

Abundance and the Relationship between Scarcity and Choice *By Shelley Cochran*

Have you ever listened to a preacher quote Philippians 4:19, "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus," on your car radio as you drove to a meeting where you knew you would be asked to cut expenses due to declining contributions? Have you ever read Ephesians 3:20, "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us..." with pangs of doubt because of the gap between that optimistic declaration of abundance and your current scarcity of resources?

Boundless vs. Limited

Scripture describes God as infinite, a concept that refers to a quantity without bound or end. The word comes from the Latin *infinitas* or "unboundedness." God is, in His very essence, limitless and boundless. The Creator is characterized by unlimited abundance with the ability to breathe something into existence *ex nihilo*.

The world God created and everything in it, however, exists within the parameters of finite time and space. Men and women are finite, "constrained by bounds, impermanent." The limitless, eternal God created a temporal world with inherent limits. People are constrained by the parameters of what exists. They utilize existing resources to meet their needs, resources commonly perceived as scarce.

The Economist magazine quotes Matthew Bishop's definition of economics as "the study of how society uses its scarce resources." He continues, "scarcity, in economic terms, means that needs and wants exceed the resources available to meet them, which is as common in rich countries as in poor ones."¹

That scarcity of resources creates dilemmas and demands painful choices. We must judge the merits of multiple options and select some over others because overwhelming needs usually exceed available resources in every aspect of life.

God's Interventions

So how does the infinite God interject unbounded resources into a finite world characterized by scarcity? Scriptural accounts of how He intervenes fall into two categories:

1. God empowers a human instrument, limited though it may be, to effect an unbounded result. He worked a miracle of multiplication for the widow after she followed the prophet's instructions to collect jars from her neighbors and fill them from her little flask of oil; when wedding hosts obediently filled jars with water, Jesus miraculously transformed that plain water into fine wine. In both cases, God expanded a depleted resource by working through human hands.
2. God intervenes directly. He delivered manna in the desert. Jesus produced the coin from the fish's mouth. In these examples, God delivered His abundance directly into the situation without requesting a human hand to contribute raw material.

In both types of intervention, God alters the equation of the relationship between scarcity and choice. The widow was able to sell the oil and pay off her debts. The wedding hosts had more than enough wine for the rest of the celebration. Every Israelite in the wilderness had plenty to eat even though the head count varied from day to day as new children were born and the older generation perished along the way. The coin paid the Temple tax in full.



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Rather than addressing which needs would be met and which would remain unfulfilled, God's abundance satisfied every need. God's intervention overruled the limitations that He Himself set in place in the created order. At a defined time and place, the Creator removed the limits so that wide-open opportunity was abundantly met, exceeding all existing resources.

So when does God intervene? Are the historical accounts of God's abundance only descriptive or are they also prescriptive? Historical examples of God's provision for abundance cannot be replicated at will. In a world with great need and scarce resources, we cannot predict how and when God will suspend accepted constraints for the purpose of introducing new abundance. Yet Scripture records accounts of God's servants imploring him to intervene on their behalf, and ministry leaders do well to do the same. It is always right to ask

God for help. He will reveal His provision and the steps He wants His servants to take.

Guidance through Scarcity

Steve Moore, CEO of The Mission Exchange, asks the question, “How might God be guiding by not providing?”² A crossroads where ministry opportunities are sky-high while income is woefully inadequate may be the place to examine the issue of abundance and the question of scarcity and choice.

God’s provision may arrive as newly created resources, or it may come in the form of His instruction to redirect resources previously misapplied.

Sometimes generous contributions flow through the doors of ministries only to be consumed on less important expenses.

For example, a ministry that divests itself of fixed costs frees up revenue to fund new ministry initiatives and thereby experiences increased provision. Similarly, funds might be released for greater good by repurposing an existing building instead of constructing a new one, going virtual to eliminate the need for an office, opting for decentralization and smaller facilities, or sharing a campus with another ministry to maximize existing space. (These options would reduce a ministry’s carbon footprint in addition to demonstrating good stewardship by reducing expenses.)

God’s provision may come in the form of creatively increasing Gift-in-kind contributions, repurposing existing materials, bartering/swapping goods or services, or making better use of non-cash resources. Rather than send more donations to cover redundant expenses, God may point to consolidation—mergers, acquisitions, strategic partnerships, or other “economy of scale” efforts—as a way to reduce duplicated efforts and repurpose the dollars already flowing into ministry coffers. God may want to supply all the needs of fewer, collaborative efforts working together with intentionality. A number of ministries are entering into these types of arrangements because they are strategic and God-honoring ways to accomplish more with fewer resources.

Other Creative Alternatives

Abundance may also take the form of God releasing a flood of resources through Kingdom companies and marketplace ministries that combine livelihoods for hundreds of employees while contributing to significant local and international

outreach. Many Christ-centered businesses are explicitly designed to serve Kingdom purposes, even as they provide goods and services in the marketplace. Increasingly, business revenue is being channeled into ministry efforts in one holistic enterprise without incurring the costs associated with running a parachurch organization.



“How might God be guiding by not providing?”

Steve Moore

many cases, there is no concern for tax-deductible receipting or other paybacks for the giver.

Sometimes scarcity begs a choice between competing needs and available resources, precipitating trade-offs that fulfill some opportunities and leave others unmet. Because they are dual citizens—living in a finite world with membership in an eternal Kingdom—Christians frequently experience both the dilemma of scarcity and the joy of abundance. With eyes that view the invisible, they watch God unleash His provision through increased income, reduced expenditures, or a change in ministry methods or organizational structure or something else that affects the correlating resources. One way or another, in the journey of faith, “God will meet all your needs, according to his riches in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19).

True to what He has revealed about His nature, God will continue the masterful interplay between the infinite and the finite. As the Creator and Sustainer of all things, how that looks in the days ahead may surprise us. He may completely alter our expectations by how He responds, even as we grapple with the relationship of scarcity and choice on a daily basis. But with eyes of faith fixed on God, we will see Him provide and we can follow where He leads.



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¹. Adapted from “Essential Economics,” an interview with Matthew Bishop, quoted on *The Economist* [website1](#) and [website2](#).

². *While You Were Micro-Sleeping*, pg. 44. [The Mission Exchange](#), 2009.

Discussion Starters

FOR CHURCHES

1. Are you aware of times in the history of your church when God has met needs in a very special way in answer to prayer? Should you share some of those stories with your congregation again now? How?

2. Do the people in your church understand God's limitless abundance? Would a sermon series highlighting biblical examples of God's abundant provision—such as those mentioned in this article—be a powerful challenge at this time of global financial uncertainty?

3. Could God want to use scarcity of resources to challenge your church leaders to reevaluate spending priorities? What would be wise guidelines to set as you approach such a task?

4. How could you honestly evaluate if you really need all of the programs you run and the facilities you currently occupy? How could you creatively downsize in order to expand essential ministry? Could you share facilities? Decentralize some ministries?

5. Could your church or missions team create a context in which Christian business-people could come together to discuss their responsibility and opportunities for resourcing ministry? How could the church encourage them to creatively and responsibly structure their businesses for greatest Kingdom impact?

6. Could your church or missions team create a context in which members can encourage one another to make lifestyle choices that maximize resources for global impact? Are there people in your congregation who would be open to experimenting with more radical options—such as sharing a vehicle so that every family doesn't need a car (or a second car), or encouraging each other to downsize homes, vacations, or other discretionary spending?

7. Should your missions team grapple with the question of whether missions funds seem scarce because some are being misspent? Have you defined clear criteria for evaluating what is truly strategic?

8. Should your church consider an alternative type of short-term missions team—where rather than traveling to the field, the team stays home and engages in fundraising projects and other efforts to benefit the work in a particular place?



Before you launch a new charitable organization, should you expend more effort to see if you could cooperate with an already-established ministry?

9. Should you be actively encouraging mission organizations to improve their financial stewardship by some of the methods listed in this article? Don't consider your voice inconsequential.

10. Is your church currently considering launching or helping to launch a new charitable organization? Should you first expend more effort to see if you could cooperate with an already-established ministry?

FOR AGENCIES

1. When support-raising is difficult, missionaries can easily slip into a scarcity mentality. How can you as an agency help workers and home staff focus on God's unlimited ability to provide in abundance? How can you encourage faith-filled prayers for His gracious provision with a "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" mentality?

2. Where has God provided in abundance for the work of your organization in the past? As you look at those instances of abundance, can you identify reasons why you think He blessed so lavishly? What lessons can you apply to your current situation?

3. Non-profit organizations have few intrinsic pressures for efficiency unless there is limited funding. Could God be using reduced income to call your organization to rethink your use of the resources He has provided? If the answer is "yes," how can you approach the process with openness and sensitivity to His leading?

4. The number of globally-focused, Christian charitable organizations being launched has exponentially increased in the past few years. If you are thinking of incorporating a new ministry, should you first seriously pursue the possibility of working with an existing group? If you are part of a not-for-profit ministry, should you consider merging into another ministry for the sake of more efficient and effective stewardship of funds, personnel, and other resources? Should you approach a sister ministry about merging with you?



Could you create a context in which members can encourage one another to make lifestyle choices that maximize resources for global impact?

5. Are there ways to downsize or share facilities, computer systems, training programs, personnel, etc. with other ministries in order to release funds for higher priorities?

6. Should organizational funds spent on travel be reevaluated? Could more meetings be held via phone or videoconferencing to save travel expense? Could a supporting church provide a volunteer with expertise in how to make virtual meetings most effective? Should more ministry training be provided via the Internet rather than face to face?

7. Has “lifestyle creep” infected your organization, especially leaders? Should administrators and board members be bold enough to challenge themselves and each other to reassess their lifestyles, salaries, and giving levels?

8. Could your organization build a fellowship of business-people who are serious about focusing their company around Kingdom benefit? How could you help them succeed in developing new, globally-focused business models?

9. Many churches are considering how to be more missional—a change of focus with major implications for how funds are raised and spent. How could you support church leaders as they grapple with how to reorient their congregations’ attention outward? In what practical ways could you provide assistance? Can you point to successful models?



Has “lifestyle creep” infected your organization?

10. Issues of abundance and scarcity look very different in the Majority World than they do from the Western perspective. Could you create opportunities for interaction where Western churches not only learn from their brothers and sisters in poorer circumstances but also wrestle with how to apply new insights in their own context?

If you have thoughts on, or illustrations of, creative abundance/scarcity responses, please send them to info@catalystservices.org.

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