

## EXCERPT

IVP Books

### ***Surprised by Paradox*** *The Promise of "And" in an Either-Or World*

May 14, 2019 | \$16, 192 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4564-4

## The Great I AND

"You and Ryan seemed tired Friday," Janey said when she saw me at church. "Everything okay?" We had been to their house for a Christmas party two days earlier.

"Oh, we weren't tired," I said, laughing. "We were fighting." The sky had been falling in thick flakes that Friday, the city roads becoming a congested crawl under a whitened sky. A few more stolen moments in the car alone had afforded just enough time for an argument.

"When are you taking your vacation days?" I had asked Ryan days earlier. It wasn't exactly his answer that I had been brooding about for days and finally took up on the way to Janey's. He did, in fact, plan to catch up while the office was quiet over the Christmas holidays. Instead, it was more that he hadn't asked me the same question, carelessly presuming that I either had no pressing deadlines or that I would squirrel away time for meeting them as I had made a convenient habit of doing. This has been a recurrent place of tension in the middle years of our marriage, this sharing of domestic responsibility, this supporting of other respective ambitions.

I don't relish an argument, but neither have I wanted the kind of polite and distant marriage my own parents modeled for me. After twenty odd years at this domestic project, I've come to believe that it isn't the absence of conflict that makes for a happy, stable marriage. Our wedding vows don't simply bind us to the politeness of yes; they also bind us to the courage of *and*, which is to say the bravery of moving toward places of paradox. In Christian marriage, we choose to love, serve, and submit to one another, even on the days that wring us out bone-tired. But Christian marriage isn't built on mute self-sacrifice alone. We must also learn to practice rigorous, risky honesty. We name our desires (however fearfully) and admit our disappointments (however angrily). Yes is the daily work of marital faithfulness and is our practiced resistance to apathy. In marriage, I am, paradoxically, called to a daily *dying* and a daily showing up—because as the Holy Spirit has whispered, "There is only one wife in this relationship." It is a lot of muddled, messy work, especially when you try doing it on the way to a dinner party.

Marriage demands that we abide paradox, that we hold to principles at variance with one another, not in spite of love but because of it. And we know from Scripture that marital love is a picture of God's love for his church (cf. Eph 5). God said *yes* and *and* in Christ to love the world well. The incarnation is the act of God fulfilling all his promises with his own hearty *yes* of Christ (cf. 2 Cor 1:20). In the incarnation, God embraced contradiction in his own being and sustained tension in his own flesh. The incarnation suggests to God's people the holy possibilities of *and*, this little word that rests at the bottom of every paradox. It reminds us that God's ways will surprise us more than we think.

There is virtue in the little word *and*, a humility that it can form in us. *And* helped the early church learn to love each other well. It wasn't easy when the contradictions of Jew and Gentile were joined together in the holy matrimony of Christ's body; God was reconciling tremendous difference for the sake of unity in his new kingdom of priests. How were these people to eat dinner together, much less share a common faith? There were very practical questions to resolve when the

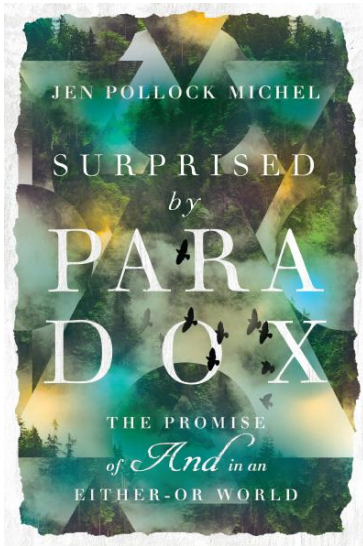


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Gentiles were grafted into the people of God: did they need to be circumcised and keep kosher? When Peter stood in the assembly of God's people, he was clear to commend grace, not law-keeping, as the basis for salvation: "We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus."

But grace didn't settle the matter entirely. The church kept insisting on *and*: exercise your freedom *and* love your brother. Obey your own conscience *and* "pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding." There was liberty in Christ to eat freely and gratefully, *and* there was also the constraining obligation to love. "If your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love" (Rom 14:15). This little three-letter word *and* had the power to bind together a church that might easily have been polarized by their food preferences and their festal calendars. As the apostle Paul outlines in Romans 14, care needed to be exercised for belonging as well as for belief. In fact, Paul deliberately withholds arbitrating some of the debates of his day (Do we eat meat or merely vegetables? Do we observe the Sabbath or esteem every day alike?) and insists instead on this: that our brothers and sisters are worthy of honor, and that each of us will stand before the judgment seat of God.

"Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God."

Imagine *and* as a measure of healing some of the hostilities of our either-or world. Indeed, that's something suggested by moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt in his book *The Righteous Mind*. As his subtitle illustrates, Haidt seeks to understand "why good people are divided by politics and religion." He posits a moral foundations theory, which teases out five different emphases in human morality: care (vs. harm), fairness (vs. cheating), loyalty (vs. betrayal), authority (vs. subversion), and sanctity (vs. degradation). A major difference between political liberals and political conservatives, Haidt writes, is the relative degree of importance they'd ascribe to each of these areas. As his research has shown, liberals are most concerned with care and fairness while conservatives tend to grant equal importance to all five. It's not simply that liberals or conservatives are more or less concerned with morality, rather their conceptions of morality differ in concern. Haidt believes there's a mutual respect to be built according to his research: that our society will flourish from the counterbalance of varying perspectives. We're helped beyond polarization and paralysis, in his words, by an "and" approach.

In this book, I'm inviting readers to imagine the possibilities of *and*. I am not, however, dismissing that *either* and *or* are God's words too. As philosopher Isaiah Berlin has written, "I am not a relativist. I do not say 'I like my coffee with milk and you like it without. I am in favor of kindness and you prefer concentration camps.'" Scripture's revelation is often less murky than we wish, especially for deciding many contemporary ethical issues at the center of fierce public debate. However, much to our chagrin, God is not afraid to pronounce, "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not."

Yet one important lesson of paradox is that we are not always confined to choosing between two dreaded alternatives. Faith doesn't always divide the world into two clean halves of right and wrong. In those places of seeming paralysis, such as I describe at the opening of this chapter, when either *and* or *seem* to bind our hands, we can surrender our straightjacketed imagination and look for the creativity of the incarnate God—And the love of the great I AND.

-Adapted from chapter 1, "The Great I AND"

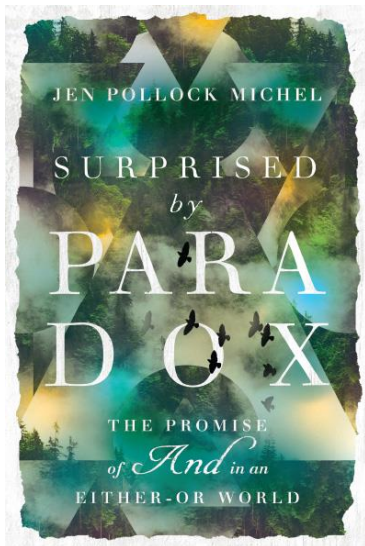


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## Q & A

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In a world filled with ambiguity, we want faith to act like an orderly set of truth-claims to solve the problems that life throws at us. While there are certainties in Christian faith, at the heart of the Christian story is also paradox, and Jen Pollock Michel helps readers imagine a Christian faith open to mystery. Jesus invites us to abandon the polarities of *either* and *or* in order to embrace the difficult, wondrous dissonance of *and*.

## New From the Author of *Teach Us to Want*

### How does *Surprised by Paradox* draw from your previous books?

**Jen Pollock Michel:** I think my two previous books both treat paradox in their own way. *Teach Us to Want* is about the paradox of desire—that it is both a place of both caution and call in our life with God; *Keeping Place* is about the longing and the labor of home is that is both now and not yet. My interest more specifically in this third book is about reading the Bible well, which is to say not imagining it like a puzzle that neatly fits together but staying curious about the mysteries we find within its pages—and certainly a God whose ways are not our ways. As I say in the book, I think paradox has a way of cultivating a certain kind of “spiritual posture” in us, one of humility, awe, wonder. Those have all the elements of worship.

### What role should surprise play in our lives with God?

**Jen:** My central thesis is that paradox isn't the exception in life with God: it's the rule. From the way Jesus' life unfolds (from the incarnation to his public ministry and then to his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascent), everything is full of surprise. God upends our expectations along the way, which seems to insist that we must approach theology with a great deal of modesty.

This approach is distinctive perhaps in that it's committedly biblical. As opposed to a Parker Palmer approach, for example, it's not just commending mystery in the abstract. It's having readers draw close to Scripture and explore the tensions.

### What do you hope readers take away from *Surprised by Paradox*?

**Jen:**

- The study of Scripture doesn't untangle every theological knot.
- For all that we can systematize in our theology, there's still a lot of mystery.
- God is often to be found in the “and,” which is to say places of dissonance, tension, and perplexity.
- Curiosity, wonder, and humility are part of the posture of worship.



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**Jen Pollock Michel** is a regular contributor for Christianity Today and Moody Bible Institute's *Today in the Word*. She earned her BA in French from Wheaton College and her MA in literature from Northwestern University, and she belongs to Redbud Writers Guild and INK. Wife and mother of five, Jen lives in Toronto, Canada, and is an enthusiastic supporter of HOPE International and Safe Families.

## Jen Pollock Michel, *Surprised by Paradox*

I'm an American living in Toronto. My husband and I, along with our five children, moved here in 2011, planning on a two- or three-year adventure. We're still here and quite naturally finishing our sentences with "eh?".

I published my first book, *Teach Us to Want*, in 2014. As the subtitle explains, it is a book that explores questions of "longing, ambition, and the life of faith." Though I used to believe that desire was the thing to lead me off the proverbial cliff, I'm not so convinced anymore. I suppose you could say that I'm believing the promise of the gospel a little bit more everyday: that because of Christ's death and resurrection, we are raised to walk in newness of life—even newness of desire. *Teach Us to Want* is a book that reflects on the Lord's Prayer while telling my story as a wife, mother, and writer.

I published my second book, *Keeping Place*, in 2016. Living as an ex-pat for several years, it's probably no surprise that I would write a book to explore the longing for home. "Where's home for you?" is the question I feel least able to answer. Some people expect that a book about home, written by a woman, is a book for women. But I'd like to say that this book is for everyone who's felt homesick in their lives. It's a book that travels through the biblical narrative to recover a vision of the home we had and the home we lost. Most importantly, it leaves us with a hunger for the home to come when God repairs his broken world.

My third book is *Surprised by Paradox*. I've had a few friends scratch their head at the idea that I would write about something as abstract as paradox. But as I like to point out, my first two books are also about paradox: the caution and call of desire; the now and not-yet of home. This third book traces four themes in the Bible—incarnation, kingdom, grace, and lament—as a way of discovering some of the both-and tensions of Christian faith. In its essence, it's a book about spiritual posture: about the humility required for following a God who hides and whose ways are often mystery.

But this is all to describe the work I do in the daytime hours when the house is emptied of backpacks and bodies. When the backpacks and bodies return, I play a host of other roles. Usually, I'm wearing an apron.

Read more at [JenPollockMichel.com](http://JenPollockMichel.com).

Follow Jen on Twitter at [@jenpmichel](https://twitter.com/@jenpmichel).



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