

Flipped



The Provocative Truth That Changes
Everything We Know About God

DOUG
PAGITT

Praise for
Flipped

“Instead of taking sides in contentious us-them debates, Doug Pagitt points a way through the tensions to a wider, better place. He uncovers hidden treasures from the Bible and flips conventional understandings. A wise, insightful, and stimulating book!”

—BRIAN D. MCLAREN, speaker, author of *We Make the Road by Walking*

“Bravery with kindness can transform—inviting us into new ways of living and thinking. Doug has been doing that in my life for years. *Flipped* is an invitation that so many of us need, offered with bravery and kindness.”

—SHAUNA NIEQUIST, speaker, author of *Bread and Wine* (www.shaunaniequist.com)

“I know of no one more skilled at rigorous and flexible inquiry than Doug Pagitt, who is a masterful and down-to-earth guide to flipped living. *Flipped* presents a vision of faithful Christianity that is hopeful, love-affirming, serious about Scripture, and passionately committed to the way of Jesus.”

—MARK SCANDRETTE, founding director at ReImagine, speaker, author of *Practicing the Way of Jesus*

“This is Pagitt at the top of his game . . . and his game is as deadly serious as his title for it is flip. Never has a low-key, conversational tone been more seductively—or effectively—employed in the

business of exegetical brilliance than here. This one really is a thought expander as well as a faith enhancer.”

—PHYLLIS TICKLE, author of *The Great Emergence*

“Several years ago, I was having another fascinating conversation with Doug. He spoke of his desire that everyone he comes in contact with would know they’re loved, they belong, they matter. Doug is obviously extremely intelligent and passionate and articulate, but above all else he has a giant heart of love. That’s a rare and much-needed combination, and I’m thrilled to know he’s out there doing his thing. The world needs more people like Doug.”

—ROB BELL, speaker, author of *The Zimzum of Love*
and *What We Talk About When We Talk About God*

“*Flipped* lets you see that God wants to trespass over the fences we have put on grace and unlock the chains we’ve put on love. This book is Doug Pagitt’s invitation to start afresh with God and not let religious folks hold the Spirit hostage.”

—SHANE CLAIBORNE, activist, author of *The Irresistible Revolution*, coauthor of *Red Letter Revolution*
(www.redletterchristians.org)

“Doug Pagitt is a fully engaged questioning theologian whose thoughtful teaching and writing illuminate what it means to live in faith.”

—SARA MILES, author of *Take This Bread* and *City of God*

“Doug reminds us of just how upside down and powerful the revolutionary call of Jesus can be. *Flipped* will challenge many of your Scriptural paradigms, breathing a fresh freedom and wholeness into your faith as you seek to follow Jesus, the all-time Master of the Flip.”

—MIKE SLAUGHTER, activist, speaker, pastor,
author of *Dare to Dream* and *Renegade Gospel*
(www.mikeslaughter.com)

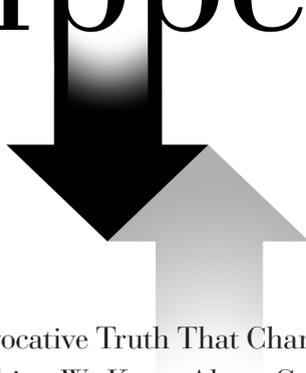
“Doug Pagitt is a lighthearted soul on a serious mission: to help us see the world and ourselves through Jesus’s eyes. Reading *Flipped*, I felt a weight I didn’t realize I was carrying fall off my shoulders. Read it for yourself. It will change your life.”

—THE RT. REV. MARIANN EDGAR BUDDE, bishop
of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington

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In God we live, move, and exist.
—the apostle Paul, in Acts 17:28

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Introduction

While the title of this book is *Flipped*, I want to be clear—or perhaps make a confession. This is a book about Jesus.

I have mixed feelings about writing a book about Jesus. In light of all the prognosticating that has taken place during the last two millennia, I worry that there really is no need for yet another book about Jesus. Second, I realize that people take their view of Jesus very seriously.

There is a chance that I might step on all kinds of land mines. After all, the Flip that is referred to in the book's title is—among other things—a different way to understand Jesus. Beyond that, it leads to a different way to understand the world because of Jesus. I know from experience that not all people take kindly to someone attempting to change their view of Jesus and his teachings.

Even with these worries, or perhaps because of them, I believe Jesus's message has the power to bring about healing of the human spirit, foster life in community, and give us a vision and path for living harmoniously with God and one another.

However, in my thirty-something years in the faith, I have wondered how the provocative, powerful, beautiful message of Jesus ended up producing the kind of religious life I see in the

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world. And perhaps, like me, you have read the teachings of Jesus and wondered how it led to this.

The question for both of us is, “Does it have to stay this way?”

I believe Jesus was in a similar situation in his day. He wasn’t concerned about saying what people wanted to hear. He had no interest in maintaining the status quo. Just the opposite, really. When Jesus spoke, he would deliberately remind people of the officially approved interpretation of Holy Writ. Sometimes he would remind listeners of the Law plus various rules and traditions that guided how people were living.

Then he would switch things up in a way that set the hearers’ minds spinning. Just when they thought they knew where he was headed with his message, he spun them around, turned them upside down, and Flipped them over.

Jesus was famous for telling people, “You have heard that it was said . . .” only to turn that bit of common knowledge on its head: “But I say to you . . .” This is Jesus doing what I call the Flip. Just when we think we know where he is taking us, he Flips it over by saying something *much better*. Jesus was not content with leaving things as they were. He wanted change.

Change and growth are what *Flipped* is all about. When Jesus first said the things recorded in the Bible, no one missed his intent. He wanted to change the way they understood God. Of course, many of them were satisfied with the old ways of doing things. They preferred the familiar interpretations and set patterns.

We aren’t all that different. We are so used to the words Jesus spoke that we confuse familiarity with understanding. We like to

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assume that his teachings conform to the accepted interpretation. The opportunity for a Flip can be lost because we rely on what we've always thought he meant.

But Jesus never catered to human assumptions. He and others—Paul, Peter, and John among them—consistently challenged fundamental beliefs and interpretations. Their goal was to change lives and the world.

I am using the Bible as my main point of reference. I know there are great commentaries and studies of the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. But I wanted to stick with the Bible in order to take a clearer look at what the Gospels say about Jesus. I wanted to look carefully at his words and actions, then try to work out what Jesus was getting at. This is a Bible-heavy book.

If you haven't read much of the Bible, don't worry. I'm not going to go all Greek scholar on you. You don't need to have completed any prerequisites to hear, understand, and live the teachings of Jesus.

If, on the other hand, you are already quite familiar with the Bible and are satisfied with your understanding of all things Jesus, you might be in for a jolt. The teachings of Jesus tend to be most provocative to those of us who feel we've already heard it all before.

Flipped has nothing to do with a quick fix of yourself or the church you're in. It does not recommend leaving the church for some other path to spiritual exploration. Neither is it a manual for setting others straight or a guide to developing a better argument to use against those who differ with your view. You can do all

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those things without this book and without the unapologetic teachings of Jesus.

Flipped has three goals (and if you find more than these three, go for it).

First, *Flipped* wants you to see that changing your mind, drawing new conclusions, and engaging new ideas all lie at the heart of Jesus's message and life. These are signs of growth. This growth will require you to be curious, open, and engaged. I hope to help you experience firsthand a Flip like none you have encountered before.

Second, *Flipped* wants you to behold the big, beautiful story of God as you find new ways to live in it. You will be invited to hear the apostle Paul make sense of the Jesus story by proclaiming, "In God we live, move, and exist." The life and teachings of Jesus call us to Flip our view from seeing God in us to understanding we live and exist In God.

We live and move In God with our entire self, not just our religious being or our spiritual nature. Living, moving, and existing pretty much covers every microsecond, every atom in our being, every move we make, every aspect of existence. That is the theme that runs throughout *Flipped*.

While this has been part of the Christian story from the start, it has been missed by so many of us. So you will be invited to look at familiar ideas and stories from a new perspective. This will involve some stretching, but that's the point, isn't it? It's almost impossible to hear and see anything differently if you remain committed to familiar patterns. *Flipped* helps you step outside

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routine ways of thinking long enough to take a completely new look at the meaning of Jesus's words.

Third, and this probably should be listed first, *Flipped* wants to invite you to a full, vibrant life In God. *Flipped* is an invitation to all the goodness and care of God so you will hear the call of God in your life. Use this book as a guide; don't let it become a demand. When it is helpful, lean in and breathe deeply, and if it feels like it is making demands on you that you don't want, lean out.

I hope this book will help you experience the love of God more richly and more fully. I trust that God is at work in you with or without this book. God is love, and love is patient and love is kind and love doesn't demand.

You won't agree with everything you read here. I'm not even sure I have worked out every wrinkle in the themes and truths we will explore. But I trust it will serve as a starting point in accepting Jesus's life and words in a new way.

Are you ready for a Flip?

Getting Flipped

How Being Turned Upside Down Makes God Interesting Again

In God we live, move, and exist.

—Paul, the apostle

Perhaps it has happened to you. You are making your way through life and suddenly find yourself upended by an idea. It's the kind of idea that stays with you and eventually makes a home in your thinking. Over time you can't imagine life without it.

I call this a Flip.

The Flip at the center of this book is one that turned me around as a pastor and a Christian writer as well as in my personal life and faith. I was sideswiped by a notion that caused me to realize God isn't who I thought God was. It's very possible that God

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is not who you have always assumed God to be. The realization comes to us in different ways.

For me, the Flip came when I was in a hotel room in San Diego and talking with a man I barely knew. My assumptions about the world and how it works were upended.

Sometimes Flips are impossible to ignore. At other times they are so subtle you could easily miss them. You spend the rest of your life trying to understand all that this change means for you and for others. The Flip can take you from being dead certain about an idea or a person or a story to a place where you aren't certain what you believe anymore.

The Flip that hit me in San Diego was like a wasabi shot to the brain.

I should explain that I love wasabi. A lot. Wasabi is a paste made from the stem of a horseradish-like plant. The paste most often is served with sushi, and there is good reason for the combination. The nearly medicinal benefit of the plant is thought to kill bacteria. It goes perfectly with the uncooked fish often served in sushi. My love of wasabi is not for its health benefits, though; it's for the kick. Not just any kick, but a head-snapping, nasal-clearing, eye-widening kick.

While the Flip didn't make my eyes water or my nose run, it did leave me feeling cleaned out, tossed around, and even a little stung. It was as if a direct path connected what I heard to all of my ideas of God, humanity, and what life is all about. I had known before that I didn't have it all straight, but never did

I dream that an encounter with a guy in a hotel room would bring such clarity.

Looking Beyond Our Thinking

It was 2004 and I was one of the organizers of a national pastors' conference. It might seem that life-changing conversations about God would be common in this setting, but these events seem to involve a lot more mundane chitchat than life-altering conversation. In situations where so many people are committed to the religion industry, most conversations stay well inside the boundaries of what we already think. No pastor wants to risk his or her job by crossing too many lines.

But I'm not interested in boundaries. I'd rather see what is possible just outside of what we all think. Curiosity is far more important to our faith than the false security of established certainty.

That might be one reason I liked LeRon almost immediately. He was a respected theologian and one of the presenters at the conference. I sensed he had a lively, curious mind. I was walking by when I heard him say, "And that's when I stopped thinking of God as a separate single subject."

Wait. God is not a separate single subject? God is not separated and removed from humanity? That means . . . And so the Flip began.

It was almost as if I heard one of those Laurel and Hardy double "whoopie" sounds in my head.

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God is not a separate single subject. This idea may not strike you with the power it did me. And if I had heard it at another time it might have slid by me without notice. But on this night it hit me hard. It danced with other thoughts that were important to me but seemed out of rhythm with so many of my assumptions about God, humanity, and life.

That's the thing about Flips: once they start, they are almost impossible to stop.

I realized I could think of God in bigger, more integrated, more expansive ways than I had before. I had always felt bound by the more classic descriptions of God. I don't mean the "chummy big guy upstairs" image or the "old man with a white beard" caricature. It was something far more crucial than that.

Prior to this, I had only heard God described in terms of difference and distinction from humanity and creation. The central understanding of God was that God is different. It was as if the important thing about God was that we have absolutely nothing in common with God.

There is this scene in the feel-good movie *Rudy* where Rudy is trying to figure out his life's call. His priest says, "Son, in thirty-five years of religious studies, I've come up with only two hard, incontrovertible facts. There is a God, and I'm not Him." In my past understanding of God, the vast distance between God and humanity was almost a point of pride.

The people I talked to about God in seminary and afterward were convinced that God is, quite simply, Other. But here was

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LeRon, a Christian theologian, suggesting that is not the only way to think about God. And, boy, did I want that to be true. Flips don't force us to think in a new way. Rather, they conspire with thoughts that already are in our heads.

I jumped on the idea that if God were not a separate being from all things in the cosmos, then we need not simply say God exists. We can say that God *is existence*. All is In God.

Why This Is Important for Every One of Us

I wanted to live with God directly and passionately. I did not want God to be some distant being that I needed to please. I didn't want to access God only through a system of faith or religion. I didn't want God to be distant at all. But for so long that seemed like a prerequisite for being Christian. You had to begin by believing that God is Other, and then you would follow certain steps to bridge the gap.

I was welcomed into the Christian faith with the understanding that God could live in your heart. I resonated with the personal nature of this: God was as close as my heart. But that was not the full story. I was told I had to adhere to a set of rules if I wanted to make my heart God's home.

But the Flip allowed me to consider that we live in the heart of God rather than the other way around. It took time for me to get comfortable with this understanding. Flips don't immediately settle in and start to feel normal. It takes a while.

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This notion of our living in the heart of God may not immediately draw you in. While I am now convinced that it lies at the heart of Jesus's message and even that of the early apostles, I suspect these ideas might make many people nervous. They certainly did me.

It is not essential that anyone immediately embrace a Flip. It is far more important to give it serious consideration. In the weeks following the San Diego conference, I remembered verses I had memorized in my early days as a Christian. These words from the Bible suddenly were saying so much more than I had noticed before. Flips not only open new pathways, but they also help us reconsider what we have become comfortable with.

One of the Bible passages that kept coming back to me was actually a song sung by first-century followers of Jesus. It's recorded in Colossians.

The Son is the image of the invisible God,
the one who is first over all creation,

Because all things were created by him:
both in the heavens and on the earth,
the things that are visible and the things that
are invisible.

Whether they are thrones or powers,
or rulers or authorities,
all things were created through him and for
him.

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He existed before all things,
and all things are held together in him.

He is the head of the body, the church,
who is the beginning,
the one who is firstborn from among
the dead
so that he might occupy the first place
in everything.

Because all the fullness of God was pleased to live
in him,
and he reconciled all things to himself through
him—
whether things on earth or in the heavens.
He brought peace through the blood
of his cross.¹

From the start of the Jesus story, people were saying and singing, “All things were created through him and for him. He existed before all things, and all things are held together in him.”

Like me, the early followers of Jesus were trying to live beyond the idea that God is in some places but not in others, in some people but not in other people, in some times but not in other times. Rather, all that exists is In God. All things are held together In God. And all of creation is being reconciled or seeking to live harmoniously with God.

Living In God

Over time a passage from the apostle Paul has become one of my favorite constructs for understanding this. Paul said in one of his most famous sermons: “In God we live, move, and exist.”² I’ll say much more about this in the coming chapters, but for now let that idea resonate in you.

In God.

In.

We are *In* God.

What a Flip.

God is not a separate subject that we talk about or relate to through belief, behavior, faith, or practice. Much better than that, God is the very existence of all things. We are called to live congruently within the existence that holds all things together. This notion resonates with beauty, intrigue, majesty, and mystery.

When we are In God and not simply relating to God or serving God or walking with God, we are able to find not only our lives but all parts of our lives in the story of God.

Recently I was talking with some people for whom this was a new idea. Katelyn said, “This reminds me of a conversation I had the other day with a friend who is a Buddhist. She told me the reason she is a Buddhist is that Buddhism has a way to include pain and suffering. I feel like understanding ourselves In God also makes room for that. It seems like nothing is left out.”

Katelyn asked several questions about all this, maybe questions similar to ones you have. She said, “I like this idea, but is it

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really Christian?” I knew right where she was coming from—I have asked myself that same question.

I have come to believe that not only is it Christian, it is the primary understanding of God that we learn from Jesus, Paul, and others. For me, it’s the only way that Christianity makes sense.

This book invites you to consider a Flip that makes it possible to live in the heart of God. It can change your understanding of God and the way you live. I’m not suggesting a one-time shift in how you understand a theological idea. Rather, it is a journey of experiencing life In God. I have not yet worked out all the nuances and implications of this Flip. But I have great faith that there is as much to be gained by the act of Flipping as there is to sticking the landing.

When we open ourselves to a Flip, we enter a process of change. We can live, move, and exist as people empowered by the constancy of the love, care, and life of God. That might help explain why Jesus introduced so many of his Flips with the phrase “You have heard that it was said . . .” He was reminding us that, in the past, we were taught to think about God in a certain way.

Then Jesus would introduce a Flip: “But I say to you . . .” The Flip, if you take it to heart, can change your life by changing the way you understand God.