

Word, Spirit and Sacrament

For a long time, the American church has been split between the Word and the Spirit movements, but convergence is taking place. The two are reuniting and becoming one—and Pastor Glenn Packiam believes a third stream, “sacrament,” ought to be included in that convergence as well.

Packiam is an associate senior pastor at New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and the author of the new book *Blessed, Broken, Given*. In his conversation with Charisma, Packiam makes the case for the Communion table as a place to not only remember Christ’s sacrifice, but to reaffirm our covenant with God and to encounter Him in a method unfiltered by any other human.

This interview—originally recorded for our New Year, New Voices podcast series—has been edited for length and clarity. Listen to the full interview here:

Berglund: A lot of our readers may not be familiar with you. Can you start by sharing your testimony?

Packiam: Sure. I’ve been at New Life Church for 19 years. But let’s go back a little further than that.

I’m from Malaysia. I grew up there. My mom was born in Singapore, my dad in Malaysia. My mom comes from a Christian family, and my dad actually came from a Hindu family. They met at the University of Singapore as college students and, as things got serious, my mom basically said, “Look, I’m not marrying a Hindu.” And my dad was compelled to convert. They were kind of nominal Christians at the time.

Then through a family member—my aunt—persisting and sharing the gospel with them, both of them experienced a born-again conversion where they made faith personal and put complete and

total trust in Jesus. That began to revolutionize their marriage. My sister and I came along around that same time period.

Part of the story here is a friend invited them to attend a Bible study with a Baptist pastor. So they were attending this Anglican church on Sundays. They were attending this Bible study with a Baptist pastor midweek. And then on separate occasions, both of them were introduced to the charismatic renewal. I think my dad actually encountered it through a Full Gospel Business Men's meeting that took place in a hotel he was staying at on one of his business trips. We would say it's random, but really, we know it's providential. The Lord interrupted both of their paths.

They were very deeply moved by the charismatic renewal that was at the time sweeping over Southeast Asia and around the world. So they eventually switched to a different church, a Pentecostal charismatic church, and that's the church I remember for a lot of my childhood. Then when I was 10, our family moved from Malaysia to America. So that was a huge move. Basically, my parents felt like the Lord was calling them into vocational ministry and to step away from their careers. My dad had a great career going in the advertising industry. And my mom was teaching part-time English classes and English as a second language stuff. Both of them felt this radical call toward vocational ministry, and there were some friends they knew who had gone to a Bible college in Portland, Oregon. So our family moved to Portland. We lived there for three years.

We were part of a great church there. At the time, it was called Bible Temple. It's gone through a couple of name changes now—City Bible Church, and I think now it's called Manna Church. But we lived there for three years. My parents were plugged in at the Bible college. My sister and I went to the Christian school there. And then we moved back to Malaysia, and I finished up my high school years with an

extension/homeschool version of this Christian school in Portland.

I knew I was going to come back to the States to go to college. At 17, I came back and ended up going to Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I met some great friends there and had some great professors. I was a theology major. I led worship there for chapels. In fact, I stayed on for a year after graduation and worked on staff to lead worship for the chapel services. Then that led to my coming to New Life here in Colorado Springs. There was a bit of a pipeline at the time between ORU and New Life, and I'm very grateful for that. So I moved out here in the summer of 2000.

Berglund: Tell me more about New Life Church. What's it like?

Packiam: Well, New Life is a great church. It's a nondenominational charismatic church. In the '90s, it was very involved in the Prayer Through The Window stuff. It's got a long legacy of missions and prayer and worship and students. That's been part of the heritage here for a lot of years.

It began in 1985. And, of course, in late 2006, there was a pretty public scandal with the founding senior pastor, Ted Haggard, that made headlines sadly around the world. It was a difficult time for the church. But it really drove not only the staff and pastors, but also the congregants, to our knees, and we began to do the thing that we needed to do, which was to pray and to worship, to seek the Lord and to keep gathering in community with one another. I remember being in other people's homes and having people in our home and praying together, having meals together, and just carrying each other through that time.

Then our new senior pastor came in August 2007, Brady Boyd, and he's been a real godsend—a tremendous gift. But sadly, 100 days into his time, there was a shooting that happened on our church campus. And tragically, two teenage girls lost their

lives. A couple others were injured. And so again, it felt like, "Man, how much can a church endure, from scandal to tragedy, in a 13-month span?" But once again, the grace of God was with us and began to rally us together as a church. We gathered a few nights after that Sunday and worshipped together and sang together. We sang one of the songs that came from our church, a song called "Overcome," written by John Egan, a dear friend of mine. It caused us really to lean deeper into Jesus and to strengthen our relationships with one another, and a whole bunch of stuff has changed over the last 12 years in really good ways. We can talk about some of that if you want, but it changed the way we think about local church, the way we think about pastoral ministry, the way we think about our corporate worship gatherings and ways that we've learned to lean into Jesus in a more holistic way.

Berglund: There's the charismatic wave that happened around the time of the Jesus Movement and that your parents participated in as well. Now it seems like there's another wave of interest in the charismatic, the gifts of the Spirit among the next generation. So I'm curious for New Life then, as a nondenominational charismatic church, what changes are you guys adopting and how are you part of that shift between the movements?

Packiam: Well, I would say it's an addition, not an exchange or subtraction or anything like that. It's an expansion.

One of the greatest gifts of the charismatic movement to the body of Christ is this conviction that God is at work, even when we can't see it or can't feel it. God is at work in the midst of the ordinary moments and the ordinary things. And actually, what we've stumbled into over the last decade or so, is there's another stream of the body of Christ that tends to say similar things. That's this thread of sacramental theology.

The idea of sacramental theology is that ordinary things like

bread and wine actually become the occasion for an encounter with the presence of God. Without getting into weird things about “Is this actually the body and blood of Jesus?”—we’re not saying that. But we’re saying there’s something mysterious that happens even in the midst of an ordinary moment, like coming to the Lord’s Table.

So what we’ve learned is, actually, when you take some of this charismatic encounter with the Holy Spirit, and look at other ways that that encounter with the presence of God shows up, the central practice that comes into view is the coming to the Lord’s table. Christians from the very beginning said, “Look, something happens when we gather at the table, and remember the death of Jesus Christ. It’s as if Jesus is present with us again.” Actually, one of the reformers, John Calvin, explained it through a theology of the Holy Spirit by saying, “When the worshipper comes with faith in their hearts, then the Holy Spirit administers the presence of Jesus to us.”

So for us as a church, we began about 10 years ago to practice weekly Communion, not just out of ritual or “Hey, we should do this. This is something Christians have done; therefore, we should too,” but rather as a way of saying, “This is a practice of the church that unmistakably focuses our attention on Jesus.”

And I’ll tell you: Coming as we did out of a situation where there was a major fall of the leader—and of course we seem to hear these kinds of stories all too often—it’s very easy to just replace the personality with a different personality and replace one name with another name, instead of saying, “Wait a minute. Regarding the practices we’re doing together when we worship, in what way are those things actually undermining the message we want to communicate?”

In other words, we want people to know that it’s all about Jesus, but do the size of our room and the shape of our services communicate the same thing? Or do our services and

auditoriums communicate that, actually, it's also about this worship band, or it's also about this preacher or this pastor?

Look, when the worship team's on the stage—and I spent my first 10 years or so at New Life as one of the worship leaders and songwriters—the worship team can do a great job or do a poor job, and that affects our experience of the presence of God. The preacher can do a good job or a poor job, and that affects our ability to receive from the word of the Lord. But when we come to the table, it's almost like all of us become like John the Baptist. We move out of the way, and we say, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

So we learned to incorporate and adopt practices that would actually more obviously anchor us not only to the historic practices of the church, but also center us on Jesus Himself.

Berglund: That's really fascinating. I don't know that I've ever heard anyone articulate it quite like that before.

Packiam: It's an interesting thing, because we tend to not pay enough attention to our worship practices. I can say this because, again, as a worship leader, I spent many years thinking, "We've got to adapt to the times and just try what works and be pragmatic about it." But actually, our worship practices don't just express our heart to God or reach people; they also form us. I was able to test some of this when I was doing my doctoral work over the last couple years.

I've recognized that there's really three dominant paradigms for thinking about our congregational worship. One paradigm says, "It's all about mission. Reach the lost at any cost." This is kind of the legacy in American history: from the frontier revivals, from the Second Great Awakening onward. Use whatever method necessary, because the gathering is all about our mission: reaching the lost world. That's true.

But then there's another paradigm that says, "What this is all

about is encounter. When two or three gather, there's Jesus, and so whatever helps us encounter His presence, that's what we need." I think that is one of the gifts of the charismatic stream. (The first one would have been a gift of the general evangelical stream.)

But then there's this third paradigm that says, "Actually, our corporate worship is all about formation. When we say words together, when we pray together, it forms our faith." There's an old saying of the church from centuries ago that says, "The way we pray becomes the way that we believe." That means the things that you repeatedly say before God. This is why when Jesus' disciples said "Teach us how to pray," Jesus gives them a prayer, rather than saying, "Well, just do whatever comes into your mind." He says, "Here's some words that will actually shape your view of God and your picture of God."

What we've come to the conviction of at New Life is that actually all three of those paradigms are important: mission, encounter and formation. And there is a way for a church to hold together all three of those things. We do want to think about the lost. We do want to encounter the living presence of Christ. And we want to think about how these practices are shaping and forming us. So how have we changed as a church? We've learned to expand our focus from being just picking one of those three things to trying to hold all three of those things in tension.

Berglund: I've heard that language of formation in the sermons of John Mark Comer, who's out in Portland at Bridgetown Church.

Packiam: He's a good friend.

Berglund: Oh, fantastic. He's talked about the need for spiritual formation and how what we do affects us. Through Bridgetown and a bunch of other churches stepping onto the national stage, I'm seeing this emphasis on the Word and the

Spirit. Whereas maybe before there was more division. For instance, the Baptist churches might be predominantly focused on the Word movement, while the charismatic churches will focus on the Holy Spirit and the gifts. But increasingly, I think there's a number of these nondenominational charismatic churches that say, "We need to have both together." I can tell just listening to you that you are on that same wavelength as well, right?

Packiam: One hundred percent. And I think we might even say "Word, Spirit and sacrament," you know. Because the sacrament part gives you a historical tether. It keeps you connected to the historic church and actually also to the global church.

Sometimes, when I'm talking to charismatics, I'll use this old renewal metaphor where we talked about the river and then the banks of the river. In a way, if the river represents the flow of the Spirit, the banks of the river on either side that keep us in bounds, if you will, are the Word on one side and the table or the sacrament on the other side. Again, the reason for that is because the table is one of those places where the level of human involvement is very minimal. So we're able to say, "Actually, none of us are really the star of the show. We're all guests at Jesus' banquet. We're actually more than guests; we're sons and daughters at this great table that is set before us. And it's His party." So it keeps us centered and grounded that way.

And I absolutely agree. I think in previous decades, and even previous years, we used to have to feel this need to pick or choose: "Well, which one are you? Are you all about this or are you all about that?" Some of it was kind of reactive. Maybe in my generation, maybe in this day, what the Spirit is doing is saying, "OK, you've now seen all these gifts. I want to weave them together. I want you to hold them together. I want each local church to benefit from the richness of the great body of Christ."

Berglund: In your own personal quiet time, what has God been laying on your heart recently?

Packiam: Man, there's so much to say there. I think one of the things I'm really passionate about is to recognize the church as this kingdom community. What I mean by that is that this isn't just a group of people getting together to pass the time until we all go to heaven someday. You know, sometimes church has been associated with this otherworldly hope—an afterlife kind of hope. But actually, when you read the New Testament, there's a very real sense that an alternative kingdom is arriving. And this community is the first group of people to live under that King, as much as possible, here and now.

That has all kinds of implications.

One, it has implications for our work in the world. Our work in the world is not, to put it bluntly, just about getting souls saved. It's about helping to announce the good news of Jesus's kingship. In Luke 4, Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor." We don't believe at our church that helping the poor and preaching the gospel are two separate things. We think they overlap and bleed on each other. It all falls under the banner of kingdom work.

If the church is a kingdom community, then kingdom work is caring for the poor and needy, as much as it is announcing the forgiveness of sins. That the Good News is the Good News, not just of a Savior who died but of a King who reigns. The good news is of a King who ushers in an alternative society and alternative kingdom.

So when I say church needs to be a kingdom community, it's got to broaden our picture of what the gospel is. It's got to broaden our picture of Jesus not simply as the Lord of the afterlife but as a King of here and now.

I think it also has implications for churches not being too

aligned with one political party. I mean, I'm in Colorado Springs. Lord knows we've seen our fair share of culture wars over the years. When I first got here 19 years ago, there was a lot of that. I'm so grateful for the way Pastor Brady has led our church, not to passive disengagement but rather a kind of prophetic engagement, where we can say, "Actually, there are critiques to be said across the aisle, and our job is not to advocate one partisan line, but to speak on behalf of those who cannot speak, whether that be the unborn or people who are the victims of racism and injustice." So the church as a kingdom community has to cut across political lines.

And then, of course, the third implication may be that the church as a kingdom community needs to be a group of people who are composed of such differences that an outsider would say, "What do all these people have in common?" And the only answer they can give is "Jesus."

Not, "We all go to the same school district" or "We all you shop at the same mall" or whatever, but rather, it's Jesus. It's one Lord, one faith, one baptism—just as Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

Berglund: You've talked about sacrament a few times and how important that is for the church. I think in many Protestant denominations, that term can sometimes feel a little scary and foreign to people. I've certainly heard people say, "Isn't that superstitious?" or "Isn't that what's wrong with Catholicism?" Can you speak a little bit to what the sacraments were, as the early church understood them, and how it still has a place in today's church?

Packiam: Absolutely. So one of the interesting things about a sacrament is "sacrament" comes from this Latin word sacramentum. And in the first century, a sacramentum was an oath of allegiance that a Roman soldier or a Roman centurion would make to Caesar. It was a pledge of fidelity—a pledge of faithfulness and allegiance. Often, it was signified by

something they would have on their armor.

I think it's interesting that early Christians began to call this meal a sacrament, because what they're saying is, "This is how we show our allegiance to a different kind of King and a different kind of kingdom." But to flip the tables on that, it's actually—in a stunning move of grace—how God pledges His faithfulness to us. So what do we see when we come to the Lord's table? We see God writing His faithfulness to us in blood. It's God saying, "I am pledging myself to you, with My body and My blood. I will be your God." This is what Paul echoes in Timothy when he says that even when we are faithless, even when our allegiance fails, He will remain faithful. What a powerful thing to think of a sacrament as a moment where we remember God's pledge of faithfulness and fidelity to us.

But the other dynamic is that a few hundred years after that, Augustine—who was a church leader in North Africa in the 400s—said, "A sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace."

Now I went to Oral Roberts University. I saw Oral Roberts pray over hankies. You know, we had lots of physical things that were "points of physical contact"—things that would make you think of or remember or engage your faith to word as a sign, whether you're praying for healing or a miracle or whatever. Well, the original point of contact, if you will, is the bread and the wine. It's the way of saying, "This is a visible sign of an invisible grace."

We can't see the work of the Holy Spirit. We can't see the grace of God at work in us. But this bread and this cup are a visible sign to us. It's a picture to us of God's grace at work. And in a similar way that water works at baptism, in a similar way that oil works when we anoint the sick and pray for them, the bread and the cup of sacrament are an oath of fidelity and a sign of grace.

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