

## Doug Pagitt

### “Universe-Honoring Christianity”

Episode 26 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com

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**Doug Pagitt** is the founding pastor of Solomon’s Porch, a holistic Christian community in Minneapolis, and founder of *Emergent Village*, a global Christian social network. He hosts a weekly radio show, where he interviews thought-leaders on contemporary issues and leading-edge ideas in Christianity. Pagitt’s books include *A Christianity Worth Believing*; *Church Re-Imagined*; and *Preaching Re-Imagined*.

#### HIGHLIGHTS

This dialogue is a **superb introduction to the Emerging Church movement**, which began as a networking of **progressive Evangelicals** in the late 1990s who craved the doctrinal openness of the liberal stream in Protestant Christianity but who wanted to **carry forward the passion and invitational energy of Evangelicalism**. A highlight is the attention given to one of the main tenets of the Emerging Church: **encouragement of diversity, including diversity of belief**. It is one of two episodes (the other being Gretta Vosper’s) that centers on **practical issues and ideas for worship and structure in progressive Christian congregations**. It is perhaps the best episode for deep reflection on **the importance of selective valuing of scriptural truth — and yet the perils that arise when that course is taken**.

#### SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

This dialogue is highly recommended for virtually all Christian orientations (other than fundamentalist). Theologically liberal congregations that are struggling to maintain vitality and membership will benefit from learning about the passion and attention to newcomers that the Emerging Church movement carries forward from its Evangelical roots — but with openness to diversity of belief that is more familiar to the liberals of mainstream denominations. By the same token, Evangelicals curious about just how far doctrines might be flexed will find food for thought in this conversation, too. Any group where diversity of belief or concern about a possible “slippery slope” when the Bible’s authority is selectively questioned will find the study guide questions for this episode especially on target.

## BLOG COMMENTS

### Richard R. Powell says:

I loved this interview. Warm giddy emotion. The way Doug is open to ideas, to creative thought, and to a shared development (open source) collaborative kind of theology. Boom, like doors being thrown wide open. All that fresh air, wow. a great big 'amen!' from me.

## KEYWORD TOPICS

**Emerging Christianity, Emerging Church, Emerging Village, divorce** (and expulsion from church), **Passion Play, Jesus, the Resurrection, altar call, evangelism, doubt, the Gospels** (Synoptic v. Johannine), **Book of Acts, Christian exclusivity, diversity** (value of), **pastoring a church** (experience of), **open-minded** (difficulties of trying to be), **evidential worldview, science as “collective intelligence”, tolerance** (limits of), **End Times, climate change, beliefs** (as loosely held, unexamined), **change** (as cosmically inherent), **truth, biblical Christianity** (flawed by unwillingness to change), **“open-source” Christianity, Pentecostal, Day of Pentecost, Moses, inclusivity, creeds** (former functions of), **“flat-earth faith” v. “evolutionary faith”, God’s word** (redefining), **hell** (an empty concept), **afterlife, judgment, theology v. lived experience, core concepts** (validity of questioning all), **God** (open for new understandings of), **God** (as personification of Reality), **religious transitions** (why they are slow), **liturgies** (the need to evolve them), **church planting, worship styles** (radical changes in), **Universalism, history of the Emerging Church movement, social media** (importance of), **Evangelicalism** (as social movement, not theology), **nonhierarchical church structures** (as leading edge)

## BIOGRAPHY

**Doug Pagitt** is the founding pastor of Solomon’s Porch, a holistic Christian community in Minneapolis, and founder of *Emergent Village*, a global Christian social network. He is one of the leaders of the Emerging Church movement. He hosts a weekly radio show, where he interviews thought-leaders on contemporary issues and leading-edge ideas in Christianity. The tagline of the show: “religious radio that’s not quite right.”

Pagitt received a BA in anthropology and a master’s of theology from Bethel Seminary. He is the author of *A Christianity Worth Believing*; *Church Re-Imagined*; *Preaching Reimagined*; *BodyPrayers*; and most recently, *Church in the Inventive Age*. He is co-editor of *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*. Doug Pagitt’s website: <http://dougpagitt.com>.

## SUPPLEMENTARY VIDEOS

Pagitt posts the videos of his radio interviews on his own YouTube channel:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/DougPagitt#p/u>

## SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found, and new ones added, at the following url:

<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/doug-pagitt-postmodern-evangelicalism-emerging/>

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **The making of an Emergent Church leader.** Doug Pagitt tells a **funny and memorable story** of how he ‘got religion’ as a teenager. He inadvertently attended a play about Jesus because it was called a **Passion Play**. He speaks of the turning point for him during the play this way:

Then they got to the story of the **Resurrection**, and it just clicked inside of me that *this* was the story I had always wanted to be true: that God was on the side of people, that there was some way that human beings were meant to be living in harmony with God, that **God wasn’t angry with humanity**, that God was trying to participate in every way. And there was this big invitation: that the things that would cause **destruction and death** in this world weren’t going to win in the end.

But we learn that almost immediately, Doug began to **question** what he was told. And then the questioning never stopped, which is one of the chief characteristics of the **Emergent Church movement**. Questioning — even of core Christian concepts — is encouraged. Anyway, right after the play concluded, Doug was handed a cartoon pamphlet on the Christian message. One cartoon depicted God as standing on one side of a great chasm, and people were stuck on the other. Doug recalls,

I was just totally perplexed as to why God of the universe would be stuck on the far side of the chasm, just looking pathetic over there.

He concludes his story,

I want to find people who want to keep that kind of **passion and excitement and exploration** and questioning going. And there’s plenty of room in my mind for **questioning** of the deep, dark, doubting kind.

**Question 1:** *What was your overall sense of this dialogue? What did you find most valuable? What about Pagitt’s central theme: that for Christianity to stay alive and current to the times, the beliefs and practices and institutions must be **open to questioning** and to change and to diversity of belief?*

2. **What is the Emerging Church Movement?** Doug Pagitt is one of the leaders of what has come to be called the Emerging Church. Near the end of the dialogue, he explains that the movement got going in the late 1990s, and that it was a coming together of very **progressive evangelical** church pastors and leaders, such as himself. He describes Emerging Church as,

. . . **a network of people who are trying to think about what it means to be a person of faith living in the context that we live in today.** It's a very loose, very open network that has lots of manifestations to it. . . We weren't talking just about the Church that was emerging; we were trying to talk about emergent thought, emergent faith, **emergent Christianity**, emergent science, all of that stuff. We were talking about emergent theory, not just what new churches will look like.

Elsewhere, Pagitt explains that “emerging” is really what the Church has always been doing; that it isn't something utterly new. He says,

Christianity can be an alive, expressed faith in every situation and not one that has to hearken back to simply a preferred telling of the story **from some other place and time.**

**Question 2:** *Do you have a sense of what Emerging Church means? What, if any aspects, of Emerging Church do you find **attractive**? Have you had any personal experience with it? Had you heard of this movement before your encounter with this dialogue?*

3. **Valuing multiple perspectives on the Christian story.** Pagitt continues his story of his acquired evangelical faith: notably, his experience that within evangelicalism there was not the kind of openness to belief and interpretation that he himself had always felt. He reflects,

Different perspectives started to become hindrances. That felt funny to me, because I've always felt that the **Jesus narrative** was told in four Gospels for a reason—it has been told through all of these expressions of Christianity for a reason. So it didn't surprise me that Christianity would have different ways of being told. What surprised me was **how few people saw diversity as a necessity.**

**Question 3:** *How do you feel about **diversity of belief** and interpretation within a church congregation, and within your denomination (if you are part of one)? Have you ever experienced too much diversity, where diversity makes it difficult for close community bonds and trust to arise? Or too little diversity? What was that like?*

4. **Building diversity by eliminating barriers.** In translating his zeal for diversity into reality in actual church contexts, Doug suggests:

I think that if you **eliminate barriers**, diversity will present itself. We don't have to work *for diversity*. We have to work *against barriers*. Diversity is the natural outcome. . . . There are so many things within Christianity and the ways it is presented and lived out in real people's experiences that *require* boundaries in order for people to get along. For example, a language that requires certain definitions, and you have to meet at a certain time, and you're going to have some kind of aesthetic to that

meeting and some kind of expectation. It's all of these lived experiences that drive us toward separating from people who are different from us and gathering together with people who are like us. We have to work on eliminating those boundaries so that the more natural diversity can shine through.

**Question 4A:** *What is your response to Doug Pagitt's suggested approach of eliminating barriers to diversity? What would be examples of that approach in a church setting?*

**Question 4B:** *While espousing the value of diversity, Doug does list a number of church and worship characteristics that **do need to be defined and bounded**. On the ground, how difficult is it for a congregation to walk that line between reducing barriers to diversity while maintaining sufficient integrity of structure and style for the community to bond?*

5. **How an evolutionary understanding supports a valuing of diversity.** The host, **Michael Dowd**, concurs with the importance of diversity in this way:

I have said a number of times in some of these interviews that **one of the biggest shifts** for me in embracing a **deep-time** understanding of reality—a 14-billion year universe rather than a several-thousand-year-old universe, which is what I used to believe—is how we handle differences. There was a time when I was really certain that there was *one* truth, *one* interpretation. And if you didn't share my interpretation, my understanding, my worldview, I really believed that you were going to hell—that God was going to torture you not just for millions or billions of years, but forever. I really believed that.

**One of the biggest gifts that an evolutionary worldview** afforded me was this understanding that our differences aren't a problem to be solved; they're a solution to our problems. In many cases, the solution is our diversity—the diversity of a body, or the diversity of an ecosystem. It's the diversity of the different cells and organs in a body that makes the body healthy. It's the diversity of species in an **ecosystem** that makes an ecosystem healthy.

**Question 4A:** *As you experience the dialogues in this Evolutionary Christianity series, are you attracted to the evolutionary perspective, as Michael Dowd exemplifies in his response on diversity? Or is evolution something you are suspicious of, or that seems too removed from real life and heartfelt experience?*

6. **Current-day, collectively gathered evidence trumps sacred texts.** Throughout this series, Michael Dowd offers a consistent plea for valuing evidence over authority, the fruit of the scientific enterprise over scriptural doctrines. In this dialogue he states his case unequivocally:

I now ground my opinions in an **evidential worldview** rather than in a **mythic worldview**, and that can make a huge difference—because I can now speak with an authority that doesn't come just from me. It doesn't come from any particular sacred text. It doesn't come from any particular tradition, as such—although I guess you could say it comes from the tradition of **the worldwide, self-correcting, scientific enterprise**. It comes from **humanity's best collective intelligence** at this time.

Grounding there first and then going *back* to the religious tradition, then going *back* to the scriptures, then going *back* to the other things that have been meaningful and inspiring allows me to hold them in a different way.

**Question 6A:** *Do you agree with Michael Dowd’s **advocacy of evidence** over scripture? Or do you have some hesitation — and if so, what and why?*

**Question 6B:** *What might be the basis of **Christian congregational life and worship** if Dowd’s privileging of evidence over scripture were embraced? That is, which core elements of the Christian story (or which interpretations of core elements) would likely stand the evidential test of time? And would they be **robust enough to forge community** and to fulfill human needs for trust, gratitude, hope, comfort, etc.?*

7. **Letting go of concern over core Christian concepts.** Doug Pagitt echoes a milder expression of Dowd’s privileging of evidence that was quoted immediately above. Here is what Doug says:

We have to remind ourselves sometimes that just because our tradition has come up with some really nifty answers, **that doesn’t mean that those questions still are important.** Theology has always been telling the story of **God’s activity in the world in our day** and trying to translate the two together. Theology is always a translator, always an adaptor. It’s the thing that connects one idea to another idea. But it’s not the idea itself. It’s not **the lived experience itself**; it’s not the story of God itself. It is this transitional thing.

So we have to remind ourselves that, look, **maybe we don’t need to spend all of our time trying to figure out why the old answers don’t fit any longer.** That would be like me going downstairs and finding every old cell phone charger that I have and trying to feel like I *have* to get it to fit this new phone somewhere. It doesn’t fit my phone. I needed it to connect my old phone to the wall, but I don’t need it to connect my new phone to the wall.

**Question 7:** You may have noticed, in contrast to Michael Dowd, Doug Pagitt never uses the word *science* in his letting go of core Christian concepts. So **his version might be more open to intuitive and different ways of knowing** — not just testable, collective science. *Which (if any) expression of a willingness to let go of core Christian concepts most suits you: that of Pagitt or that of Dowd? And why?*

8. **Pastoral pragmatism — with authenticity.** Doug Pagitt tempers his drive toward more inclusive language and more **flexibility in core Christian concepts** with a pragmatic sensibility gained from many years of pastoring churches. He says,

So if I start saying things like, “Well, maybe we can think about **God in language** that doesn’t use the single subject any longer; maybe we don’t talk about God as just being a separate single subject. And we could talk about God in some more helpful ways.” I mean, even people who love me and are in all of this with me, their eyebrows start to go up, like, “Holy moley! I don’t know if we want to start

**exploring if God is a separate single subject** or not.” To which, I’m like, “Okay, maybe we *don’t*. But if we’re *not* doing that simply because we’re **afraid**, then let’s acknowledge that. Let’s tell one another the truth about why we’re not going to talk about something. Because I don’t have to talk about everything. I don’t have to think about everything. I don’t have to mess around with every idea. But **let’s not be dishonest about why we’re not talking about that.**”

**Question 8:** What is your response to Doug’s dedication to both authenticity and pragmatic church leadership?

9. **Beliefs on a spectrum of commitment.** Doug Pagitt talks about not taking anyone’s declaration of belief at face value. Beliefs may be held to different degrees of commitment. Here is a rather long quotation that demonstrates why, as a Christian leader and church pastor, this is such an important insight for him:

I have come to the conclusion that we are not always responsible for the things that we believe. It’s not as if all of us have gone through every belief that we hold, every assumption, every sort of root life-giving idea that we’re building our lives around and have measured those, and challenged those, and tested those. **A lot of us are victims of our very own beliefs. We don’t know why we believe things.** They’re just *ours*. They come with us, and they happen to us. They kind of befall us. Then we have to *deal* with them. And it’s almost like the beliefs and assumptions have a life of their own. But then we have to say, “How *am* I with that? I believe that and I hold that, but I don’t even know if I *want* to anymore. I don’t know where I am in that.”

And so, when we hear someone articulating some belief—whether it’s one we agree with or a different one—I have tried to say to myself, I wonder where that person *is* in relationship to that belief? I wonder if they’re really comfortable with it? Maybe they’re more comfortable now than they were five years ago. Or, maybe they feel like, ‘This might be the last time I’m going to make this argument with a real sense of confidence, because it’s really slipping away.’

**Beliefs aren’t these settled things that we either hold to or not.** We’re always negotiating with everything that we hold to and with every assumption, at one level or the other. I’ve raised this point with some of my evangelical friends, and honestly, they look at me as if to say, “That’s *all* I’ve been trying to do for the last twenty years—to stay right where I was.” It’s as if somehow sameness and stability is the most important thing.

I just think about what I know as sort of a pop scientist about the nature of the cosmos. And stability? That’s not a big part of it. Activity and interaction and intention and energy and playfulness and movement and change: *That* is. **So why would we want to have a faith that would be so counter to everything else of the cosmos?**

**Question 9:** What is your response to Doug Pagitt’s perspective on beliefs being held on a spectrum of commitment? And what do you think of his claim that **beliefs may often be unexamined** — that we and others may continue to hold and to express beliefs without stopping to consider whether those statements are actually still valid for us anymore?



10. **The cosmic context of change and its benefits — versus a slippery slope.** Michael Dowd expands on Doug Pagitt’s quotation above by putting change in a cosmic context. Dowd says,

In a very real way, if everything in the universe is evolving—galaxies, solar systems, planets, continents, oceans, species, groups, cultures, everything—if everything in the universe is transforming through time, so that the only constant is change, you could say, if that’s *real*, if that’s so, then to try to look to the *past* as if these beliefs, these revelations, these understandings, these words, these metaphors, are The Truth, then what you’re basically trying to do is **step out of this rhythm, of this flow of evolution**. I think this is actually **the fatal flaw of traditional biblical Christianity**, pre-evolutionary Christianity, in a modern and postmodern world. Ultimately to my mind, any creature, any species, any group, any organization that attempts to *not* change—as if the past understandings are totally where it’s at—is setting itself up for either **irrelevance or extinction**.

**Question 10A:** *What is your response to Dowd’s celebration of change in the cosmos and his assertion that change ought to apply to religions? What might an ever-evolving view of scripture and scriptural truth look like?*

**Question 10B:** *If the Bible needs to be approached with discernment, rather than taken literally, where do we obtain the values and measuring tools upon which to evaluate which parts of the Bible still apply? And if we obtain those values and measuring tools somewhere other than the Bible, what does “biblical authority” mean? Overall, on what basis does a Christian who is not a fundamentalist select biblical passages to honor and others to overlook, discount, or find metaphorical ways to interpret? How can this be done authentically and securely — without sliding down a slippery slope that ultimately demotes how one regards the truth-value and guidance of scriptural authority?*

11. **“Open-Source Christianity.”** Open-source Christianity is a term coined by Doug Pagitt. “Open source” is a term used in computer software design, which Doug explains in this way:

In open-source theory, what you’re doing is creating a code that you give to all other programmers. People can change the code at every level—at the root level, the experiential level, and all the way through. The underlying belief in open-source code writing is that **all of us collectively are going to create something better than one or two of us**.

I think Christianity ought to be seeing itself as it has been: as **an open-source faith**. I’m not suggesting that we should *change* Christianity to make it open-source. I’m trying to say that we should acknowledge that that’s what it has always been: an open-source faith.

**Question 11:** *Did you find the “open source” analogy as a helpful metaphor for the point Doug Pagitt is making? And to what extent do you agree or disagree with his enthusiasm for continuing change in Christian doctrines and worship?*



12. **The perils of religious openness and change.** Despite his enthusiasm for a more “open source” form of Christianity, Doug Pagitt is well aware of **the equal need for stability** and constancy. He muses,

It takes a long time to build **the infrastructure of friendships and churches and songs** and rituals and all the things that you need in order to be an active faithful person in the world around these new ideas. It’s so slow in coming that **I wonder if it’s possible to make the advances that we need to make, while keeping one foot in both worlds.** Can you keep talking in the old way *and* do the thinking that’s going to be required in the new way? I’m not sure.

**Question 12A:** *What do you think when a speaker, as in Doug’s case, makes a strong case for one side of an issue (the need for more openness to change in Christianity) but then also states the downside (in this case, the loss of a level of stability vital for holding a community together)?*

**Question 12B:** *Overall, where do you typically feel most comfortable on this **spectrum** of religious change or stability?*

13. **What Progressive Christians can learn from Evangelicals.** Doug is asked to help non-evangelical listeners understand what distinguishes an evangelical form of Christianity. He then describes a **key characteristic of Evangelicals that he urges progressives** to take on:

Where they got their name, ‘Evangelicals,’ is from the word ‘evangelistic.’ Evangelicals tend to be evangelistic, naturally. Evangelistic (which sometimes can be abusive and it can be controlling and threatening), when it’s at its best, is very **winsome and very invitational**. It allows people to start in the process before they’ve concluded anything about the process. I think that’s something important for non-evangelical religious people to learn from: this innovative, upstart kind of thing that tends to **start with invitation and considers outsiders just as important as insiders.**

The freedom to be an upstart and the freedom to be innovative is really a big deal in Evangelicalism. Evangelicalism tends to be **non-denominational and non-hierarchical**, and I think that’s a really important part of the future—that we are moving away from bounded-set and center-set organizations, into networked, relational-set organizations.

**Question 13:** *What is **your experience** with the evangelical side of Christian faith? What is your sense of the invitational quality, in general, of evangelical congregations? If you count yourself as a mainstream or progressive Christian, can you envision ways of making it easier for **newcomers** to feel at ease with your form of Christianity?*