting issues. We’re done mourning the loss of yet another leader. We are done with all the public humiliations and accusations. We are going to deal with our stuff and Mark, that begins with you. We will not continue. We will not plan further ministries. We will not cooperate with further ministries. We’re done. We’re gonna deal with these issues. And based on **our authority as elders of Christ’s church**, we are directing you to step down. We will fully support you and will do everything we can to restore you. We’re not divorcing you. We’re not kicking you out of the ministry. Our whole purpose is restoration. It’s the only way that change is going to happen, and no one is going to make that happen but the elders of Mars Hill Church.”*

### **In Conclusion**

As we bring this letter to a close, we want to again reiterate that we are sending this as an act of love, not of defiance. Love is not compliance, but rather speaking the truth and seeking to walk in the light together. Brothers, we know that we do not stand alone in our concerns for our church. We stand as your brothers, risking our future for the sake of the bride of Christ. It is time for us as elders to “stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong,” (1 Cor 16:13) while still letting all that we do be done in love. It is time to take responsibility for our church, regardless of how much our current bylaws prevent us from exercising that authority. It grieves us that the only voice that has never been heard in all of this is the voice of the current elders.

**Lead Pastors** - you can lead the way and your men will follow.

**Volunteer Pastors** - you carry more weight than you know.

**Staff Pastors** - Jesus is good and sovereign and he will take care of you.

It’s been implied that Pastor Mark may be stepping down this week. If he does, then we can joyfully affirm his decision. If he does not, it will continue to be our belief that is what would be best for Pastor Mark and the church. But either way we must make the following clear:

- We, the elders of Mars Hill Church, love Pastor Mark and truly desire his full restoration to preaching Pastor of this church.
- Whether he were planning to step down or not, we direct that he steps down from ministry, submitting himself under the authority of the elders of the church, who will oversee the details of his restoration plan.
- He must step down not only from the pulpit, but from all aspects of ministry and leadership.
- He will continue to receive his salary so long as he continues to cooperate with the restoration plan set before him by the elders of Mars Hill Church.
- Dr. Tripp has agreed to serve us in a consulting role to oversee the restoration plan for Pastor Mark. We direct the BOAA to retain Dr. Tripp in this capacity, and in doing so also to agree that Pastor Mark only be restored when Dr. Tripp and all members of the BOAA and the Board of Elders believe that process to be complete.
- Lastly, we direct that this information (Pastor Mark stepping down in submission to the authority of the elders) be lovingly but candidly presented to the people of

Mars Hill Church, as we know that this will be helpful in rebuilding their trust in their leaders and hope for their church.

We will close this letter with a sermon excerpt from Pastor Mark, exhorting the members of Mars Hill to follow their Jesus and their elders.

Part 3 of 1st Corinthians  
1 Corinthians 1:10-17  
Pastor Mark Driscoll  
January 22, 2006:

*...That's what Paul's saying. "I don't remember atoning for the sins of the world. I don't remember living a sinless life and dying as a substitute in your place and rising to forgive your sins. Was I crucified for you? No!" And his third question: "Were you baptized in the name of Paul?" Is your ultimate allegiance to me, or Jesus? This is so important. I want you guys to respect me, the pastors and the leaders in this church. I don't want you to have too low a view of leadership, too high a view of leadership – the extremes that we see in the church in Corinth. At the same time, your primary and ultimate allegiance is not to me, and it is not to the pastors in this church. I will say this publicly: I am one of the pastors. They can out-vote me and fire me. They have total freedom to do so.*

*And if at any time in the history of this church the elders discipline me, do not be loyal to me. Be loyal to them; be loyal to Jesus. And if at any point – God forbid – I should say or do something that would disqualify me from being your pastor – and I have no intentions of, and I do live a life above reproach. And I'm not a sinless man, but I do love Jesus and I do love my family and I do love you. And if by – I just shudder to say this, but if I should ever say or do anything that the elders would need to fire me, do not be loyal to me. Be loyal to Jesus; be loyal to your elders. Be loyal to the pastors in your church. Trust them. Follow them.*

*And if you forget, this'll be archived. Pull it down and listen to it again, and say, "Mark, you told us to ignore you and follow the leaders in the church and Jesus." Do that – because at the end of the day, you're not baptized in my name. You're not ultimately loyal to me. You are not ultimately devoted to me. My job is to point you to Jesus. He was crucified for your sins. He forgives your sins. He is your God and Savior. He's the one when you are buried in baptism and raised in newness of life that you are celebrating and honoring – that the focus and heart and the devotion and commitment and the passion in the church must be for Jesus; no one else; no one else.*

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With the love of Christ,

Pastor Dustin Kensrue - Director of Worship / Worship Pastor at Mars Hill Bellevue  
Pastor Drew Hensley - Lead Pastor at Mars Hill U-District  
Pastor Mark Dunford - Pastor at Mars Hill Portland  
Pastor Ryan Kearns - Director of Community Groups / Pastor at Mars Hill Bellevue  
Pastor Ryan Welsh - Pastor of Theology and Discipleship  
Pastor Adam Ramsey - Director of Student Ministry / Pastor at Mars Hill Bellevue  
Pastor Cliff Ellis - Director of Biblical Living / Pastor at Mars Hill West Seattle  
Pastor Gary Shavey - Pastor of Biblical Living at Mars Hill Bellevue  
Pastor James Rose - Pastor at Mars Hill Ballard