

Exploring the church in dark times with Mike Cospers

TRANSCRIPT

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NOTE: This transcript was AI-generated and has not been fully edited.

Mark Turman (00:02.36)

Welcome to the Denison Forum podcast. I'm Mark Turman, your host for today's conversation. We hope that our chat today will equip and edify you and your in your walk with Christ and in the witness that you're giving for him. As I like to remind you, we try to do that by letting you eavesdrop on conversations with good thinkers and writers and people in the kingdom so that you can think, live and serve Christ well. Our founding verse for our ministry is Ephesians 412, equipping the saints for the work of ministry. So we hope that that is what happens today. We've been looking forward forward to this conversation for a while. We kind of carve out some special days and some special people. Let me put this in pastor terms for you. When I pastor churches, we would lay out a calendar for the year.

And we would talk about when I was going to be on vacation and who would come to preach at the church when I was gone. We would also plan some special Sundays where we would encourage our people to invite their friends and we would bring in someone special to talk. And my conversation partner today is one of those people. If we were pastoring a church today, I'd be saying, how do I get this guy named Mike Cospers to come in and

So we're welcoming Mike to our conversation today. Many of you recognize Mike as the creator and producer of the popular podcast, the rise and fall of Mars Hill from just a year or two ago, but he's been around for a lot longer than that. He's been doing music ministry, radio shows, podcasts, things like that for more than two decades today you can find him hosting the CT podcast called the bulletin, which I highly recommend to you. listen to it regularly myself. you can also find him leading cohorts of church leaders when he's not spending time with his family as they live in Louisville. And part of what we're going to talk about today is not only what he's up to now, but his recent book. And, we're going to get to talking about that in a moment after we get some background from him.

Mark Turman (02:17.816)

But the new book is called the church in dark times, understanding and resisting the evil that seduces the evangelical movement, which is a really good read and it'll really stretch your thinking. But before that, Mike, welcome to the podcast. We're glad to have you.

Mike Cospers (02:33.801)

I'm really glad to be here. Thanks for having me on.

Mark Turman (02:36.994)

Well, tell us a little bit about Mike Cospers that, we might not know just from the work that you've done over the last four or five years.

Mike Cospers (02:46.225)

Yeah, man, I think you, you covered a lot of it pretty well. I, you know, I was 19 years old, and got married at 19, like I'm one of those folks. And been married, it'll be 25 years in December. And it's kind of stumbled into church planting around that time. And

Mark Turman (03:10.752)

Yeah.

Mike Cospers (03:12.858)

ended up serving on a church planting team from about 2001 to 2015. Learned a ton, struggled a ton, and that certainly informs all of the work that I do now, whether it's the podcasting work or this book, and informs it for better or for worse. I mean, it was a wonderful experience. We got to do a lot of amazing things. We got to be part of some really incredible arts ministry.

But yeah, I mean, I have a big heart for the church and it's not something I get to talk about as much as I end up talking about other things, whether it's a war in Israel or a political election on the bulletin, but I really do love the church and my heart is to see the church be better and more beautiful as she moves forward into this new century.

Mark Turman (04:15.052)

Yeah, that's a great word. Tell us a little bit about your faith trajectory. Did you grow up in a Christian home? How did faith become important to you? Tell us a little bit about that, that story.

Mike Cospers (04:26.65)

Yeah, so I grew up in a Christian home, grew up in a home with a real serious commitment to churches on Sunday mornings and and the churches to kind of church in in life like faith in life. It's I mean, it's actually kind of a funny story, like the fact that I'm the the guy that told this story about Mars Hill and kind of the contemporary American megachurch. I was

I was baptized by Ed Young Jr. in 1988 and second Baptist of Houston. People will be familiar with Ed Young, Ed Young Jr. in particular. And yeah, I was so immersed in it and really lived in that world. For me, for me, faith really came alive when I was about 15, 16 years old. And it's, I was

Mark Turman (04:58.178)

Yeah. Okay. Yeah.

Mike Cospers (05:24.558)

I was blessed to have an incredible youth pastor who just, you for, for a number of us, it was, it was almost that thing where it's like, you, hear this in ministry a lot, like do for the few, what you wish you could do for the many. My youth minister was one of those people who, there were a handful of us that, that he identified some leadership gifts in, and that was kind of the way he poured his life out for us.

Mark Turman (05:41.256)

Yeah.

Mike Cospers (05:52.7)

It's a guy named Jim Vile. still in ministry here in the Louisville area. And man, it was transformative. I, I, yeah, I thank God for him all the time.

Mark Turman (06:03.948)

Yeah, that's awesome. yeah, that's, that's a good segue, I guess, into talking about, really the, story that comes before the story of this most recent book you wrote. But, I was asking around, like I I work with about 35 people on our immediate team and I was asking some of them, okay, I get to talk to Mike Cospers. What would you ask him? And they were, there was no shortage of questions.

Mike Cospers (06:30.172)

Thank

Mark Turman (06:32.396)

But one of those questions is, can you kind of, give some flesh to the, to the idea of what was it that prompted you to go toward the Mars Hill story? What was it that triggered? Okay. I'm going to go dig into this. and it almost feels like it kind of became lightning in a bottle on a scale that maybe wasn't anticipated.

Mike Cospers (06:38.62)

you

Mike Cospers (06:55.056)

Yeah, no, I mean, let me just clarify. It definitely was not anticipated. We thought that, we thought this was a story that, that, you know, church leaders and, people who kind of follow the church growth movement would probably want to pay attention to and, and maybe it would have some spillover effect and other places. We did not expect it to become what it became, you know, I mean, at I mean, think to date we're at like 31 million downloads on the series. it's just, I mean, even just to say the number just feels kind of surreal and unexpected. So the church I was a part of, we planted in 2000. And it was definitely part of that. There was a church planting boom in the United States that starts somewhere around like 1995 and runs to about 2010. And it happens for a variety of reasons. Some of it's just, some of it's just as pragmatic as like organizations. There was, there was some grant funding that kind of came into a bunch of different Christian denominations that led to a lot of church planting. So we got to kind of ride that wave. We were, we were inside the SBC.

Mark Turman (07:54.392)

Yeah.

Mike Cospers (08:18.972)

And then in about 2004, we met a guy named Darren Patrick. People familiar with Axe 29 will probably know who Darren was, Darren's name is. Darren passed away a few years ago. It's a different story altogether. But Darren invited us into Axe 29, and it was through him that we got to know Mars Hill and Mark Driscoll. So from about 2005 to 2010, we were part of Axe 29.

Mark Turman (08:30.53)

Right?

Mike Cospers (08:48.252)

I got to know a lot of the Mars Hill folks. Our church in in Louisville, our church ended up being just just because of kind of the nature of who we were and where we were and everything else. We ended up being, I would say fairly influential in Acts 29 in those years because of our music ministry. We just had like, God just did a weird thing at Sojourn. So the church was called Sojourn in Louisville.

God did a weird thing here where he brought together a number of like extraordinarily gifted musicians. And I had the privilege of kind of stewarding all of that. We put out a bunch of records. We, you know, as a result, we ended up playing at a bunch of conferences and various things throughout Ax 29, training events, things like that over those years. And I got to know some of the Mars Hill folks who were obviously like music was central to Mars Hill, was a big part of their vision, was a big part of just kind of Seattle culture. so I mean, I say this often, like, I couldn't have done the Mars Hill podcast if I hadn't been a musician, because it was the music

that built the bridges to the Mars Hill people who ended up being, you know, when you fast forward a few years to 2010, 2012, 2013, these were my, these were people that I knew and that I would see regularly at events and they would kind of share like, man, we're really going through it over here at Mars. Things are really hard. Things are really rough. And, and then of course the church melts down. My own church goes through a pretty significant crisis in 2016, 17, 18. And by then I had left ministry. I was still a member at the church, but, but

Mark Turman (10:19.33)

Right.

Mike Cospoer (10:44.068)

I'm still connected to it. And, you know, it dawned on me around that time, like, man, it really feels like so many of the churches that we were connected to, and, and serving and part of and etc. Like, we've all gone through these similar stories with these leadership issues, extraordinary growth, difficulty and splintering.

I really want to understand what happened. And so in one sense, the Mars Hill podcast was an effort to kind of understand what had happened at my own church, just by sort of unpacking the patterns at another church. And then this book, *The Church in Dark Times*, came about because in the midst of, you know, in the midst of trying to understand the Mars Hill phenomenon, these larger themes emerged that connected to some some bigger ideas that I think are really significant to where we are as a culture.

Mark Turman (11:47.222)

Yeah. And I want to want to get to those ideas in just a second. Would you have you been able to frame Mike how maybe your perspective and your ministry today has kind of changed since you did the work on the Mars Hill podcast?

Mike Cospoer (12:04.474)

Yeah, man, interesting question. you know, once, once I really sort of went all in on journalism, I, I stepped away from sort of front lines church ministry. And in part, I did that because there's just, it often felt like there was sort of this conflict of interest of like, what, what's necessary in order to be able to kind of do the journalistic work of showing up every day and

Mark Turman (12:25.303)

Yeah.

Mike Cospoer (12:35.184)

you know, speaking, speaking honestly and truthfully about what's happening in the church around the country. And, and at the same time, it's good for pastors to have like an abiding

loyalty to their communities and to want to sort of focus on them thriving. So, so it profoundly changed ministry in that sense, in that I just sort of stepped away from

Mark Turman (12:53.004)

Right? No.

Mark Turman (12:57.1)

Yeah.

Mike Cospers (13:03.1)

frontlines ministry at that point. I do think there's some truth to the fact that like, once you're a pastor, you're kind of always a pastor. people, yeah, you just kind of learn to talk to people in a certain way and listen to people in a certain way. it, and I mean, I think, I think being a pastor made me a better journalist for sure. But it also means that, that I, you just often find yourself in situations where people are kind of.

Mark Turman (13:12.499)

For better or for worse.

Mike Cospers (13:30.342)

talking to you about the hardest things they've ever been through and you have to know how to listen and care for them in the midst of that.

Mark Turman (13:38.646)

No, no, absolutely. Well, let's, let's get into the book a little bit. The church in dark times. tell me if I got this right. If I understood at the beginning of the book, you're basically saying that this is the third in a trilogy. If we count the podcast of Mars Hill kind of as the first book, if you will, last year you wrote a book, called the land of my surgeon, sir, drawing, if I think I got it right, that

Mike Cospers (13:53.532)

Now, the next task is to have a look at the first book that you wrote. Now, I'm sure if you know the book, but I know that that's the third book.

Mark Turman (14:06.176)

If I understand that, haven't read that book, but understand that kind of is your own personal story of both your own church planting ministry experience and other things that kind of was your journey kind of through a valley and then back out of that valley. And now this is the third installment of this conversation, if you will, that has become kind of a pretty long extended conversation. am I, am I getting that right in some way?

Mike Cospers (14:10.976)

Yeah.

Mike Cospers (14:35.213)

Yeah, absolutely. If, if the catalyst for this, I mean, I think it's fair to say this, like the catalyst for this for me was my own ministry experience, which was in some ways like the greatest experience of my life and, at times kind of the worst experience. Because I just found so many, you know, I just encountered so many moments of like wounding and difficulty and moral complexity. so what The Land of My Sojourn is about is kind of the personal journey of waking up one day looking from the outside in on my own church and ministry and going, how did how did I end up here? And how did this happen? And I think that's a personal journey that will resonate with a lot of people who are sort of, sort of tempted to deconstruction and, and, and all that. And then the, the Church in Dark Times is pulling the lens much, much, much further back. I mean, I mean, I think, I think we go all the way back to like Galileo at the sort of

Mark Turman (15:29.452)

Yeah.

Mike Cospers (15:49.44)

early chapters of the book to try and say like, hey, historically, how did the church end up in this place where there's, there's a unique, there's a unique pattern in our historical moment to, to kind of malform the church in ways that, that makes it capable of doing really harmful things.

Mark Turman (16:11.374)

Yeah, and really is, in my opinion, kind of a revealing of patterns. know, it's been, you know, I live in the Dallas area, and if anybody's been following this, been pretty rough for the evangelical church in the Dallas area for the past five or six months. Big iconic pastors of well-known ministries. I think we're up to somewhere around seven or eight that have had major problems, scandals,

Mike Cospers (16:33.769)

Yeah.

Mark Turman (16:43.481)

But your book kind of starts to give some handles about, as I heard somebody say just a few weeks ago, why does this keep happening? You know, what is, what are the dynamics that seem to just keep replicating themselves in different churches that are both similar and unique in various ways? But you, take us on a journey. here's, here's part the,

Mike Cospers (17:12.028)

of where you can put me and our listeners in a big way, think. All of us, have at least a handful, two to three anyway, of teachers who have really helped us and we can...

Mark Turman (17:12.306)

of where you can help me and our listeners in a big way, I think. All of us hopefully have at least a handful, two or three anyway, of teachers that really help us and become very important to us. They shape us in profound ways. And early on in the book, you call out a thinker by the name of Hannah Arendt, as you call her, your conversation partner in the book. She was new to me and she may be new to

Mike Cospers (17:42.34)

Mm-hmm.

Mark Turman (17:47.208)

a number of our listeners. So explain a little bit about who aren't aren't it. Aren't you can say better than I can explain a little bit who Hannah is in this book and how she has been significant in your life.

Mike Cospers (18:02.202)

Yeah, she's been she's been massively significant in my life. So a rent. Arendt was a philosophy student in Germany in the 1930s. She was Jewish. She was born to kind of a secular Jewish family, but still very sort of ethnically and culturally Jewish in many ways. As the Nazis came to power, she very quickly sort of joined the resistance and opposition 1933, she ends up getting arrested by the Gestapo because of her involvement with them. She somehow or another kind of I mean, it's a fascinating story in and of itself for probably another day. But she she somehow sort of manages to talk her way out of a Gestapo prison. And, and then, yeah, there's not very many who did certainly not many Jews who did. And

Mark Turman (18:58.72)

Not many people can claim that.

Mike Cospers (19:05.956)

And then and then shortly after that, she, you know, once she gets out, basically within a couple of days, she gets her mother, she gets their their possessions and they escape to first to Switzerland and then to France. And then and then in France, of course, like eventually the Nazis come to France. That creates another whole series of dramas. She ends up in a detention camp in Gours, France, where she spends just a few weeks there and, then she and a number of other women who were, who were detained there, they all, they end up being able to forge documents so that by the time the Germans actually take over the camp, they're able to basically say, look,

we have these transit papers and, and get out. And so she escapes from France to England eventually from England to America. And so from then, you have this young woman who is a brilliant philosophical mind and devotes the rest of her life to trying to understand how did these people that I knew and loved, you know, literally one of them being Martin Heidegger was like, she had a love affair with Martin Heidegger as a student. Heidegger's being the smartest, most influential philosopher of the 20th century, certainly up to that point.

How did these people compromise their morals and ethics in such a way that they became Nazis? And so you can kind of pull back and see this larger question that she is wrestling with, which is, you could kind of frame it as how do good people get drawn into these systems that create so much harm and so much damage? Early in her life, she or sort of early in her processing of all of this in 1950 when she publishes a book, she she publishes this theory of she sort of recapitulates this theory of radical evil, which which came from another philosopher a century before. And it's like, man, there's a there's just this way that the certain kind of evil sort of corrupts and takes over everything that you see. But then about a decade after she publishes that book,

Mike Cospoer (21:28.888)

She is invited by the New Yorker to cover the, the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. And Eichmann was one of the, you know, one of the primary architects of the final solution. This was the guy that basically, you know, when people make the comment about the Germans made the trains run on time, like Eichmann was the guy that literally made the trains run on time. And, she goes to Jerusalem to cover it and she's shocked by what she finds.

Mark Turman (21:50.168)

Right?

Mike Cospoer (21:56.496)

which is not just that Eichmann is unimpressive, but that he's not a monster at all. He's a bureaucrat. He's a careerist. just, he's just trying to advance his own sort of standing career inside, inside Germany as a whole. And so what, what, what, what is burst out of that encounter with Eichmann is this, this idea of the banality of evil. A quote, a line, a lot of people even who don't know aren't probably are familiar with. But just this idea of ordinary people getting drawn into these larger systems of oppression and evil and corruption. and then she really from 1961 until she, you know, until she dies, she she really devotes every moment of her study and writing to trying to understand how does that happen.

How does somebody sort of lose themselves in these larger systems, these larger stories? And yeah, there was this moment when I was reporting the Mars Hill story. I'll never forget it. was talking to somebody who basically said, essentially what they said is they said, you know, in the first decade of the existence of Mars Hill, we had a certain way of doing things. But then because

the church was successful, And because there was this sense of urgency about like, we've got to reach the city, all the normal rules got suspended. And it, triggered this thought in my head of something a rent says and something other political philosophers say that's like, basically says like, if, you want, if you want to establish a political dictatorship, the thing you have to do is create a state of emergency and tell everybody like everything's so urgent, all the normal rules have to go on the shelf for a little bit. And, and all of a sudden you can look at the church and you can realize, man, people get rightly enamored with the mission of the church, where all of a sudden they then say, well, the mission is so urgent and the opportunity is so great. Let's, let's set the normal rules of accountability or governance or polity. Let's set all those on the shelf and

Mike Cospo (24:18.98)

and do everything we can to kind of streamline things so that the leader can lead us forward. And what you don't realize that you've done is that you've paved the way for all kinds of incredible harm. And there's just example after example of this taking place.

Mark Turman (24:36.418)

Yeah. And it's, and it's really a fascinating kind of journey that you take us on to the idea that, like in the case of Eichmann, as you describe a rinse feeling that it was that he just refused to think it wasn't that he was, it wasn't that he was radical in the way that we normally think of radical. was extreme in terms of his evil, but he was simply trying to impress his bosses so that he could move up the ladder and gain a little bit more power and a little bit more.

Mike Cospo (24:50.939)

Right.

Mark Turman (25:06.422)

influence, but what he, what he was willing to do was to not think and to suspend, you know, kind of trusting your gut, if you will. and, and because of these other greater urgencies and it, really becomes a fascinating way of thinking about, a lot of the problems in our culture, both inside and beyond the church.

It seems to apply in a lot of ways. One thing, Mike, that we talk about at Dennison Forum is we want to try to help people think biblically. And we believe that Satan attacks the American church in kind of a tailor-made way. doesn't come at the church in America the way he would in South America or in the Middle East or in China. He's tailor-making a plan, right? part of what your book, it really deals with it at depth. would say is this concept of ideology. and how, you and a rent really kind of work your way, around the concept of evil, the banality of evil. And then to this place of what we, we hear this word ideology talk to just tossed around everywhere.

Mike Cospo (25:59.526)

Yep.

Mark Turman (26:23.486)

but it really seems that what you're describing is that ideology is kind of become the tool that Satan is really using well to impact and injure the church's witness in America. Am I, am I on the right track with you? Am I thinking the way you want me to think from your book?

Mike Cospers (26:40.23)

Yeah, no, I mean, I think you're putting it as, I mean, as well or better than I've, I've, I've ever put it. I mean, yeah. So, so, so ideology, you hear the word a lot and people are often kind of confused in terms of like, what does it mean? Because, and, and it's funny, it's one of those things I've wondered about, like, even as I wrote the book, I wrestled with this and I may have, I may have made the wrong choice in it, but it's almost, I was tempted to try to sort of distinguish between like lowercase i ideology and uppercase i ideology. Everyone has ideologies, like we all have these ideas that kind of shape the way that we see the world. But ideology the way Arendt uses it in particular, and she's not alone in this. I mean, you can kind of look at lots of people who sort of looked at political theory in the 20th century, whether it's Alexander Solzhenitsyn or, or like Miroslav Volf has written about this as well, the Christian theologian. Ideology in this, in the sense that I'm using it in the book is this little idea that can change the world. And it's this idea that like, if you, if you can solve this one problem, right, you have this, you have this story, and if you can solve this one problem, you can, you can fix everything. And

Mark Turman (27:44.013)

Yep.

Mike Cospers (28:07.46)

you know, the most sort of egregious version of it. And it's, it's, it's one of the reasons why Arendt is so compelling is because it's such a compelling story. The most compelling version of it in terms of the most compelling example of it that you can see in the 20th century is Nazi ideology, which was the foundation of it was this idea that there was this sort of Aryan supremacy and that Germany deserved to be kind of ruling all of Europe and really sort of all of the world. But the problem was, and this was the ideological piece, the problem was that Jews were undermining and subverting Aryan supremacy. So if you could solve the Jewish problem, these people, I mean, it really, you go read, literally, if you go read Hitler on this stuff, not that I'm suggesting that to anybody, but if you go read Hitler on this stuff, he sounds just like Haman in the Book of Esther. He's saying,

You have these people living among us. They're not really a part of us. They're, they're, they refuse to assimilate with the rest of us. And as a result, they're undermining all of our ability to kind of do what we're supposed to do and all of this, all this kind of thing. So solve the Jewish

problem and you solve everything else. Well, you can find that in all kinds of other places. I mean, Stalin's ideology was

Mark Turman (29:15.856)

They're hindering us. Yep.

Mike Cospers (29:31.334)

that the problem was the bourgeoisie, like the middle class, the managers in society, they were the problem that was undermining all of us. But what's wild is you find it in the church and you found it in Mars Hill. With Driscoll, it was this idea that if you can give young men a purpose, I Driscoll would say all the time, 99 % of the world's problems are the fault of young men.

So if you can kind of solve the problem of young men, you can reach the city, reach the world, know, sort of achieve everything. And it gets pretty grandiose very quickly from there. The danger of that is, and this is something that I think we documented pretty well in the podcast, the danger of that is that there are downsides to orienting the entire programming of the life of the church around the needs, wants, and desires of young men. And, and again, like those are well documented at this point. But that's the nature of ideology. It's this little idea that can change the world. And, and, and what happens around ideology is you create this kind of iron logic that just consumes everything that falls into it. And again, a rent just a rent accounts for that really

Mark Turman (30:32.738)

Right.

Mike Cospers (30:58.732)

I effectively and really beautifully. And, and then once you start to look for it in other places, I mean, I, in the book, I, try to sort of document it, a variety of versions of it, of what I call evangelical ideologies, which are these kind of church growth expansionist ideas that, that, that take this little idea and they can just chew everything up in them once people encounter them.

Mark Turman (31:27.348)

And part of the, part of the appeal, right, is that it, it, gives us a, a simple and clear solution to a lot of really complex and kind of mind boggling problems, right? you know, the whole time I've been in ministry is like, how come everybody doesn't believe in Jesus and the story of grace? Who wouldn't want it to be true? Right? Why didn't everybody believe it? Well, it's, that's a, and, you know, I, I'm constantly, fascinated people on this

Mike Cospers (31:38.012)

Yep.

Yeah.

Mark Turman (31:57.204)

podcast will hear me talk regularly about why is it that we are constantly always seeing another show on television about hospitals and about police officers and about firemen. And, know, why are we drawn to that? It's because part of it, we want to puzzle out these things. want to, know, Jay Warner Wallace, the investigators that, we, like to puzzle out and get to the solution. And if somebody can offer us a simple, fairly cogent.

Mike Cospoer (32:10.972)

And so why are we talking about this? Because part of it, we want to open up these things. And the daily logic is that investigators and the reach we want to open up into it.

Yeah.

Mark Turman (32:27.194)

and, easily articulated answer to a really big problem. Like, why doesn't everybody in our town become Christians? Then we kind of run to that and we were like, well, yeah, let's just do that. And Let's funnel everything into that one idea. And then I love what you talk about in explaining this iron logic. It's kind of what I call all or nothing thinking. You have to be all in on this. And if you're not, if you're not all in on this simple, clear idea, then you must be part of the problem. Is that the, is that the way to think about iron logic as you explain it?

Mike Cospoer (32:44.366)

Yeah. Yeah. For sure. I mean, I think the language aren't uses even is this idea of a key to history, right? This little that sort of unlocks everything else and and it feels very convenient I mean I mean unfortunately I mean I hate to use it as an example but it's just so prevalent in terms of where we are right now but it's it's kind of the way antisemitism still works in our culture which is like once you lock in on this idea that there's a secret cabal of people who behind the scenes are controlling everything and they're controlling it for their interests and against yours, it becomes very easy to sort of look at like all the ways that the economy has gone wrong or politics have gone wrong or the media feels like it's moving against you that lens is it's just it's it's almost hypnotic and it's in its compelling nature. Well, then translate that into the church. If you're Bill Hybels, Bill Hybels shows up and says, the problem with the church is that it doesn't have a real culture of entrepreneurship and leadership. And if we can just solve that one problem.

Mark Turman (34:26.135)

Yeah.

Mike Cospoer (34:26.138)

then we can really reach the world. And so everything becomes about entrepreneurship and leadership. You build this whole church around that culture. And, and then any objections to the way Bill sort of led and initiated and certainly had, you know, allegedly anyway, sort of allegedly had like serious character flaws and everything else. You can kind of consume all of that up inside this iron logic of leadership and say, look, this larger purpose, here's this guy with this unique gift and it's so essential because this is the missing piece that the church doesn't have. He has it. So we need him no matter what. And it justifies all kinds of bad behavior.

Mark Turman (35:09.26)

Right? No. No.

Mark Turman (35:16.364)

Yeah, and it becomes a really strange journey of the end justifies the means built around one of these key ideas. let me kind of elaborate on that, turn this a little bit to the idea we're seeing inside the church and kind of around the church, lot of conversation in this political season about how many Christians have kind of suspended

Mike Cospers (35:23.312)

Exactly.

Mike Cospers (35:27.568)

Exactly. Yeah.

Mark Turman (35:46.681)

things like the fruit of the spirit for some of their forms of engagement in politics.

And one of the things you spend some time, you don't go too far too long in this, but you talk about a rents use of this idea of the shoe and the hammer. And, and it really spoke to me from the standpoint of how it seems like so many Christians are letting their politics become their religion instead of their religion being their religion. So unpack that.

Mike Cospers (36:03.625)

Mm-hmm

Mark Turman (36:19.8)

Unpack that metaphor of shoe and hammer that Arendt runs with for a bit.

Mike Cospers (36:24.222)

Yeah, man, I mean, it's one of those moments where you just, for me anyway, when I when I first kind of read her talking about this, I just felt kind of slack jawed in in awe of like what a perfect

illustration it is. She says, Look, you can, you can use a shoe to hammer a nail into a wall, but that's not, that doesn't mean that that's what a shoe was for. And so she uses that as kind of a metaphor to talk about the way that we handle all kinds of ideas, where we sort of apply them in the wrong places. I think, I think in the church where this is like, this is incredibly relevant is, well,

Mark Turman (36:49.251)

Yep.

Mike Cospers (37:13.146)

Well, let me just get really specific right now. I'm not sure when we'll air. Maybe this will probably air after the after voting day and I could care less how people vote. Yeah, I mean, I could care less like it's not. I don't say this as a as a way to sort of say like here's how you should vote. But you've heard so much about in this season. You've heard a lot of people kind of take this this this metaphor of Cyrus, right?

Mark Turman (37:21.73)

Cup maybe a couple of days after the election. Yeah. Yeah.

Mike Cospers (37:42.868)

Cyrus was this corrupt leader. has all these problems and yet God uses him to do X, Y, and Z. Therefore, you know, that gets, that gets kind of turned and twisted into, justification for therefore you sh- not, not only can you vote for Donald Trump as though was sort of like a, a permission structure or whatever. It's actually like a, you should vote for Cyrus because, you know, because he fits the bill for these various reasons. And we see that, you know, certain initiatives that he's about and invested in will pay off for us down the line. And I just, again, like it's this kind of idea, like, dude, just because you can hammer a nail into a wall with a shoe doesn't mean that that's what the shoe is for, what the nail is for, or anything else.

Mark Turman (38:09.208)

Right? Yeah.

Mike Cospers (38:39.386)

the whole point, I think of so many of these biblical stories of corrupt leaders is that God works in spite of them and through them. Not that the point of those stories is not therefore, you should vote for Cyrus and Nebuchadnezzar, right? It's, it's in spite of the fact that it seems like the tide of history is moving against you.

Mark Turman (39:01.71)

All right.

Mike Cospers (39:12.764)

God is, God is providential and, and, at work. The Book of Esther is a great example of this again, like where so much of the story of the Book of Esther is like all of the tide of where the culture is going and what was happening was, was running against the people of God. And when the people of God stood up, you know, Esther thought she was going to die. And when Mordecai refused to bow down to Heyman, he thought he was going to die. Like, these were people who sort of showed up and go, well, the tide's running against me. I'm going to, I'm to do the right thing and bow down and maybe it all goes in the wrong direction. Now, our political moment is very different. And I'm certainly not trying to say that any leader in the United States is Heyman. And, or for that matter, that they're that they're even Cyrus or some of the others. Like our circumstances are very different. Another lesson from Arendt, like, like history actually doesn't repeat itself, but it does kind of rhyme. So we look at it, we go, God, is it work in ways that are surprising that we can't fully understand? All of that is a, is a long sort of roundabout way of saying,

As, as the people of God, we, we, we show up and I feel like the biggest thing that we should show up in these circumstances with is just a whole lot of humility because Daniel's story isn't David's story isn't Esther's story isn't. You can just go down the history of the people of God in these various circumstances. We don't know what God's doing in, in Providence in these moments.

What we need is a sensitivity to conscience. And I think the biggest thing that, you know, especially in the moment that we're in, we need a little bit of skepticism when somebody shows up and goes, I've got the solution. It's really simple. If we just, if we just solved this one problem, everything else is going to come together down the line. That historically is always a red flag.

Mark Turman (41:35.17)

Right.

And when it comes to reading our Bible, right, we talk a lot at Dennison Forum about the difference between reading your Bible and understanding it descriptively versus prescriptively. There's a relatively small number of things that are prescriptive and they're really important to God and he makes them very clear. But he also gives us a lot of descriptive stories that are, as you said, to remind us that he is always there, always

Mike Cospers (41:48.752)

Yeah.

Mike Cospers (42:01.563)

Yeah.

Mark Turman (42:05.908)

at work at a scale way beyond our comprehension and always ultimately achieving his good ends but often in very surprising ways you know you're as you were talking about that I was just thinking I got to visit Wittenberg Germany where basically the Reformation was ignited in a very big way and I got to hear all the stories of Martin Luther on this one mile of cobblestone street, right? It's amazing story of what happens 500 years ago. But as the, you know, one of the teachers was explaining, yeah, you have to wonder what John Huss was thinking because he was articulating many of the same things that Luther went to, to bat about, but he got burned at the stake.

Mike Cospers (42:43.916)

Right

Mark Turman (42:54.668)

And you have to wonder if there was a conversation in heaven between Jesus and, and John Husco and what was it Lord, was I just not born in the right time or, know, anyway, it's very important that you don't read the old Testament and see that David and Saul had more wives than we could count. And therefore it's okay for us to go have a bunch of wives. don't read the Bible that way. And we shouldn't read it prescriptively in, in a microcosm that will lead us into trouble add onto that, let's go one step further in that, cause you talk a little bit about how there are accelerators when you get into these ideological, journeys that can become idolatry. There's accelerators, things like celebrity and energy momentum and even rage. Talk about how those things become accelerators in this process.

Mike Cospers (43:44.919)

Yeah.

Mike Cospers (43:51.002)

Yeah, so, so, so part of the background to this that I think is really important is, I talk about this in, in, a lot of detail in the book, but, but to put it briefly, we live in a time where, people don't have the same kinds of roots that they had even, you know, a century ago or more we don't have the roots that we, that we once had in terms of like our identity as like part of a community, part of a spiritual community, part of a, you know, even things like, you know, two centuries ago, you were kind of born into a vocation. It was like, if your dad was a baker, you were probably going to be a baker, you know, all, all that kind of stuff. So we have this, the benefit of that is all that we kind of know and love about Western society in the sense that like, you can pull yourself up from your bootstraps. And just because you were born into poverty doesn't mean that you're

going to die in poverty and all that. Like you, you, you have, you have all this opportunity. But, but the, the, the mirror image of that is that we all have this sense of anxiety of

Well, what exactly am I supposed to do with my life? Like, what am I going to, what's my vocation? Who am I going to marry? Where am I going to live? what do I believe ultimately about all of these things? And they're the, the opportunity that comes from that, which again, I do think is a positive thing and a good thing. The, the, the downside of that is that it creates this vulnerability where a charismatic leader can show up in this season where there's these people who don't have like a deeply rooted sense of self and who they are and where they belong and where they're going. They can show up and they can say, I have a wonderful plan for your life. And it's this thing that I'm doing. And here's where it's gonna take you and here's what it's about. And again, like you take the ideological piece of it like,

Mike Cospers (46:12.112)

you're a young man with that's shift lists and doesn't know where they're going. And Driscoll shows up and says, we're going to change the world because young men are going to get activated to change the world. That can be incredibly powerfully and that can be incredibly powerful and compelling in a way that's, that's really kind of disorienting and disrupting, like it can disrupt your entire life.

You see this in political movements all the time where people who are, you know, what, what, of the things that rent talks about is that sort of the, the cumulative effect of the modern age is this, sense of mass loneliness and isolation. we don't have these deep connections to place or to people or to family or to vocation or anything else. So we just feel really lonely and isolated. So when a leader comes along and says, again, like, I have this wonderful plan for your life we can lock in on that and find ourselves on this journey where you're part of this sort of populist movement that demands a whole heck of a lot from you. And I think, you know, can see very, to me, it's very easy to see these kind of parallel lines where one person who finds themselves in this place of mass loneliness ends up being a member of Mars Hill.

And another person who finds themselves there ends up being a member of the Proud Boys, raiding the Capitol on January 6th, 2020. Because, because the, the commonality in, the abstract, the commonality between those two stories is someone showed up and gave them a story and a purpose that they didn't have deeper roots in.

The challenge for the church is how do we give people a story and a purpose that has those deep roots and has those subtle roots, but isn't as ephemeral as a church growth movement? Like, how do we tell a story to Christians who are looking for meaning and purpose that can outlast not just a celebrity pastor who says, I have a wonderful plan for your life.

Mike Cospers (48:31.718)

But actually, even the institution itself, if the institution collapses, how can we root them in the story of the gospel in such a way that's like, yeah, if everything falls apart, if the leadership collapses and everything else, they still wake up the next day and they go, I'm part of a big, beautiful story that provides this meaning and purpose that goes well beyond what we're talking about here.

Mark Turman (48:59.948)

Yeah. And really points to what we know the Bible teaches us, which is we do have a deep longing for meaning and we have been created for a really profound and eternal purpose, which is to know Christ and to, walk with him. I keep coming back the last few years to John 17 three, where Jesus is praying and he says, this is what eternal life, the best life you could imagine is it's knowing the father and knowing me. That's what it really

Mike Cospers (49:07.674)

Yeah.

Mike Cospers (49:15.996)

Yeah.

Mark Turman (49:29.882)

is all about. And, and yet we want, we want to be in some ways the culminating generation, right? We, we want it to all kind of come together and culminate with us. And we want that kind of clarity and certainty. And we really, we really kind of want to get away from anything that is mysterious. You just kind of have to think about, I, when I get in this mindset, I started thinking about the people in

Mike Cospers (49:42.72)

Right, right

Mark Turman (49:59.792)

Thessalonica who thought, well, Hey, we just can quit our jobs and walk away from our businesses because this is all going to be over soon. And Jesus is going to come again. And Paul has to write them this second letter and say, look, if you're not going to work, you don't get to eat because none of us knows what the real timetable of this whole thing is. Right. And, and yet we're uncomfortable with that element of mystery and, that, Hey, this story could actually go on for 2000 more years.

Mike Cospers (50:25.489)

Yeah.

Mark Turman (50:28.915)

And we're not comfortable with those kinds of ideas, right?

Mike Cospers (50:32.56)

Totally. mean, it's, it's, it's where kind of these themes of like narcissism and grandiosity really express themselves. And, you know, there's been, there's been great writing and, and journalism and reflection on narcissism and the pastorate and that the past, you know, these problems of kind of predatory leaders finding their ways into churches and all that. And I don't want to take anything away from any of that stuff. I think that's really, really true. But I.

None of that works. Unless the people who are showing up on Sunday morning are also in a place where they're thinking exactly what you kind of just described sort of the like, like a, like a narcissistic vision of history that says, it's all culminating here with us. Like we're the generation, you know, we're the generation where everything's going to change and, and, and, you know,

Mark Turman (51:22.542)

Right.

Mike Cospers (51:32.1)

essentially like if you want to be really brutal about it, what they're actually thinking is because of us, everything's going to be different from here forward. That's a horrible way to look at history. It's just incredibly unhealthy and distorted. And it's also like you take five minutes and you look at it and you go, okay, so our generation is special in a way that like

Mark Turman (51:45.822)

Yeah, pretty yeah

Mike Cospers (51:59.622)

Cory ten boom showing up to fight the Nazis in, you know, in Holland, not her. The abolitionists a couple generations before her, not them, you know, not the reformation guys, you know, 500 years ago, that it's us, it's here. And, and it just, it just really makes you want to sort of call into question like, man, what is it about?

Mark Turman (52:10.508)

Yeah.

Mike Cospers (52:26.928)

what is it about our world that makes us want to feel like we're sort of the hinge of history? And I think some of that's just sort of human nature. Like we want to feel like we matter and we have

some significance. But at the same time, I mean, I think it was Count Zinzendorf that had this famous phrase where he said, you know, the motto of the Christian missionary should be preach the gospel, and be forgotten. There's a comfort in that. man, I'm part of a

Mark Turman (52:50.648)

Yeah.

Mike Cospers (52:55.984)

bigger story that I can get lost in and feel great about. That's okay.

Mark Turman (53:02.86)

Yeah. And to know that, you know what? mean, yeah. And like you said, I think it's human nature to say, well, we want the world to be better because we were here. Right. And hopefully it will be. but. You know, putting all those pieces together is really God's jobs, God's job and not ours and, and being humble enough to let that be true. Right. And so, yeah, well, we got a few more minutes. So let me see if I can get just a couple of more comments out of you about a couple of questions. One of those is.

Mike Cospers (53:09.53)

Right. Sure. Sure.

Mike Cospers (53:20.411)

Yeah.

Mike Cospers (53:24.828)

Absolutely.

Mark Turman (53:32.834)

You touch on this in the book and that is the idea of authority. I authority contrasted with the idea of power. and we keep running when we read our Bibles. Well, we run into this statement about Jesus over and over again. He, they heard him and he was different. He spoke and lived as one who had authority and not like others that they had experienced. Talk tease that out for just a minute what's the difference between power and authority

Mike Cospers (54:04.144)

Yeah, so, so I think the biggest part of it is, I mean, what I love about even just the word authority is that it connects you to a certain sense of history. The roots of the word authority come from Roman culture, come from this idea of like, like, like what mattered in

if you were a politician in Rome, what mattered was your ability to kind of express yourself as an author, meaning like you expressed yourself as somebody who understood the roots of the way this city came into being. and, and so your own sort of life and work was an expression of something that was deeper and richer and went well beyond you the contrast to that is power, which is this ability to this ability to essentially to strong-arm people who don't want to do what you have to do or to punish them if they refuse to do what you have to do. What I love about it too is like, if someone has authority, they show up in your life and they say, I think you should do this.

And because of who they are, and because of your confidence in their understanding of history or tradition or, you know, whatever it is that they come from, like, they don't need to coerce you in any way whatsoever to do what they ask you to do. You're probably if they have truly have authority in that sense, you're going to just feel compelled to do it because of all these sort of layers in which they've already kind of operated. Power is, pay this parking ticket or we're going to lock you up. Right. Like, it's, there's, there's, a sense, there's, there's no actual authority to it. Like you're not, you're not paying your parking ticket because you really trust this person and feel like paying your parking ticket is the right thing. you're primarily paying the parking ticket because it's like,

Mark Turman (56:03.847)

Yeah.

Mike Cospoer (56:22.756)

I don't want to get locked up for this, you know. we lose sight of that a lot in the church. And I think in this culture of celebrity and kind of twisted leadership, we, we, we've got a distorted understanding of leadership in such a way that like, we've lost sight of these, like, what is it that makes you an authority? I remember a pastor telling me years ago, he said,

The reason I do hospital visits is so that, is so that when I do church discipline, people believe me when I say what I have to say. And I think that's like, that is such a remarkable contrast. It's like, I'm going to be the pastor that shows up when you're suffering and when you're in a moment of loss and when you're in a moment of trauma. And that way, when something goes wrong in your life and you're making a bad decision, when I show up then,

There's this whole weight. I mean, this is authority. This is the whole thing. There's this whole weight and, and, momentum around what I say that, that I couldn't get any other way. It's like, dude, if you show up when my father dies in the hospital to sit with me and talk to me and pray with me and everything else, if you then sit up six months later and say, Hey, I think you're making a really bad decision here. I received that.

Mark Turman (57:29.538)

Yeah.

Mike Cospers (57:54.862)

entirely different way. I talk about this a lot in the book, but I really think that's a lost art in our moment. Because what we think is kind of the inverse of all of this, which is like, well, by virtue of the fact that you're a pastor, the position itself earns you the right to say X, Y, and Z. Not only do we not live in a culture where that's just sort of the norm anymore,

That's never been the way that authority actually works. It's not even the way that it works in the military. I people think that's the way it works in the military, like just because this person is ranked higher above you. But like you, you listen to people who've actually been to combat and they're like, I don't obey orders in combat because this guy has a, you know, a few extra stripes than me when, we're in the field. I obey that guy in combat because long before the bullet started flying, he earned my trust.

Mark Turman (58:42.723)

Right.

Mark Turman (58:52.46)

Yeah.

Mike Cospers (58:52.9)

I think it's the same thing for pastors. Sorry, that's a really long answer to your question, but it's a it's a huge issue.

Mark Turman (58:56.812)

No, no, I think it's exactly that way. Right. Because if, if, if you're doing that in the right kind of motivation and you're doing that in the humility of Christ and people know that you're there either with a comforting message or with a hard message because you care about them. That's, that's, that's the real issue. And your, character over time has revealed that, right? That's the, that's the message, your character. That's, that's why when Paul's telling Timothy to do hard things, Timothy can say, okay,

Mike Cospers (59:13.766)

Yeah, exactly.

Mark Turman (59:27.336)

I don't know if I'm up for it, but I'll do my best. You is because of what he had seen in Paul's life over a long stretch of time. There's so, so much more I want to talk about, but your book includes

an afterword that I think is very important. want you to just speak for a moment about, is where we are with Israel. We're now 13 months past 10, seven of last year. I'm going to have a conversation with some of our friends in Israel.

Mike Cospers (59:30.032)

Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Mark Turman (59:56.916)

in about 10 days. What are your thoughts on Israel today as to where we are in this really hard moment between Israel and Palestinians and particularly not just simply Palestinians but between terrorists in the form of Hamas and Hezbollah and others?

Mike Cospers (01:00:18.842)

Yeah. I mean, man, what a great massive question. I feel like we need another hour. So I went to Israel November of last year, a little over a month after the attacks actually happened. And there was a moment when I was there that I just, someone said something that has just proven so true over and over again since then, which is so I was we were in Kaffar Aza, which was one of the hardest hits. Sorry, it was one of the hardest hit kibbutz kibbutzeme on October the 7th. And I think 90 people in the in the kibbutz died that day. And maybe another three dozen, I think, were taken into captivity that day as well most of the people that died that day were young, cause the, the, the sort of youth community of, of Kifaraza was the closest to the border when they attacked. and while I was there, someone who lived in that strip of the kibbutz, you know, showed up and, kind of shared his story. And he said a thing that, that I think is such an important thought. He said the problem for Israel is that we're never allowed to win. and, and if you look at the history, it's like, you can go back, it doesn't matter if it's a democratic or, or Republican administration, you can go back over the last number of years and, these waves of terror happen, these, these attacks happen and Israel is allowed to go sort of so far and no more.

And then doesn't matter if it's Barack Obama or George W. Bush, they show up and they go, okay, that's enough, no more. Because the, the, the, on the world stage, the Palestinians have a way of sort of showing up and saying, it's too much, we can't take any more, you have to stop here. And, and often what happens is it allows them to regroup and start the war again. Which, frankly, is kind of what what's happened ever since 1948. We're in a different time right now. We're in a different moment. I have a lot of critiques of the Netanyahu administration. This is something I followed really closely. We've reported a lot on on the on the bulletin about all of this. I have a lot of critiques of it. But I think part of what's happening right now in Israel is that they're saying, we can't wait on the Americans anymore. We can't we can't rely on the Americans anymore.

who knows what's going to happen after this election. On the one hand, I think they don't necessarily trust that the Democrat party actually is going to stick with them, you know, beyond the war or beyond the election, I'm sorry. But also, you've also had Donald Trump saying, finish the war before I get sworn in. I don't want to be, I don't want any part of this. So on both ends, I think they're looking at it going, we can't trust the Americans anymore.

Mark Turman (01:03:12.77)

Right.

Mike Cosper (01:03:40.134)

The UN is coming after us. And so they're just like, let's finish this thing. And they've gotten really aggressive really fast. I think the Gaza war is basically done. I think we're gonna see them declare victory fairly shortly. Hezbollah is a lot more complicated. What Israel's done in Iran is shocking and incredible.

they've really dismantled Iran's ability to hurt them. Iran says they're gonna retaliate. We're talking on Halloween. Iran says they're gonna retaliate. So maybe in the next couple of days, we'll see another rocket barrage. And I think if you see that, I think you're gonna see Israel respond and just kind of wipe out the nuclear capability and maybe wipe out the oil fields as well. And just really, really economically and militarily cripple Iran.

All that to say, that's a long wind up to say.

I think we've had three or four decades now in the United States where probably five decades now in the, U S where we haven't won a war. Like we haven't made the decision to do the hard work to finish a war, to take it to the place where it's done. it certainly didn't happen in Vietnam. Kind of didn't happen in Iraq. Definitely didn't happen in Afghanistan because we pulled out. and I think.

The difference between us and Israel is that Israel can't afford to lose another war. They've got to finish the thing. And they seem determined to finish it. I actually think this could be good for the world. Like regardless of where you are theologically on like, what does Israel mean? And you know, how do we understand their place in the, history and all the rest, the idea that like the good guys that care about freedom and democracy and liberty and human rights and everything else, that the idea that they go and finish a war and beat the bad guys. That's a gift to the world. And it's a message to the world that says like, no, we're just not going to put up with this anymore. So I think we're headed in a good place. But you know, the world's a weird place. Anything could happen in the next few weeks. It's a long answer to your question. Sorry, I have a lot of opinions about this. As you can probably tell.

Mark Turman (01:05:58.412)

Yeah. Yeah, for sure. lots. And, well, some, well, some really great reporting there too. You can find, you can find Mike's work on Israel, as its own podcast. Give us the name of that podcast for a moment.

Mike Cospers (01:06:15.408)

Yep. Yeah. So we did a podcast called Promise Land and it's a six part series involving my reporting on the ground while I was there. But the bulletin as well, if you go back to a year ago in the bulletin in the like six or so weeks after the war started, we did some kind of in-depth reporting on the history of the conflict and everything there as well.

Mark Turman (01:06:19.5)

Yeah.

Mark Turman (01:06:38.518)

Yeah, really great work. Yeah. Highly, highly recommend that. And like I said, we'll be doing some follow-up conversations with some of our friends in Israel in the next week or two as well. So encourage y'all to follow that. All right, Mike, last word, cause I know you need to get onto other things, but is there anything you wanted me to ask that I didn't ask? What's your last word to us today?

Mike Cospers (01:06:40.294)

Thanks so much.

Mike Cospers (01:07:00.144)

man, I'm just grateful. I'm grateful for this conversation. I feel like I wanted a lot, but I am. grateful for the conversation and grateful for the chance to talk about the book and I hope people check it out.

Mark Turman (01:07:14.06)

Yeah. All right. The book is the church in dark times by Mike Cospers understanding and resisting the evil that seduced the evangelical movement. it's an important book and it is well done as all of Mike's work is. And so we highly recommend that to you, Mike, thanks for being with us. Thanks to our audience as well. If this has been helpful to you, we pray that you would rate review us and recommend this to some of your family and friends so that they can be a part of the conversation as well.

Mike Cospers (01:07:30.14)

then my thanks to be another place for our audience as well. This has been helpful to you, and sorry to you with our late review, and special thanks to some of your family friends for taking

part in the conversation as well. We're grateful for you allowing us to be on this platform, and we look forward to you joining us on the next episode of OVC Media.

Mark Turman (01:07:43.458)

We're grateful for you following the Dennison Forum podcast, and we look forward to you joining us on the next episode. Thanks for being here.