

Enough: God’s Blessings in Abundance

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Meet the Writer

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Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

We Don't Have Enough

Scripture

John 2:1–11; 4:4–26; 6:1–15; 11:1–14; 14:1–3; 21:25

Main Idea

Though we sometimes become powerless to the myth of not having enough, Jesus himself is always enough.

Teaching Points

This session invites participants to:

1. Explore the concept of abundance in Scripture.
2. Consider destructive myths that tell us there is not enough, more is better, and this is just the way it is.
3. Discover what is enough.

Resources Needed

Bibles
Participant's books
Paper
Pens

Leader Prep

The destructive myths—*that there is not enough, that more is better, and that this is just the way it is*—set us to rationalizing, give us permission to distort reality, and cause us to believe we are helpless. In the very first pages of Scripture, we hear the story of Adam and Eve wanting more—more from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

In the last century, Abraham Maslow studied human behavior and established what he called a hierarchy of needs: physical needs; safety needs; the need to love and be loved; the need for knowledge, meaning, order, and beauty; and finally, the need to realize our potential, to make a difference, to touch the eternal. He concluded that as soon as one need is met, another takes its place. We are defined by the idea that more is better. Even in a situation of abundance (the situation of most of us), we are dominated by the notion that we don't have enough and that we need more. When we become caught in the spiral of "not enough," the need for more is addictive.

In contrast, God's abundance permeates John's Gospel. In the first chapter, John speaks about Jesus as the Word from whose fullness we have all received grace upon grace. Consider the first sign, when water is turned into wine at the wedding in Cana (2:1–11). Jesus instructs the servants to fill some jars with water, and they fill them to the brim. The result is profusion, not merely of wine but of good wine. Then at a community well in Samaria Jesus tells a woman about living water gushing up to eternal life (4:4–26). In John 14, we hear, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places" (v. 2). At the end of the Gospel, John ends his witness by noting that in addition to the things he has told us, there is so much more that if it were all reduced to writing, there wouldn't be enough space in the world to contain the number of books that would be required (21:25).

Consider how this theology of abundance initiated by the generous spirit of a young boy might transform your group's conversations and your congregation's way of life.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Give participants an opportunity to name something in their homes or offices that they haven't used in the past year. Ask: *Why are you keeping it? Who might be able to use this thing more than you are?*
- Most of us fall into the trap of showering those we love with more and thus perpetuating the addiction of needing more. Give participants an opportunity to recall instances where they were intentional about what they were buying and the gifts they were giving. Ask: *What three words best describe this experience?*

- Pray: *Holy God, we know you are here, and so we give thanks. Teach us, lead us, and show us how to live with you more fully through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.*

Head

- *Abundance* is a theme throughout John's Gospel. Form pairs of participants, and assign each pair one or more of these Scripture passages so that each passage is assigned to at least one pair: John 2:1–11; 4:4–26; 11:1–14; 14:1–3; and 21:25. Invite pairs to summarize what they discover about God's abundance in John's Gospel.
- Explore John 6:1–15 and what it teaches about abundance. Ask: *How much is enough to feed so many?*
- Ask: *In what ways does your faith mirror that of Philip and Andrew, who could not see past the six months of wages or the meager five loaves and two fish?*
- Ask: *When do you tend to pull back rather than push forward?*

Heart

- In John 6:1–15, it is possible that many of those gathered with Jesus had brought something with them to eat. Some suppose that by a miraculous change of heart some of them reached into their bags, took out what they'd been keeping for themselves, and put that in with what Jesus was sharing. Ask: *Was Jesus' multiplying the loaves any more miraculous than the possibility of those people sharing with one another? Why or why not?*
- Ask: *How might the twelve disciples have felt as they passed the baskets for the leftovers?*
- Ask: *What might change in our community or in this world if we were willing to share our resources and to collaborate with one another?*
- Ask: *What will happen if we don't move beyond our anxiety created by notions of not having enough, our enslavement to the idea that more is better, and our resignation that this is just the way it is?*

Hands

- Dr. Mendenhall writes, “When we know how much enough is, there will always be enough.” But how do we know how much is enough?
- Distribute paper and pens. Invite the participants to write responses to the question “If you had all the money in the world, what would you do with that money?” Underneath their answer, have participants list seven unique responses to the question “Why is this important to me?”
- Give participants an opportunity to read aloud their responses. Ask: *If you had or could do what you named, would this be enough? Why or why not?*
- Ask: *When Jesus says, “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33), did he declare that what you have named on your list will be yours? Why or why not?*
- Ask: *What topics and issues in our lives need to be addressed before we can determine what is enough?*
- Dr. Mendenhall writes, “We need a focus on Jesus as the one who can give us new perspectives. When we realize it is Jesus who is the ‘bread of life’ (John 6:35), who brings us meaning and true life, then we can give up the race to gain more. Jesus is always enough.” Ask: *How can you embody the phrase “Jesus is always enough”?*

Depart

- Pray together the prayer in the participant’s book.

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We Don't Have Enough

Scripture

Matthew 14:13–21; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–15

Jesus feeds the five thousand.

John 6:1–58 Jesus walks on the water and then identifies himself as the bread of life.

Prayer

Thank you, dear God, for all the ways you feed us and give us what we most value in life. We implore you to free us from the myth of inadequacy, to strengthen our ability to trust in your faithfulness. We commit ourselves to seek your kingdom first. O God, whose grace is sufficient for all our needs, hear our prayer through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction

The account of the feeding of the five thousand helps us challenge our society's culture of scarcity and clarify what is most important to have *enough* of. The story begins with the disciples assembling to report to Jesus on all they'd done. As they were enthusiastically caught up in what they were doing for Jesus, imagine James's and John's impatience in waiting their turn to tell their story! Imagine James the Less holding back until the others finished. Even more, imagine Jesus not really needing to keep score of who had done what and interrupting them to say, "Let's take a break and get a little rest." Perhaps Jesus wanted them to take some time to center themselves, get their priorities in line, and refocus on what it was God was doing. Jesus got them into a boat and headed for a remote place where they could be alone. Just picture the disciples' glee in anticipation of this time with Jesus.

Some folks saw Jesus leaving and raced ahead. They spread the word that they'd seen Jesus. Whole families set out on foot, some of them running ahead so that when Jesus and the disciples arrived on the shore, he saw a huge crowd of folks waiting for him. "Well, so much

for the rest,” he must have thought. “These folks are desperate for a word from me. They need to see God’s presence with them. They need to see their story as part of God’s story.” Jesus’ heart went out to them. They seemed like lost sheep looking for their shepherd. Jesus was their shepherd. His compassion for them overrode his desire to be alone with his disciples. He turned from his disciples and turned to those whose need was so crushing. If Jesus was disappointed not to have enough time to “get away,” he didn’t show it.

Visualize the disciples waiting impatiently. At some point, they must have decided this interruption had gone on long enough. A group of the disciples slipped up to Jesus and caught his eye. They said to him, “Hey, it’s getting late. These folks have a long walk home. Pronounce the benediction so they can leave and go get their supper.”

Jesus looked at the disciples and realized that they didn’t get it. He said to them, “You feed them.”

Philip calculated the cost of feeding the crowd at more than six months’ salary. The disciples had already left everything to follow Jesus. Surely Jesus didn’t expect them to foot this bill, too? They must have blurted out to Jesus, “You’re kidding! Even if we had the money, it would cost a fortune to feed all these people. We don’t have enough to feed them.”

Jesus was serious. This was the point of his ministry. “Feed them.”

A Problem, A Solution

Each of the Gospel writers confirms that five thousand men were present. Many of them came with families, boosting the numbers considerably. How did they take an inventory quickly in that large crowd? Did they simply shout out, “Who’s got something extra to eat that they’re willing to share?” That would be like asking the congregation during the announcements on Sunday morning, “Who wants to stay up all night with the middle schoolers for a lock-in on Friday night?” or “Who will stay after worship and spend a few hours polishing the pews?”

If that’s what the disciples did, then it is not really surprising that only one child spoke up to offer the snack his mother had prepared, five barley loaves and two dried fish—the food of the poor. Can’t you hear his mother saying, “Son, I made that food for *you*. You know how whiney you get when you’re hungry. You don’t have enough to share. Put your hand down.”

Of course, don’t you imagine there were other mothers who brought food along? Most parents today can’t go anywhere without

snacks in the car. Men and women surely had something tucked into their belts or in their packs, right?

This child was the only one in the crowd whose instinct was generosity. It didn't matter to Jesus that only one made an offering. The child's offering was enough.

Andrew said, "There's a little boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. I know it isn't enough. What are they among so many? How can such a small offering meet such overwhelming need? What shall we do?"

Jesus said, "Get the people to sit down in groups." He took what had been offered, gave thanks to God, and fed all who were hungry. When they had eaten their fill, Jesus told the disciples to gather the leftovers so that nothing was wasted, and they gathered twelve baskets.

Why did Jesus have them gather the leftovers? Did Jesus then instruct the disciples to take those baskets to the local soup kitchen to feed the homeless? Surely Jesus didn't want the twelve disciples lugging those baskets around. They traveled lighter than that, and it seems they were too weary for a big party that night. What *is* clear is that Jesus didn't want them to waste anything. Even the leftovers are worth something; even those who feel like they are the "leftovers" are worth something. Who was given the responsibility for those twelve baskets of leftover food? Who has responsibility for the "leftover" people?

Who was given the responsibility for those twelve baskets of leftover food? Who has responsibility for the "leftover" people?

Jesus fed all those people. All four Gospel writers attest to this. We cannot explain it; if we spend too much time worrying over the details, we miss the miraculous, the extraordinary thing that is happening right before our eyes.

Missing the Point

The crowd realized that God was at work among them and that they had become part of God's story. They remembered how God had rescued their ancestors from slavery in Egypt, how God provided their ancestors with manna each morning, and how every evening the quail came. Did anyone start humming "Great Is Thy Faithfulness"? This would be a great ending for this story, except that it isn't.

Jesus slipped away because the exuberant crowd wanted to crown him king. He knew the kind of king they were looking for—someone

miraculously to meet their needs, their immediate and temporal needs. Jesus had something much bigger in mind.

As Jesus slipped away, he sent the disciples down to get in the boats and head back to the other side of the lake. Jesus went off to pray, something he'd been longing to do. As the disciples made their way across the water, a big wind blew up, churning the sea. The disciples became anxious again. When they saw Jesus walking on the water, near their boat, they were terrified, wondering what Jesus was doing now. Jesus reassured them, "It's just me. I am with you. Do not be afraid." They took Jesus on board and soon reached their destination.

The next day those who had camped on the hillside with their bellies full of bread and fish piled into boats and headed across the lake, looking for Jesus, wanting more. When they found him, they said to him, "Teacher, when did you get here?"

Jesus answered, "You've come looking for me not because you saw God in my actions but because I fed you when you thought there was not enough. You just want another free lunch. Don't waste your energy like that. Work for the food that nourishes your life, that satisfies you so you know how much is enough and what will last eternally. The point is that God is feeding you now, giving you all you need."

"Work for the food that nourishes your life, that satisfies you so you know how much is enough and what will last eternally. The point is that God is feeding you now, giving you all you need."

They replied, "Give us this bread, now and forever."

Jesus told them, "I am the bread of life. I came to be bread for the hungry world. That was God's plan: that anyone who sees me and trusts that I am God's Son, aligning their story with mine, will have their needs met, now and eternally."

When Jesus said, "I am the bread from heaven," the arguing began. "Don't we know his father and mother? How can he say he came from heaven? He came from Nazareth."

Jesus responded, "Don't bicker among yourselves. I am telling you the truth: My grace is sufficient for all your needs. Whoever believes in me has real life, eternal life. I am the bread of life, broken for you. Come, you who are hungry. Come and be fed."

Is More Better?

Most of us have trouble believing we have enough. In 2006, the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis reported that the average personal-savings rate dipped into negative numbers at -0.5 percent. Not only were Americans not saving, we were dipping into our savings—a phenomenon not seen since the Great Depression.¹ Though the rate has moved back into positive numbers in recent years, on average the American household currently saves less than 4 percent of its income.

When we want more, our contemporary culture has plenty of ways to finance our desires. In January 2010, the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston reported that the average consumer has 2.7 credit cards.² Also in 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau found that Americans had more than \$886 billion in credit-card debt. This amount was projected to increase to \$1.177 trillion in 2011. The report also states that average credit-card debt for each cardholder was \$5,100 in 2010, with an expectation for this number to reach \$6,500 by the end of 2011.³

If we fear we do not have enough, then more must be better. All this becomes so overwhelming that we begin to believe that “not enough” and the need for more are normal. The destructive myths—*that there is not enough, that more is better, and that this is just the way it is*—give us permission to distort reality and lead us to believe we are helpless.

We know that we will always be reaching out, seeking to extend ourselves and what we have to obtain more. It is a natural human reaction, even when it means we hurt other people along the way. It reflects our self-centeredness, our focus on our own needs and these alone.

So we need a way out of thinking that more is better. We need a focus on Jesus as the one who can give us new perspectives. When we realize it is Jesus who is the “bread of life” (John 6:35), who brings us meaning and true life, then we can give up the race to gain more. Jesus is always enough.

When we become caught in the spiral of not enough, the need for more is addictive.

1. investopedia.com/articles/pf/08/in-over-your-head.asp#axzz1VOz5uiQg, accessed August 18, 2011.
2. creditcards.com/credit-card-news/credit-card-industry-facts-personal-debt-statistics-1276.php#Card-ownership, accessed August 18, 2011.
3. hoffmanbrinker.com/credit-card-debt-statistics.html (source: money-zine.com/Financial-Planning/Debt-Consolidation/Consumer-Debt-Statistics, August 18, 2011).

When we become caught in the spiral of not enough, the need for more is addictive. Too many of us fall into the trap of showering those we love with more and thus perpetuating the addiction instead of being intentional about the gifts we are giving.

When we know how much enough is, there will always be enough.

Spiritual Practice

Amid the cries of “There is not enough,” name what you most want. Having named what you most want, are these the things Jesus promised would be yours when he said, “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33)? What will be yours as you live into the kingdom of God? Is it enough?

Questions for Reflection

What might change in our community and in this world if we were willing to share our resources and collaborate with one another?

What will happen if we don’t move beyond our anxiety regarding not enough, our enslavement to the idea that more is better, or our resignation that this is just the way it is?

What do you want most out of your life? What is enough for you?