

Doug Pagitt

“Universe-Honoring Christianity”

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Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 26 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity: Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith](#).” I’m [Michael Dowd](#), and I’m your host for this series, which can be accessed via EvolutionaryChristianity.com, where we invite you to add your voice to the conversation.

Today, [Doug Pagitt](#) is our featured guest. [Doug](#) is the founding pastor of [Solomon’s Porch](#), a holistic Christian community in Minneapolis, Minnesota and founder of [Emergent Village](#), a global Christian social network. He holds a BA in anthropology and a master of theology degree from [Bethel Seminary](#), and he is the author of a number of books, including [A Christianity Worth Believing](#); [Church Re-Imagined](#); and [Preaching Re-Imagined](#). The topic of our conversation is “Universe-Honoring Christianity.”

Host: Hello Doug Pagitt, and thank you for joining this conversation on evolutionary Christianity.

Doug: Thanks, Michael. Glad to be here.

Host: So Doug, you have been involved in what is called ‘[Emerging Christianity](#)’ or ‘[The Emerging Church](#)’ for quite some time. Really, you’re a leader in that context. I don’t know that all of our people are going to be familiar with what that flavor of Christianity is. I’d love for you to begin by sharing your spiritual story: how you got to be where you are and who you are now —some of the main mileposts along the way— and how you see yourself in this larger movement.

Doug: Well, I live in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and I pastor a church here called Solomon’s Porch that we started ten years ago. Before that I worked at a large evangelical church, which was a really good and healthy place. But I didn’t grow up in evangelicalism, or in religion at all. I grew up in the Twin Cities area in a family that didn’t go to church—on purpose. It wasn’t that we were just missing it on Sundays. We were one of those intentional non-church-going families. We created our own family rhythms for what we did and how we did it, but there was no context of religion or Christianity at all. I didn’t ever memorize a Bible verse, never went to a

summer camp, never sat through Sunday school. I never had to wake up early on a Sunday morning to drive to church with my family. We never said a prayer in our house; we didn't have a Bible: There was just none of that at all.

Host: How were your parents raised? I'm just curious.

Doug: My mom was raised a Missouri tent Baptist convert. So she had a little bit of religious experience as an early teenager from the poor part of Missouri. My dad had very little religious experience. His family in Iowa was kicked out of the Episcopal Church when his mother divorced my dad's father. I only picked that up on the side. It wasn't a big family story for us. But my dad was one of those who felt that religion is for weak people and there's no reason to believe all that flooey. So we didn't grow up with religion at all. There was no expression of it, but also no real bitterness toward it. There wasn't a kind of intellectual elitism that went on, no insulting of religious people. There wasn't any of that. My dad made my mom promise when they got married that if they had children, she wouldn't force them to go to church. So she never did, and so I never did.

I didn't know anything at all about Christianity until I was a teenager. Just before I turned 17, a friend of mine asked me if I would go with him to a play happening in downtown Minneapolis on Hennepin Avenue (which was a fairly well known and risqué street). The play was called [The Passion Play](#). Now I know what a Passion play is alright. But when I was sixteen years old, it was a bit of a bait and switch—let's just put it that way. *[laughter]* It wasn't what I expected at all. I didn't know anything about Christianity. I didn't even know this was a religious event that I was going to.

So I went with my friend and I'm sitting there in the balcony, watching this story of Jesus for the first time. I didn't know Jesus, didn't know the connection at all. I mean, I'd heard of Jesus but didn't know any of the details or any of the content at all. And I didn't know about the Resurrection. So I thought the play was sort of peaking at the point when Jesus yells, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing." I had no idea what was coming next.

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. So I didn't know anything at all, but I started piecing together this whole story of what was happening.

Then I was invited, as people are in those events, to go backstage for this altar-call experience. I went backstage, following everybody else, and we sat in this little circle. They handed out booklets and started going through this booklet. The content in the booklet was so different from what I had just seen out on the stage. Now, of course, I consider this typical of evangelism booklets: a picture of a bridge with human beings on one side of a chasm and God

on the other side. But in that moment, 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. I was confused because it wasn't the story that they had presented out on the stage. So right away I felt this sense of being at odds with the Christian expression that I was hearing—and I didn't know what to do with that. That's really what started me on this path, early in my Christian experience, of thinking, "I'm going to hear different ways that people explain this story."

Now, I didn't grow up with any predisposition toward any religious system, but I knew almost instantly, during my first three to five months of being a Christian, that I was hearing all of these different versions of the story. These versions always seemed to be good news to me. It didn't trouble me that there are different expressions of Christianity because, to my mind, this story is so big, so good, so rich—with so many levels and so many layers to it—that there is no way everybody's going to have it right. We're all doing our best to tell the story, as we understand it.

Since some of the Emerging Church conversation that I'm involved in really, for me, roots itself in that sensibility, 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. But then, there's also the kind of questioning that comes when you think you've got it just the way you want it, and then there's a new possibility that opens itself to you. And that's what I find exciting about what *you're* doing and about conversations that are going on: that 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.

Host: That's great! Say a little more, if you would, about your educational and professional background.

Doug: No one thought I'd ever make it out of Hopkins High School, but I did. And then I went on to [Bethel College](#). Bethel was a private Christian liberal arts college. I only knew about it because I was a basketball player and got recruited to play basketball there. The year before, I'd had this religious experience, so I fit the criteria for this Christian college—but I didn't even know there were such things as Christian colleges. So I ended up there in sort of a strange way. I studied anthropology in college and found a nice sense of how I want to think about the world by studying culture and anthropology.

Immediately after these studies, I went to [Bethel Seminary](#)—a different school, but with same name. I went to Bethel Seminary and got a master's in theology. Sometimes I refer to myself as an anthropological theologian because I think that both of those worlds are mixing together for me in some really important ways for how we are to think about religion, and humanity, and expressions of faith, and all of this. There are days when I feel far more like an [anthropologist](#) than I do a [theologian](#), and some days when I feel the other way around.

Host: One of the things I appreciate about what you've already shared is your valuing of different expressions of the faith, different interpretations of the Christian story. One of the things that motivated me in [this whole series](#) was to bring together a really broad spectrum of thinkers, ministers, and theologians—different folks [from different streams of Christianity](#), different flavors or brands of Christianity that all share a few things in common, a few really important things, like: a deep-time understanding of the nature of reality, valuing of evidence as divine communication, a global heart, a commitment to the health and the wellbeing of the entire planet and the human expression of that, a sense of hope or possibility grounded in an understanding that God isn't some far-off being. God is active. Whatever we mean by the word *God*, we're pointing to some reality that's active in—and through—the world and Creation.

Those are some of the things that I think we all share in common. I'd love to hear about how *you* now hold Christianity—and whether you have always embraced an evolutionary understanding, or where that came into your sense of things.

Doug: I think I have always held an evolutionary view of Christianity. I haven't used that word for it, but I really like that. I became sort of infatuated with the Bible early on in my Christian life. So as a teenager, I bought a Bible and a picture of Jesus and a Keith Green album on the day after my experience with the *Passion Play*. I went to this Christian bookstore and bought these things and started into this whole project.

I started reading the Bible, but I didn't know how to read it. I had some people around, some adults in a campus ministry program who were kind of helping me, but I was really doing it myself. I was just reading the Bible and opening it up. I started to sense, because I didn't have a theological lens through which to read the Bible, I was kind of reading it through my own experience. So I started to see all of the different ways in which the stories were told—and quickly noticed (I think within the first six to eight months or so) that the gospel of John tells the story differently from Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Later, I found out that other people had noticed that too and that the versions are called the [Synoptic Gospels](#) and the [Johannine Gospel](#). I noticed that and wondered, how come these three told the same stories and that one told a different story? So right away, I had this sense that there was something up. I started to read the [Book of Acts](#) and I was finding in it all these different expressions that were coming together, but I didn't have the categories for understanding. I could tell early on in the stories I was reading in the New Testament that there was a lot of flexibility, a lot of wondering, a lot of conversation happening. So I think that early on, I really had that sensibility.

But then I started, as many people do, feeling the pressure of one stream of Christianity, in comparison to another, and it became less accommodating to have this kind of open view of thinking that different perspectives are requirements. Instead, 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.

It was very interesting. I kind of chalked all that up to the fact that I was raised without a commitment to any particular denomination or theological form. I thought, “Well, maybe if I had been raised a Baptist or Methodist or something, then I would give preference to that one and I would understand why people feel that they’re supposed to think that one view is simply better than another.” Actually, I want to tell you that I *do* think that some views of Christianity are better than others, so I don’t want to act like I’m all gracious with that. There are some that I think are really troublemaking, and I wish people would stop sharing those. But on the whole, even the troublemakers are necessary, because none of us has a corner on all of this.

So I think from the early days I had that open view. And I went to a seminary that was kind of a generic evangelical seminary that wasn’t hard-line on anything—no trying to push one particular perspective against another. It was a kind of a base-level master’s-degree-in-theology kind of place, so I didn’t feel that kind of pressure. It wasn’t until I got involved in starting a network that is now called [Emerging Village](#) and [Emerging Church](#), that I really started having intense conversations with people who held views that seem to be deeply exclusive in their core. I’ve always tended to run around with people who are open-hearted and who at least *wanted* to be open-minded.

Host: That’s an interesting distinction because—I think about my own life—there have been times when I had the intention of being open-minded (I even had that story about myself, that I *am* open-minded) but years later, looking back, I realized that I wasn’t quite as open-minded as I would like to believe. We’re all emerging and growing at different rates on different developmental trajectories.

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.

Doug: I know there are a lot of people who hear about diversity and for them it gets a bit tiresome—especially when people feel that what we have to do is *create* more diversity. I’ve never really understood that thinking. I think that if you eliminate barriers, diversity will present itself.

Host: Absolutely!

Doug: We don't have to work *for diversity*. We have to work *against barriers*. Diversity is the natural outcome. It's not the goal that we're all trying to get to someday—that someday things will be diverse. It's a little funny that diversity is only restricted when restriction is intentional. 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. And that's what we try to do.

I feel very fortunate that I'm able not only to think theologically and write books, and go around and give lectures and my radio show, and all that. But I also have the opportunity to be a pastor of a church where we're having that kind of real-life experiences with each other on a daily and a weekly rhythm. It's so helpful. I'll tell you, it is not my personality to be all open-minded to other people's opinions. I'm a really opinionated person who forms opinions about topics I haven't even thought about yet; I start forming an opinion before I even have all the facts in my head. That's my natural personality, my natural bent.

It's my Christian conviction that *that's* not the best way to live in the cosmos, which keeps me from just falling into ill-formed opinions. I know there are some people who are like, "I listen to you and your kind of progressive, evolutionary people, and I think, 'Well, yeah, if you're not opinionated and if you're an open-minded, sort of easy-going peacenik, great, that works for you. But what if you're kind of a fiery, opinionated person?'" I'm like, "Oh, I'm nothing but that!" It's not that I'm just slipping into an easier kind of Christianity that comes naturally to me. It is a really deep call to have to be someone who is intentionally open-minded and wants to listen to others and to difference—because that doesn't come very naturally for me.

Host: Yes. I can relate to that. I hold my ideas and beliefs passionately, and yet also lightly. But while I'm in the midst of articulating them, I'm full of energy. I now ground my opinions and my faith in an [evidential worldview](#) (also [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), 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.

As you articulated earlier, yes, I value differences. Do I value *all* differences? No, I don't. It's not a surprise to me that America is not exactly leading the world with regard to our response

to climate change, for example, because one in three Americans believes these are the “[End Times](#)” anyway, so why bother?

So I don’t tolerate all belief systems. But I do find it useful to say, “Let’s start with just accepting people where they are—exactly where they’re at, and exactly where they’re not.” And then we do what we can to educate and inspire, because I think ultimately, judgment and guilt and condemnation doesn’t work. Just from a pragmatic standpoint, it doesn’t work as well as inspiration and allurements and education.

Doug: Yes. I think you’re onto something there, because 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? Or, maybe they’re more comfortable now than they were five years ago. 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. And I think it’s interesting to give grace to one another and say, “Well, that’s where we all are right now on this, at least what we’re willing to say.”

I’m not saying that we’re dishonest or liars or anything, but we don’t say everything about everything we *think* all the time. And so, as I find people I differ with, I like to think, “I wonder in five years if we’ll still both view things so differently?” This is like the family picture at the summer picnic. There’s a snapshot of who someone is right now, and we did grab that idea and that’s where we are. But wouldn’t it be a shame if we were both precisely where we are now, five years from now?

Host: Yes.

Doug: Wouldn’t that be a bit of a disappointment? 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?

Host: Great point! 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.

One of the reasons why I'm excited about [this conversation series](#) is that we've got 38 of us—and we don't all integrate evolution and theology in the same way. We don't all hold Christianity and science, or faith and reason, or head and heart, in the same way. And yet what we're all committed to is an embrace of both-and, not either-or, and that the evolving of our faith traditions is a good thing.

Doug, I've heard you speak on your radio program, and I remember hearing a phrase that I want to ask you about now. You've talked about the “open-source” nature of Christianity. I wonder if you could say a little bit about what you mean by that, and how you see Christianity evolving.

Doug: Well, I borrowed the phrase *open-source* from the computer technology world and from the development of software. I know that there's a philosophy of development of software called '[open-source theory](#).' 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. Now, you may not have the fastest development or the most precise outcomes, but what you're going to have, because of the collective experience, is something better.

So I've been thinking about how Christianity, if you look at the biblical narrative, was doing open-source religion from the start, all the way back into the Hebrew culture—Judaism and those expressions. But you especially see it in the life of Jesus, where the systems of control that were in place at one point for people (faithfulness to God, a temple structure, Mosaic law, and a pharisaical application of that law) that you see these changing at the time of Jesus. There is this invitation for all people to be involved, for everyone. That's why I refer to myself as a Pentecostal—not in theological terms, but in sort of the big story. The day of Pentecost was the celebration of Moses going to the mountain to receive the [Ten Commandments](#), and then

on that commemorative day is when the Spirit in the [Book of Acts](#) falls upon all the people. So that which came in one period upon the *one* person, Moses, on [the day of Pentecost](#) in the *Book of Acts* falls upon *all* the people.

So then you have this open-source nature, where it's not one code-writer, it's not one designer, it's not one person with an idea. Rather, it's all of the expressions coming together: *that* is going to create something better. 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. You have people called into it without any kind of criteria.

It's really amazing when you read the early accounts through the Old Testament and the New Testament. You see there's nothing that is expected of people or that is a prerequisite other than that they have life in their lungs. I tend to say, for example, that in our church we don't restrict anyone from any activity. You don't have to achieve anything in order to participate in this community in any way. The act of being born is the born-again experience that's required. I *get* that that rubs against some people who want their religion to be a little bit more discriminating, for reasons that they find very valid. I just don't find it to be a very helpful way forward. I think that a more open-source approach is more in line with what Christianity has always been about.

Host: I've actually in recent years—probably seven or eight years, now—come to speak about a distinction that I think is important. The distinction is between, what I call, [“flat-earth faith”](#) and [“evolutionary faith.”](#) What I mean by flat-earth Christianity *isn't* about Christians who still believe the world is flat. It's where your understanding of core Christian concepts—like, sin, salvation, the Kingdom of God, heaven and hell, Jesus as “the way the truth and the life”—is the same understanding that Christians held centuries or even millennia ago. That is, long before we had an evolutionary understanding of reality.

I see evolutionary Christianity as revisiting, in a very open-source way, that it's not *one* person, *one* pope, even *one* group of religious leaders that's going to tell us, *What does sin mean in evolutionary context? What does salvation mean? What do heaven and hell mean? What do these core concepts mean in an evolutionary context?* It's not as if there's one meaning that's going to be decided for us by some elite group. It really is open-source. And what that means is that we all get to participate.

People will sometimes ask me, “How do you understand sin?” or “How do you understand heaven?” And I say, “Well, how do *you*?” I want to hear from the community. I'm less interested in finding the one true meaning than I am in saying, “Okay, here's how I'm interpreting it now. Does that inspire you? Does that work for you? Do you have a way of thinking about it that's more inspiring?” I want to know about that, because I think if we ask those kinds of questions, then we start seeing what answers emerge from the collective. Rather than in the 3rd and 4th centuries, when a group of men were basically deciding which books are in and which books are out of the Bible, and how things are to be interpreted, and what creeds are created, today

it's a much more global conversation. It's a much more, as you say, open-source process—and it's a vital process to have!

For those of us who choose to continue to identify with the Christian tradition, I think we're *required* to keep our faith alive and vibrant and life-giving to people, and life-giving to the world. We have to ask these questions: How do we interpret even the concept of scripture? Does the phrase "God's Word" only and always mean only the Bible, or could it also mean evidence? ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#).)

Doug: Right. Not only should we be thinking about the answers to the questions; we should have the freedom to say, "I don't know that that's a valid question anymore." Sometimes we feel as if Christianity is a belief that starts with a set of answers, and we have to convince people that the questions are important.

I did a debate with some people on the topic of hell. That's a pretty core concept in some expressions of Christianity—that there is some kind of afterlife and judgment, and heaven and hell, as it all comes together as the whole package. We started this debate—it was a formal debate—and the other presenter was taking a more reformed view. He started his talk and said, "I was encouraged by people on Twitter and Facebook to start this event, and they were saying, 'Give 'em hell!' So when it was my turn to start, I said, "Look, I think we need to recognize the fact that 'hell' now is a punch line."

It wouldn't have been funny if he had said "Give 'em pedophilia!" That's not funny because we know the reality. The fact that people use 'hell' as a punch line in a debate about the legitimacy of thinking about hell as a theological concept tells me that for most people's lived experience, the topic of 'hell' has become something like, How many angels can fit on the head of a pin? It's now a theological concept that we can argue over, but it's not a personal lived experience that people are struggling with.

Host: Yes. Good point.

Doug: And so 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.

I think we have to acknowledge sometimes that some of the doctrines, some of the teachings were people's best guess at the time—but those topics might not be what are

important to us any longer. For example, do you really know why there are creeds? It's because people differed about how they should tell the story. So maybe what we should be reminded of when we hear a creed or see a creed is, all along people have been differing on these things. So maybe we should take the notion of differences as being *normal*, rather than the creed as being a single answer. In that way I like to consider myself a 'creedal' person because I think that it tells us that differences matter and that we should be in inter-play with one another. We should not just tolerate one another; we should love one another—rather than just repeating the answers that people struggled with 700 or 1100 or 2000 years ago.

Host: I love it!

Doug: But I know that people are like, "Holy moley! What do we have to hold on to? Is there anything at all, then, that we can start with as being unquestionable?" And I just think to myself, "Why do you want that category? Why do you want there to be something unquestionable? Because all that's telling you is that you have a cosmology and a sense of authority that's built around the idea that the unquestionable is somehow more authoritative. That seems odd to me. And that's really caused me to think differently about God in some ways. Frankly, I don't tell everybody all the time about what I'm thinking about God, because the nature of God is, for a lot of people, at the real root.

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."

Host: For myself, as I've shared in some of the other conversations, I don't find *any* notions of God useful that are disconnected from or no longer part of an understanding of Reality. [God has always been identified with Reality \(also here\)](#). In fact, in cultures throughout the world, Reality has always been personified in various ways, in divine ways. And if we separate God from Reality, so God then becomes an idea, a hypothesis that we can either believe in or not, then that God becomes trivialized and is impotent in comparison to Reality as It/He/She is actually experienced by billions of people and all creatures in this real Universe.

So I like this idea of God, as you say, as not a single subject—or for that matter, a single object. Many people, when they think of God, think of a supreme being, an object up-there-out-there somewhere, rather than the supreme subject—that is, the 'I am-ness' of all things, all

creatures, all beings. There's certainly a zillion different ways that we can conceptualize Ultimate Reality.

Doug: It's kind of like the electric car, in a strange sense. We all think an electric car would be great until we start going like, Where am I going to plug it in? and how far is it going to go? and what are we going to do with the battery? Because our entire infrastructure of transportation is built around the combustible engine automobile, to go to the electric car means an entire new infrastructure. It's going to be slow.

When we start having this little conversation that we're having, we start to realize the entire infrastructure of Christianity would have to change. And what I mean by that is, the language that we use and the way that we meet and the symbols that we use. How do you pray to God in that kind of language? When someone says, "I just want to pray to God," well, it'd be great if you stopped using *God* as a separate single object or subject. *[laughter]* It takes awhile to have language in which people start to say, "Yes, that kind of fits together; it's congruent." I hear a lot of people who will listen to this kind of conversation, and they're just not where we are on this. They'll say things like, "You know, I listened to those guys for about thirty minutes, and I have no idea what they're talking about." And then there'll be other people who will say, "Oh finally! There are people who are talking the way I talk in private with my friends." You and I both have been through this.

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.

Host: I don't think so. And that's one of the reasons why I've been so inspired by the conversations that I've been having, really, with everybody, but especially with the pastors— with those of you who are actually working with individuals and writing new hymns, new songs, new liturgies, [prayers in an evolutionary tone](#) (also [1](#), [2](#), [3](#)): rethinking how we talk about prayer, how we do communion, how we think about the sacraments. There are just so many wonderful people that are a part of this conversation that have amazing, truly stunning contributions on exactly this point—like, how do we rethink some of the infrastructure and then give some liturgical legs to this incredibly sacred, deep-time evolutionary understanding of reality? I think it's just really exciting and important work that needs to be done.

Doug: Yes, I'm with you on that. That's why I'm an advocate for new church development and for [church planting](#) and that kind of thing. Because I think it's a necessary part of an Emerging Christianity. And I know for some people, church planting is really just franchising. It's just extending the brand that already exists, and there's a lot of that going on, so you're just going to get kind of a better, newer, crisper version of whatever tradition it comes out of.

But then there are these kinds of new church developments that are saying, “No, we’re going to do the really hard work in collective life in a lived community in a place—work that needs to be done in order to get up to talk about any of this honestly and sustainably.” Because we all know, and you and I both have done it before where we’re the itinerant, travelling the world and finding these friendships and making our way in the world. And that takes a lot of time and a lot of effort and a certain kind of personality. Most folks can’t do that. Most people who would want to have this conversation, like you’re hosting here on the [Evolutionary Christianity site](#), don’t know where else to get it, other than scouring the Internet to try to find it. We just need more and more outlets online and in person that allow people to experience these conversations in real ways.

In some ways these churches aren’t all that different—and in some ways they’re radically different. I know those people are out there because I hear from them. They’re like, “Man, I listen to you guys talk about all this kind of stuff and I just wonder what would your church ever be like? What would you *do*? Would you just sit there with a star telescope and stare at the sky all day? Like, [what do you do \(also here\)](#), you people who think that universalism is too small of a story for Christianity? How does your church function? What does it look like? What *could* it look like?”

So I think we need really good thinking and we need really good practitioners, always in conversation with one another. But that’s true of all the sciences, right? This is where the development of sciences within the last 150 years really does give us some clues about how you do this: You can’t do any science simply in a vacuum of thought. Even in theoretical sciences, you have to have some kind of laboratory of play, of experimentation, of trial. Somewhere. It has to actually *work*.

We can all sit around for the next twenty years and talk about how great all this is and basically create a nice little imaginative world for ourselves. But there are enough of us who aren’t satisfied with that and we actually want these ideas to be playing out in the economy of a real world.

Host: Doug, I want to come back to some of your experience in terms of the [Emergent Village](#). Anything you want to share there? And also a little more background, because not everybody that’s listening in on this is going to know what [Emerging Church](#) is. So if you could talk about your own experience there.

Doug: Sure. Well back in the late ‘90s and early 2000s, there was a group of us who had some common thoughts around the issues of philosophy. There were a number of us who were sensing that there was a significant cultural shift happening that was moving us from kind of an Information Age into another period, one that I now call the Inventive Age. So people would recognize that there was an Agrarian Period, an Industrial Age, Information Age, and then something else was changing. People were calling that by a lot of names. There were people in the philosophical world talking about *modernism* and *postmodernism* in philosophy, and so on.

There were whole groups of people from mainline evangelical backgrounds who were thinking about the influences of culture and a cultural shift on religious expressions, in this case Christianity. So a bunch of practitioners (church planters and theoreticians) got together at conferences and events that some of us put together to say, maybe it matters, the time that we live in, and maybe it's true that there are no privileged times and no privileged places and everywhere is just as good a time and place to do Christianity as any other time and place. We were saying that *this* time that we live in right now has its own characteristics, and Christianity needs to respond, needs to be engaged in that, and needs to be lived out authentically inside of that culture.

We were having these conversations in 1997, '98, '99 and we were meeting and having big events—a couple of thousand people around the country, and smaller events—and all this going on. We decided that what would be important is to form some kind of a network where people could stay in touch with one another. That would be what now we would talk about in terms of *social media*—like Facebook and that sort of thing, none of which existed back at the turn of the 21st century. So we didn't know that kind of language. But we were trying to create an open-source relational network amongst leaders who were trying to think new thoughts in light of the cultural situation that we find ourselves in.

We picked a name for that by borrowing from agriculture and forestry, and the word was 'emergent.' So people might be familiar with 'emergent' from TV commercials that you'll see throughout the Midwest where they'll say, "this is a pre-emergent herbicide that you apply to your fields before the weeds emerge from the soil." And in forestry, the two ways that you can tell the health of a forest are either by flying over it and looking at the treetops—seeing how rich the treetops are—or by going into the forest, moving pine needles, and seeing what is called the emergent growth, that which is just popping through the soil.

So we said, "Okay, there's this kind of thinking in churches that's just now coming to the surface." So we called it *emergent*. Then we liked the notion of a village and how people participate in a village, and so we said, "What if there was a concept of a village of all the people who are doing these things that are just now coming to the surface?" So we started a network called Emergent Village.

Then what happened was, people started to use the words *emerging* and *emergent* interchangeably, and then started to use the term *Emerging Church* in a particular way. A lot of us got dubbed as these "Emerging Church" people. 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. So now there are two terms that are interchangeable.

An *emergent village* is 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.

Host: And, of course, part of that context that we live in today is a reality given by [an understanding of the universe and our place in the universe and our participation in this larger](#)

[body of life that the ancients couldn't have had](#). So that's a new context—and it's not surprising that we see new forms of faith expression emerging.

Doug: Because it's always been that way. And this is the funny thing: people say, "Well, what are you after you've emerged?" Well, then you're old growth and something else is emerging. It's not as if we came up with this idea and said, "Oh, new ideas should spring forth." That's what has actually happened through 6,000 years of recorded human history—one emergent episode after the other.

Host: And Connie and I have been immersed for twenty years in this whole understanding that the entire universe is a [13.7 billion year process of emergent complexity](#). Old labels, like *materialist* and *materialism*, don't even apply to most scientists anymore, because most of us who are coming from an evidential standpoint consider ourselves as [emergentists](#).

Doug: So what's happened is that that term *emergent* has taken on additional meaning over time. It means more now than it did when we coined it in 2000 and 2001. It's not that we're going to protect the notion of it, as in, "That's not what we meant by that!" *Emergent* gets to mean whatever it needs to mean within the context of 2010 and 2011 that it didn't mean in 2000 and 2001.

Host: Great. Well, Doug, could you share just a little, before we close, about your books and about your radio program?

Doug: Sure. I run a radio show out of the Twin Cities—it also broadcasts online but it's an AM radio station—and I call it [Doug Pagitt Radio: Religious Radio That's Not Quite Right](#). And by "not quite right" I mean it's not quite right politically, it's not quite right theologically, and in some ways, it's not really religious radio. But we do talk about religious things. What I'm trying to do with that show, and I'm going to try to do it through some other media outlets, is I want religion to be an accessible conversation for people—without having to adhere to it. I want there to be ways that you can have conversations about religion, in the same way that the Food Network lets you talk about food, or the HGTV network lets you talk about home improvement, or ESPN lets you talk about sports. There should be a way that religion doesn't have to simply be interesting when you get people together who are all in agreement and adhere to the same expression of faith.

I try to do that in my radio show. It's once a week, a two-hour show with interviews. I have a parenting person, a wine person, a natural health expert. We have a rabbi on—there are a lot of pieces to it. I want to encourage other people as well to try to create some kind of media outlets online or on-air somewhere that allow for religion to be a more interesting conversation.

I also write books, two different kinds. I write books for church leaders. My most recent one is called [Church in the Inventive Age](#), which is an anthropological look at the movement

from the Agrarian Age to the Industrial Age to the Information Age and now to the Inventive Age and what that can mean for churches. It's kind of a 'businessy, fast-read style' book. I write books about Christianity, so I have a book called, [A Christianity Worth Believing](#), where I try to argue for a more open-flowing way of thinking about Christianity. Another book is [Body Prayer](#), where you use your body for prayer as opposed to just conjuring up words. And I write books on preaching and evangelism and all those kinds of things. I keep all these materials on a website, which is my name: dougpagitt.com. So people can find different outlets of what I'm doing there.

And then I also own a social media consulting company, an event company called [Social Phonics](#). We do social media training for nonprofit leaders and pastors and churches. All these things fit together because I think that the way that we communicate in social media is just as important as the content that we're trying to develop in our theology. So you can't separate, in my mind, the way we communicate from *what* we're communicating.

Host: [Marshall McLuhan](#) and [Robert K. Logan](#) are major figures in this understanding that there's a deep relationship between *what* you say and *how* you say it. "The medium is the message," is the way McLuhan said it.

Doug, [Connie](#), my wife, wanted me to ask you a question, and I think a lot of our listeners would be interested in your response. Given that a number of evangelical Christians are represented in these dialogues, could you help our non-evangelical listeners to understand what core aspects of evangelicalism carry through, and carry through vibrantly, when one comes to an embrace of an evidential, evolutionary form of our faith.

Doug: That's an insightful question. I think that evangelicalism is not a theological movement. It's a social movement. So I think non-evangelical people should keep in mind that evangelicals most often didn't make a *choice* to be an evangelical. It was a social package that they were introduced to, a faith that they were born into. Seeing it as more of a demographic or psychographic rather than a theological vantage point, might give us a little more freedom to be gracious with those people.

But the parts of that culture that I think carry through in this world is that 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. And evangelicals tend to have that sensibility a bit more refined.

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.

Host: Beautiful!

Doug: That's not always true for all evangelicals—I don't want to put them in a tight box. But when they're describing themselves in their best terms, I think that's how they want to describe themselves. So I have no problem calling myself an evangelical. I think other people have trouble with me calling myself an evangelical, right? *[laughter]* But that's not a theological thing; it's a sociological thing—and I don't feel badly about being one, in that sense.

Host: You and I have taken heat from some of the same heresy-hunters ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)), and I unabashedly would refer to myself as an *evangelical naturalist*. I'm no longer a supernaturalist; I no longer believe in theological doctrines interpreted in an unnatural, otherworldly way. But nonetheless, I find those concepts and that language to be really useful in many contexts. The only qualification, if somebody asks me, "Are you an evangelical?" I always want to say, "Yes! I'm an evangelical naturalist." That's the language that I've found useful for me.

Well, Doug Pagitt, thank you so much for sharing your experience and your insights and your passion for this integration of faith and reason, with our listeners today here on the leading edge of faith.

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