

A Christianity Worth Believing: Hope-filled, Open-armed, Alive-and- well Faith for the Left Out, Left Behind, and Let Down in us All

Doug Pagitt

THE AUTHOR

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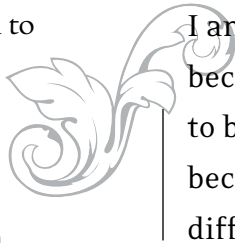
**CONFESSIONS OF AN
ADOPTED SON**

I am a Christian—a theologically trained, church-planting, evangelizing, Jesus-loving Christian. I trust in resurrection, and I seek to join with God in the world. But I have a problem, an internal conflict that has only gotten worse in my twenty years of following this faith. It's the kind of problem I tell others about with great caution and no small amount of anxiety.

I am a Christian, but I don't believe in Christianity.

At least I don't believe in the versions of Christianity that have prevailed for the last fifteen hundred years, the ones that were perfectly suitable in their time and place but have little connection with this time and place. The ones that answer questions we no

longer ask and fail to consider questions we can no longer ignore. The ones that don't mesh with



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what we know about God and the world and our place in it. I want to be very clear: I am not conflicted because I struggle to believe. I am conflicted because I want to believe differently.

I don't like feeling at odds with the faith I hold so deeply. But I've come to believe these sorts of struggles are part of being adopted into a family that's been around for generations. And I know firsthand just how fraught with conflict the adoption process can be.

Seven years ago, my wife, Shelley, and I adopted our sons, Ruben and Chico. They joined our biological children,



Michon and Taylor, to make us a family of six. We quickly realized that the addition of these two did not just make us a third larger and a third Hispanic; it made us a new family. All six of us have hurt and grown and changed because of the shifting dynamics of our family. And I believe we are a better family with Ruben and Chico than we were without them.

Before becoming part of our family, Ruben and Chico were part of the foster care system and lived with our neighbors. Before that, they were living with their biological parents. Through adoption, their family and our family came together. That meant we had to learn one another's histories. We had to tell them our stories and listen to theirs. We couldn't force them to become Pagitts overnight but had to give them permission to be themselves. We have spent the last seven years figuring out how to embrace each other in order to be a new family.

There's a whole lot more to this process than simply adjusting to a different family system—setting boundaries, establishing authority, rethinking roles. There are endless ramifications to opening our family up to include the history, memories, patterns, habits, and assumptions of other people. Ruben and Chico, with their unique experiences, stories, pains, and passions, have changed who we are right now. But they have also changed who we will become. I sometimes wonder what it will be like if Ruben and Chico marry Mexican women and have children of their own who do the same. In a few generations, the name Pagitt will, for many people, be a Mexican name. These two children are now part of the Pagitt story, and they will forever alter the course that story takes.

As hard as adoption is for the adoptive family, it can be even more difficult for the adopted children. The first few



months after Ruben and Chico became part of our family were particularly intense. Since we live next door to their foster home, the boys knew us fairly well before we adopted them, but moving in, making us their “forever family,” was radically different from the occasional sleepover. This was the real deal. Our home wasn’t a place to hang out but the place where they lived. They weren’t visiting our family; they were re-creating our family. They still talk about how strange it was for them to look at us and realize we weren’t the neighbors anymore, but Mom and Dad.

The boys have also told us that their most vivid memory of this odd transition is the collection of new smells. Every family has its own scent. Who knows how it comes about, but it seems to infuse the family’s house, their clothes, even their skin. Naturally, smells that seem normal or even unnoticeable to the family are strong and distinct to others. Chico in particular says that when he came to our house knowing it would be his house, he noticed how different it smelled—and it scared him.

As adopted children, Ruben and Chico had a lot to learn: our smells, our rules, our customs, our humor. They were introduced to a new set of grandparents and friends. They had to make an unending series of adjustments. They brought their family pattern with them, but our structure was already set, and we had them outnumbered.

As Ruben and Chico began to find their way in our family, I thought about the ways their lives echoed my experience as a Christian. Growing up, I knew virtually nothing of Christianity or its characters. I didn’t know Easter and Christmas had anything to do with each other, much less anything to do with the intricacies of religion. I grew up in a family of intentional nonchurchgoers. There was a church on nearly every corner



that we didn't go to on purpose. I was never reprimanded for sleeping in on a Sunday morning, never taught how to look up verses in the Bible or sing songs to and about God. I never spent a summer at Bible camp or a week at vacation Bible school. The closest I ever came to setting foot in a church was when I was eleven and Danny Oakland and I broke into Good Shepherd Catholic School to steal playground balls and walked by the sanctuary on the way to the gym.

My family's deliberate lack of engagement with all things Christian was initiated by my dad. He never had much interest in religious life. His parents divorced in the 1930s, when divorce meant church ostracism. As a boy, my dad felt the pain of not being the "right kind of person for church." His bitterness at being turned away lasted the rest of his life.

My mom, on the other hand, was raised a tent-meeting Baptist convert, but my dad made her promise she would never force us to go to church. And she didn't. When it came to religion, my sister and I were on our own. It wasn't until my out-of-nowhere conversion at age sixteen that I paid any attention to things Christian.

I couldn't have asked for a warmer welcome to Christianity. I was embraced, disciplined, and loved by wonderful people. As the adopted son in this faith family, I did my best to get used to the smells, memorize the names of the relatives, and follow the family rules. It was a wonderful beginning. I was asked to be part of it all, to bring my gifts and ideas and experiences to bear on the life of this family. Yet my gifts, ideas, and experiences have sometimes led me down roads that many in my family don't care to travel.

The thing is, I came into Christianity with a family pattern of my own, my own way of living and interacting, of



processing and creating. My adopted sons are Mexican. I am a contrarian.

I have always seen the other side of an issue, a different perspective on the conversation. I am not a contrarian by choice; it's just part of me. I am pretty sure, even though I can't prove it (yet), that I am genetically predisposed to being positively oppositional.

Just after my dad's death in 2001, the family of his second cousin contacted me to express sympathy. I had only a vague recollection of my father mentioning these people when I was a kid, but I figured it couldn't hurt to connect with this crew. So in 2005 we Minnesota Pagitts headed south to meet the Missouri contingent.

As wonderful as it was to connect with them, it was also incredibly strange. They kind of looked like me and even sounded a bit like me in spite of their slight Missouri twang. My kids, who'd never had cousins, were introduced to a whole family's worth of them. But the strangest moment was when my dad's cousin showed me some of the research he'd done on the Pagitt family. He handed me a placard with a short explanation of the origins of the family name. It traced our name back to 1623, and across the bottom it read, "The ancient family motto for this distinguished name was: *Per Il Suo Contrario*."

I didn't need to know Italian to recognize the word *contrario*. I was stunned, to say the least. Could it be that my family, even back into the early 1600s, had been contrarians? That very real possibility felt like a confirmation that my contrarian nature was somehow built into me.

As soon as we got home, I got online and started searching for the meaning of this motto. Roughly translated, it



means “Those who are contrarians” or “For it is contrary.” People often think of contrarians as cynical, but I believe we are just the opposite. We are accused of playing the devil’s advocate or of being provocative just of the sake of it. But to me, being a contrarian means holding out hope when others have stopped hoping. It means looking past the limitations and imagining the possibilities. It means rethinking ideas that have been ignored or dismissed in the past. I looked at that translation and knew that I wasn’t just a contrarian, I was contrarian carrying on the family heritage of wondering, questioning, and imagining.

These contrarian impulses don’t always go over so well in my faith family. Religion, by its very nature, tends to be conservative. Not just in the political or theological sense, but in the truest sense of the word—to conserve something. Religion is often a tool for preserving a set of beliefs, ideas, and behaviors. That preservation necessitates a stance of protection, of warding off any change that threatens those beliefs.

The stickler is that Christianity doesn’t make a very good religion in this sense. Christianity is not a faith of conservation and preservation. It is a faith of creation, participation, movement, and change. For conservation to happen, something needs to be stopped. Something needs to be limited. Something needs to be ignored. And too often that “something” is the unstoppable, unlimited, impossible-to-ignore activity of God at work in the world.

This is why things get tough for a Christian contrarian. Contrarians find life in hopeful possibilities. We tend to see what could be as so much more interesting than what has been. It’s natural for us to want to raise our hands after the final amen has been said. We are convinced that when we stop



asking questions, when we turn away from a set of facts or an idea screaming to be considered, that's when things really fall apart. We are not trying to cause trouble; we're trying to stay out of it.

Like other families, established Christianity has particular ways of talking, eating, celebrating. It has history, memories, patterns, and assumptions that have set it on a certain course. And just as families have their crazy aunts that no one talks about, the church family has its "no-talk rules" to let everyone know what is and isn't open for discussion. It has set rules about who gets to talk and who gets to listen. Because of my personality, I crashed into these rules almost as soon as I became part of the family. I was like the kid who blurts out the family secrets at Grandma and Grandpa's fiftieth anniversary party.

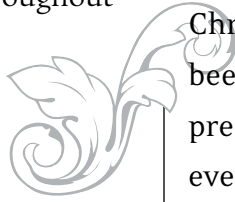
Please don't misunderstand me here. I love my faith. I believe that living in the way of Jesus is the way humanity will embrace peace, justice, mercy, compassion, and love. I have seen my fellow Christians graciously, selflessly caring for the least among us. I have seen Christians who have found ways to live at peace with each other and in harmony with God. I have seen Christians following Jesus' command that we love others as we love ourselves, even when that love involves great sacrifice.

But while Christianity has given so much to the world, it too often carries with it a message, a belief system, that can be hard to believe. It too often creates a culture that is unintentionally hurtful to far too many people. I have a tendency to climb on my high horse of righteous opinion and make statements that imply (sometimes not very subtly) that Christianity is a stagnant, exclusive club for those who are satisfied with ill-fitting answers meant for issues of a different age. But when



I come to my senses, I'm convinced that if I'm ever going to feel like I truly belong to this family, if I'm going to live out the faith I profess in any kind of honest way, then I have a responsibility to break the no-talk rules and say what I believe the good news has been about all along. I am as responsible as anyone for the faith I profess. If I want to be a full participant in Christianity, I need to stop complaining about the beliefs articulated by others and make my contribution instead. In doing so, I am following the true legacy of this family.

For Christianity has always been a living faith, one presented in hundreds, even thousands of different ways around the world and throughout the ages. It has always been the dynamic interplay between the Spirit of God and the lives and cultures of people. It is meant to be a real-life journey of discovering, wondering, answering, and questioning.



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This book is an articulation of that process. It is an expression of my desire for a Christianity that makes sense in the world in which we live, a Christianity that is not afraid of questions and will not resist answers, regardless of where they lead. It is my attempt to embrace a faith that is expansive, growing, and beautiful, one in which God is active and alive, involved in all of life. Because I believe in a Christianity where nothing is left out and no one is left behind, where humanity participates with God in the redemption of the world; where sin is more than a legal problem to be judged but a relational problem that



can be healed; where we pursue harmony, centered on Jesus the Messiah, the Jew, whose life, death, and resurrection allow us to live well with God; where the Bible draws us into a story of life and healing; where we find hope for this life and life ever after; where love is alive, where love drives out fear, where love propels us toward lives lived for the betterment of all the world.

The Christian family will always include people who are satisfied with the way things are and people who want to see new possibilities come to life. And we are all better off because of the mix. No one should be removed from the family simply for wanting the benefits that come with conservation, and no one should be removed for wanting to move forward as the faithful have always done.

Toward that end, this book is a call, or a re-call, for those who believe the gospel of Jesus is an invitation for all people to live a dynamic faith as full members of the family, joining in the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of God for the world no matter what kind of family we come from.





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PASSION PLAY

When I was growing up, my family had its own Sunday morning rituals: my dad played golf, and my sister and I watched TV while eating my mom's french toast triangles. (Decades before french toast sticks became a heart-stopping favorite on the Burger King menu, my mom had perfected the technique of frying batter-dipped Wonder Bread in the Fry Daddy.) In the winter, my sister and I had to eat quickly so we could make it to our bowling league on time.

This combination of TV, bowling, and deep-fried bread made Sunday mornings the second-best day of the week—second because nothing could outdo Saturdays with their promise of AWA Professional Wrestling. Most kids in Minnesota knew about Saturday morning wrestling on TV, but for the blessed few of us who lived in Golden Valley, just two miles from the Channel 9 studios, Saturday mornings meant hopping on our Huffy Thunder Roads to see Vern Gagne, Hulk Hogan, The Crusher, and the High Flyers in action and within spitting distance. Between the ringside seats and my mom's french toast triangles, my weekends were plenty full even without church. I had no idea other people spent their weekend mornings in their best clothes, sitting still, and eating tiny pieces of unleavened bread. It wasn't that I chose not to go to church. I didn't have church on my radar and never thought about it. I literally didn't know what I was missing.

Even though I had no Christian framework, I did have thoughts about and even faith in God. I'm not sure where this awareness of God came from, but it ran deep. I didn't know the story of God, yet I had a gut-level understanding that God was involved and active in the world and wanted



people to join in that activity. I remember watching the movie *Billy Jack* as a twelve-year-old and thinking, *Now that's what God must be into.* Before I had any usable vision of Jesus, I saw Billy Jack as God's worker.



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He was a half-Native American, half-Caucasian Vietnam vet with a black belt in karate, riding a motorcycle, living in the desert, and coming with fist and feet to the aid of native people who were being oppressed by “the man.” Defending the powerless—and looking wicked cool doing it. Now there's a picture of God's agenda for the world that grabbed me. I wanted to be part of that agenda. I wanted to be the guy bringing justice, righting wrongs, protecting the weak.

The Billy Jack image of God hung in there and gave me some tangible picture of a possible life with God. But it also gave me the impression that God wasn't someone to mess with. So I made a deal with God: “If I don't hurt, kill, or rape anyone, then you won't utterly destroy me. OK?” I took God's silence as implicit agreement. My prayer wasn't very sophisticated, but it helped me feel like I was doing something to get my life in line with God.

This God was absolutely real for me. I had a big American flag hanging over the headboard of my bed. On those nights when I came home under the influence of some chemical, which was fairly common, I wouldn't let myself look at the flag. It just seemed unpatriotic and wrong. But



I would always pray my little prayer. I believed that God was near and approachable and didn't care what shape I was in.

Still, it wasn't enough. I knew that something wasn't quite right. There was a disconnect between who I was and who I wanted to be, but I couldn't figure out what it was or what to do about it. I sometimes wondered if it would have been better to not think about God at all than to know of God but feel so out of sync with God. I was lost. There was something out there, something I knew I wanted to find, but I couldn't even name what it was, much less make my way toward it.

In fourth grade, my buddy Charlie Lyons and I joined the Boy Scouts. Before the abrupt end to Troop 176 (brought on when our troop leader was charged with stealing the money we had raised through our Christmas wreath sale), we would take weekend trips during which we were taught to navigate our way through the forest, look for and leave clues, and use a compass and the stars as guides to keep us from getting lost. I never could figure out what we were doing in the woods. Not being much of a camper, I figured that the best way to not get lost in the woods was to stay out of them in the first place. Still, we scouts, even though we lived in urban Minneapolis, apparently needed to know these survival skills. So I earned my merit badges and learned all the tricks to track my way through the trees.

Life-tracking skills were another story. I didn't have a compass for life. I didn't have the tools I needed to trek through the forest of my confusion and fear. What I did have was the potential and ability to not just get lost but to stay lost.

I wasn't the only one wandering in this particular forest. Steve and I were best friends growing up, and he was equally unversed in Christianity. We lived in the Village



Terrace apartments and shared the kind of unsupervised, we-run-the-show childhood that seems to be the birthright of apartment complex kids. Steve had a really hard go of it. His mom left the family when he was five, and his dad was hooked into all sorts of addictions. When we were thirteen, Steve was forcibly removed from his dad's care and placed in a foster home. Two years later, when Steve moved back in with his dad, it was clear to all of us at the Village that he had been "born again."

Steve carried a big Bible everywhere he went and talked constantly about Jesus. Steve's Jesus talk didn't make much sense to me. (My knowledge of Jesus started and stopped with John Lennon talking about being crucified like Jesus in "The Ballad of John and Yoko" and Bobby Bare's song "Drop Kick Me Jesus Through the Goalposts of Life.") But even I could tell that Steve, who had been the craziest kid I knew, had changed. Instead of being up for whatever destructive plan the rest of the apartment kids came up with, Steve was the guy hanging out his apartment window, yelling at us to stop doing whatever sinful thing it was we were about to do.

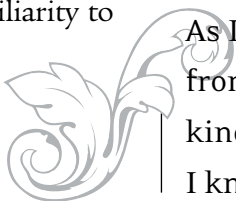
The spring of my junior year in high school, Steve asked me if I wanted to go with him to something called "The Passion Play." I thought the old Steve had returned. I mean, when a sixteen-year-old guy hears there's a play about passion going on downtown, well, let's just say I wasn't expecting it to be about Jesus. I agreed to go, and on Friday night, April 1, 1983, we hopped in my car, cranked up the John Lennon, and headed downtown.

We settled into the front row of the balcony of an old theater that had been turned into a church. The place had a strange smell to it—it smelled like old paper, old clothes, old



people. The worn velvet seat creaked as I peered over the balcony railing to the stage below. As people filed into the rows of seats on the main floor, I sensed the excitement building in theater. It all felt so foreign to me. I had no idea what it was all about, and yet I couldn't wait to see what might happen.

The lights went down and the play started. As I watched the scenes from Jesus' life, I had this kind of déjà vu moment: I knew this story. The events themselves were new to me, but they had a strange familiarity to them—the kindness of Jesus, the loneliness of seeming abandonment, God standing with the weak.



As I watched the scenes from Jesus' life, I had this kind of déjà vu moment: I knew this story.

Then they got to the resurrection. Now there was a twist I didn't see coming. I had no idea something could trump the unbelievable and startling "Father forgive them" line Jesus screamed from the cross. But then Jesus came back and something inside me burst open with hope.

This was what I had longed for, what I'd needed to be true. There was God alongside the tortured and beaten Jesus. There was God on the side of people, bringing about goodness even in the midst of horror, betrayal, and struggle. There was God inviting people to join in the redemption of it all. There was God outdoing my vigilante, Billy Jack faith with something far better.

Sitting in my creaky seat, leaning over the railing, I felt my soul wake up. This was the story that was deeply planted in me. This was the completion of the story of God that had been in me from childhood. It was a bright, clear marker that



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