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Gerrit W. Gong

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Elder Gerrit W. Gong

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“I Am the Bread of Life”

ELDER GERRIT W. GONG

Elder Gerrit W. Gong is a member of the Presidency of the Seventy.

From an address to CES religious educators, Salt Lake Tabernacle, 17 February 2017.

Dear brothers and sisters, it is a special privilege to gather this evening. Thank you to so many of you for your kind messages of love and encouragement. This evening, as we talk of Christ, rejoice in Christ,¹ learn of Christ, I pray we may reverently draw closer to Him.

Family members and spouses, it is an honor to be with you. If the plural of “spouse” were “spice,” then the plural of “spouses” would be “spices.” Spouses are the spices of our lives. You get up early, you stay late, and you live with faith in every footstep. Thank you for all you are and do.

The assignment to participate in an “evening with a General Authority” comes as a letter signed by President Thomas S. Monson, President Henry B. Eyring, and President Dieter F. Uchtdorf. I feel the love of our First Presidency for each of you as they ask the Lord to bless and inspire our efforts this evening.

When I first received this assignment, I invited Elder Kim B. Clark and Brother Chad Webb to teach me about you—our seminary and institute teachers, missionaries, and CES employees across the world.

I learned 45,731 called seminary and institute teachers and missionaries teach in 133 countries: 34,527 of you serve outside the United States; 11,204 of you serve in the United States. Collectively, you contribute 20,807,605 hours of gospel service each year. Thank you!

I learned 2,878 Seminaries and Institutes of Religion employees serve in 129 countries: 1,849 of you in the United States and 1,029 of you outside the United States. You faithfully serve in countries literally from A (Albania) to Z (Zambia)—with Botswana, Bulgaria, Hungary, Lithuania, and Mozambique, among others, in between. Thank you!

Some of you have taught many years. For example, Sister Enid May, in British Columbia, was recently released after teaching seminary for thirty-five years. Sister May taught nine of her own ten children, two of her grandchildren, and her own current bishop. Sister May said she prayed her car would make it through each school year. The last day Sister May was teaching seminary, as she was backing into her driveway, the transmission of her car finally gave out.

Others of you are just beginning to teach. For example, Sister Jang Dongran in Korea and Sister Johanna Mercader in the Dominican Republic, who started teaching this year after being a Church member for only six weeks. Sister Margaret Masai in Kenya began teaching seminary only a few weeks after she joined the Church. Sister Masai modestly says her students, many born in the Church, have taught her and helped create a gospel foundation that has blessed her seventeen years of teaching seminary.

You teach and serve in every clime, under every condition, with students from every background, in classes large and small. Brother Benjamin Hadfield teaches in North Pole, Alaska, and Sister Lorena Tossen teaches in Ushuaia, near Antarctica, where the South Pole is. On Wednesdays at the Salt Lake University Institute, Brother Jared Halverson teaches almost four hundred students. I asked Brother Halverson how he does it, and he said, “I teach the group but reach out to individuals, one text at a time.”

In Poland, Sister Dagmara Martyniuk, herself a young single adult, is up early to work at the bakery, then stays late to teach institute. Sister Myra Flores-Aguilar’s seminary class in Honduras starts at five in the morning, and Brother Reuben Adrover’s institute class in San Juan, Argentina, begins at

ten at night. You also teach and administer primary and secondary classes in Mexico, Kiribati, Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa.

Because of you, more youth and young adults are reading the scriptures and the words of the living prophets than ever before; because of you, more youth are learning to acquire spiritual knowledge and answer their own questions by understanding the doctrine; and because of you, cornerstone courses across our Church schools and institutes are bringing students closer to Jesus Christ, the Chief Cornerstone.

Again, we admire who you are and how you serve. Wherever you are, whatever your circumstances, thank you for gathering this evening with open hearts and open minds—whether as one, two, or more in His name.²

Once, after a long assignment together, as we were coming to land at the Salt Lake airport, with warm anticipation President Boyd K. Packer said, “Gerrit, my wife, Donna, is putting the bread in the oven now. The bread will be fresh and hot when I arrive home.” Can you imagine or remember delicious bread? Can you smell it—fresh and hot? Can you taste it—perhaps a little sweet, a little salty? Bread is a universal staple food. People in every age and every circumstance have eaten bread. Of course, with our worldwide group, bread comes in every size, shape, and ingredient, even with different names. Perhaps because all people everywhere understand and depend on bread, our Savior declared, “I am the bread of life.”³

In this world, amidst thorns and thistles, we eat bread by the sweat of our face, as did Adam and Eve. Moral agency comes with real choices, and spiritual growth comes from real challenges, but our Savior does not leave us to see only this world’s sticks and stones, the limits and scarcities. Our Savior blesses us with manna, daily bread, and His sacramental promise that we might have life, hope, joy, and have them more abundantly.⁴

Our Lord declares: “I, the Lord, stretched out the heavens, and built the earth, my very handiwork; and all things therein are mine. And it is my purpose to provide for my saints. . . . For the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare.”⁵ In other words, His is not a world of sticks and stones. His is a world of loaves and fishes.

Do you remember how Jesus fed the multitude with a few loaves and fishes? Let’s watch and imagine we were there.

[Video]

Jesus: “Behold the multitude.”

Disciple 1: “This is a desert place, and now the time is far passed. Send them away that they may go into the villages and buy themselves bread. They have nothing to eat.”

Jesus: “Give ye them to eat.”

Disciple 2: “Shall we go and buy two hundred pennyworth of bread and give them to eat?”

Jesus: “How many loaves have ye?”

Disciple 1: “Five, and two fishes.”

Jesus: “Bring them to me. Divide the people into companies of fifty, that they might be fed. . . . O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, I thank Thee for thy bounties. Amen.”⁶

[End of video]

Four New Testament accounts⁷ describe our Savior feeding a multitude of five thousand people. Two additional New Testament accounts describe,⁸ on another occasion, our Savior feeding a multitude of four thousand people. Those large multitudes seem to include men with women and children in addition.⁹

We sometimes say God is in the details. Recently, I combined the scriptural details of our Savior feeding the multitude of five thousand from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, including Bible notes, into a single, verbatim scriptural narrative.

Will you please invite the Holy Ghost to open our understanding as we study scriptural accounts and gospel principles found in our Savior’s example? Our prayer is that increased appreciation of our Savior’s ministry will draw us, our families, and our students closer to Him.

Here is our combined scripture passage:

“And the apostles gathered themselves together unto Jesus, and told him all things, both what they had done, and what they had taught.

“And he said unto them, Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place [that is, a secluded, or quiet, place], and rest a while: for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat. . . .

“And the people saw them departing, and many knew him, and ran afoot thither out of all cities, and outwent them, and came together unto him.

“And Jesus, when he came out, saw much people, and was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd.”¹⁰

“And he received them, and spake unto them of the kingdom of God, and healed them that had need of healing.”¹¹

“And when it was evening, his disciples came to him, saying, This is a desert place, and the time is now past; send the multitude away,”¹² “that they may go into the country round about, and into the villages, and buy themselves bread: for they have nothing to eat.”¹³

“But Jesus said unto them, They need not depart; give ye them to eat.”¹⁴

“And they [said] unto him, Shall we go and buy two hundred pennyworth of bread, and give them to eat?”¹⁵

“One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, saith unto him,

“There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many?”¹⁶

“He said, Bring them hither to me.”¹⁷

“And he commanded them to make all sit down by companies upon the green grass.”¹⁸ “Now there was much grass in the place.”¹⁹ “And they sat down in ranks, by hundreds, and by fifties.”²⁰

“Then he took the five loaves and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven, he blessed them, and brake,”²¹ “and when he had given thanks, he”²² “gave the loaves to his disciples, and the disciples to the multitude.”²³ “And the two fishes divided he among them all”²⁴ “as much as they would.”²⁵

“And they did all eat,”²⁶ “and were all filled.”²⁷

“When they were filled, he said unto his disciples, Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost.”²⁸

“And they took up of the fragments that remained”²⁹ “and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves”³⁰ “and of the fishes”³¹ “which remained over and above unto them that had eaten.”³²

“And they that had eaten were about five thousand men, beside women and children.”³³

“And when he had [bid the people farewell], he departed into a mountain to pray.”³⁴

“Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world.”³⁵

What did you notice, or feel, or learn as Jesus feeds each of us and all of us with five loaves and two small fishes? Were the loaves like manna, sweet as coriander and honey?³⁶ And how did two small fishes feed us—fill us—all?

Here are nine things I notice and feel. Perhaps they can help us better understand our Savior, draw us closer to Him, and invite us to become more like Him.

Theme 1: Our Savior is moved with compassion.

Many of our Savior's miracles begin with His understanding and compassion. He knows our hearts and circumstances. He is filled with compassion for our hopes and our hurts, our desires and our needs.

It has been an agonizing time. John the Baptist has been beheaded, his head brought in on a platter, the result of a promise of a sorry king to the dancing daughter of a spiteful mother. Our Savior and His disciples have gone to a secluded place to rest, yet what does our Savior feel as He saw many people? He "was moved with compassion toward them."³⁷ He receives them, He teaches them, He heals them, and, in a very practical way, He knows "they have nothing to eat."³⁸

Through His ministry our Savior is moved by compassion—compassion for the leper,³⁹ compassion for the man's son possessed with a foul spirit,⁴⁰ compassion for a widowed mother whose only son has died.⁴¹ Our Savior teaches us to be like the good Samaritan who had compassion on the man wounded and left for dead.⁴²

Likewise, the father of the prodigal son had compassion and ran to his son when his son "was yet a great way off."⁴³ Interestingly, speaking of bread, when the prodigal son "came to himself," his realization is "how many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare."⁴⁴

Our Savior begins with compassion. He concludes with gracious kindness. The gospel accounts say that after Jesus fed the multitude, He "sent them away," but the footnote in Mark clarifies. Instead of He "sent them away," the footnote says He "bid the people farewell."⁴⁵ Can't you hear Jesus compassionately bidding the people farewell as they leave after He has fed them?

Theme 2: Our Savior starts with what they have.

Wanting to feed the multitude, our Savior starts by asking His disciples what they have. He is Creator of the world, Lord of heaven and earth, yet He starts with what they have, from where they are. "There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes."⁴⁶ Our Savior begins with what they have: "Bring them hither to me."⁴⁷

Do you ever look at who you are, at what or who you have to teach, and wonder how what you have can possibly be enough? Perhaps, like the disciples, we look at our few small loaves and fishes and marvel, "But what are they among so many?"⁴⁸

As teachers, we invite each student to contribute in class, and some students offer more, some less. As learners and teachers (and we are both), we begin with what we have, with who we are now. He can then magnify us and multiply our efforts. The principle of growing from where we are reflects the truth in the Book of Mormon that we are saved by His grace "after all we can do."⁴⁹ He smiles as we bring what we have and who we are and come hither to Him.

Theme 3: Our Savior proceeds in an orderly manner.

Have you ever been caught in a large crowd that is pushing and shoving and grabbing for something? I have. The people in the front did not care about the people in the back. I was afraid that if anyone fell, he or she would be trampled.

In contrast, our Savior "commanded them [the disciples] to make all sit down by companies."⁵⁰ These companies are organized "in ranks, by hundreds, and . . . fifties."⁵¹ In the Church, we speak of a pioneer company. We speak of a company worshipping in the temple. To us, the word *company* denotes an orderly group with a higher shared purpose.

And, while it is called a desert place, our Lord does not have the multitude sit on dusty, bare ground. He has the companies sit "upon the green grass."⁵² He has chosen a place where "there was much grass in the place."⁵³

Theme 4: Our Savior expresses gratitude.

He took the loaves and fishes, and "looking up to heaven, he blessed them, and brake."⁵⁴

Creator of heaven and earth, the King of kings Himself gives thanks before He divides the loaves and fishes and multiplies them among them all, "as much as they would" eat.⁵⁵

Theme 5: Our Savior feeds the disciples and has them feed the multitude.

It is order, but it is more than order. It is strengthening the shepherds so the shepherds can strengthen the sheep; it is teaching the teachers so the teachers

can teach the students; and it is a divine pattern in the Bible, in the Book of Mormon, and in His restored Church: and He “gave the loaves to his disciples, and the disciples to the multitude.”⁵⁶

It is the great gift of spiritual giving and receiving. Knowing we will teach helps us to learn. In teaching others to learn, we learn to teach. Our example of learning and teaching helps our students know they too can learn and teach.

Theme 6: Our Savior feeds the five thousand and the one at the same time.

In a miraculous way, the loaves and fishes are divided and then multiplied to each person in the multitude: “And they did all eat”⁵⁷ “and were all filled.”⁵⁸

This is a miracle we teachers seek—to teach our whole class and each person in the class. This requires attending to the five thousand and the one. It invites addressing general concerns and individual needs, and, beyond balance, it invites the spiritual miracle that with which we begin will become enough.

Theme 7: Our Savior ensures nothing is lost.

“When they were filled, he said unto his disciples, Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost.”⁵⁹

Part of beginning with gratitude for what we have is ensuring nothing is lost when we conclude. Heaven’s economy does not waste because everything is drawn on in the beginning, and nothing is left to be lost in the end.

Elder Richard G. Scott shared how we can record impressions and learn if there is yet more.⁶⁰ This repeated process of asking, receiving, recording, pondering, obeying, and asking if there is more reflects our Savior’s declaration that “unto you that hear shall more be given.”⁶¹

And there is more. In describing Himself as the bread of life, our Savior notes: “And this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing.”⁶² He keeps those given Him by the Father, that none be lost. As teachers, missionaries, employees, we do all in our faith and power to keep those entrusted to our care, that none be lost.

Theme 8: With our Savior, we end with more than we began.

Gratefully ensuring nothing is lost, the disciples realize another miracle: “And they took up of the fragments that remained”⁶³ “and filled twelve baskets with

the fragments of the five barley loaves”⁶⁴ “and of the fishes”⁶⁵ “which remained over and above unto them that had eaten.”⁶⁶

A miracle of spiritual multiplication is that, with our Savior, we end with more than we began. We end with more love, more learning, more inspiration, more kindness than when we began. Spirit-filled teaching comes back as bread upon the water—like loaves and fishes, with more than we began.

Let us summarize our discussion thus far:

Our Savior understands our hearts and circumstances. He is moved by compassion to bless and fill us in every way.

He begins from where we are, with what we have, even accepting the few loaves and fishes from a lad.

He proceeds in an orderly fashion.

He is grateful. He looks to heaven before He blesses and breaks.

He shares first with the disciples and asks the disciples to give to the people. He knows how to care for and teach the five thousand and the one at the same time.

He gratefully gathers what we have, that nothing is lost.

He helps us understand we have ended with more than we began.

And there is more. Feeding the multitude is neither the first nor the last time our Savior uses bread and fish to teach and testify of His abundance, thus our ninth and final theme.

Theme 9: For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, our Savior teaches and testifies of sacramental abundance.

“Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world.”⁶⁷

Later, specifically referring to the loaves and fishes, our Savior asks His disciples: “Do ye not remember? When I brake the five loaves among five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? They say unto him, Twelve. And when the seven among four thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? And they said, Seven.”⁶⁸

To repeat: His is a world of loaves and fishes, of abundance.

To the woman at the well, with particular meaning in a dry land, our Savior declared Himself as living water. Jesus said unto her, “Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.”⁶⁹

To those who ask Jesus, “Our fathers did eat manna in the desert, can you give us bread from heaven to eat?”⁷⁰ Jesus replies, “My Father giveth . . . true bread from heaven.”⁷¹ “I am the bread of life.”⁷² “He that believeth on me hath everlasting life.”⁷³

There is nothing more basic, more essential, or more universal than bread and water. What do we receive when the bread of life and the living water come together? Of course, we receive the sacrament.

At the end of His mortal ministry, in a pattern the disciples had seen before, our Savior “took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying . . . this do in remembrance of me.”⁷⁴

At the beginning of His resurrected ministry, again showing a familiar pattern, our Savior instituted the sacrament among the Nephites, His other sheep: He commands His disciples to bring bread and wine, has the multitude sit upon the earth, takes the bread and breaks and blesses it, and gives to the disciples and commands they should eat. And when the disciples have eaten and are filled, He commands the disciples to give unto the multitude. The multitude eats and is filled.⁷⁵

Later, our Lord again administers the sacrament with the Nephites, this time miraculously providing the bread and wine: “Now, there had been no bread, neither wine . . . ; But he truly gave unto them bread to eat, and also wine to drink.”⁷⁶ He promises that those who ate of the bread and wine to their soul “shall never hunger nor thirst, but shall be filled.”⁷⁷ Indeed, “when the multitude had all eaten and drunk, behold, they were filled with the Spirit.”⁷⁸

This is fulfillment of the great sacramental promise to men and women in all ages, in every circumstance, to each of us whose very lives depend on bread and water: “Blessed are all they who do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled with the Holy Ghost.”⁷⁹

Brothers and sisters, thank you for being remarkable learners and teachers in a spiritually hungry and thirsty world! Thank you for making each lesson, each student interaction, like unto a spiritual feast of loaves and fishes!

Brothers and sisters, I have felt a wellspring of living water overflow inside me with a fullness of love for my Savior.

Recently, as I had the privilege to pass the bread and water, I felt our Savior’s great love for those receiving those sacred emblems. I also felt great gratitude to our Savior for instituting the ordinance of the sacrament.

On occasion, as I reflect (including on the Sabbath day), I feel quiet approbation that I am doing all I can at this point. More often, I feel hope and encouragement that I can “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him,”⁸⁰ despite my shortcomings.

I hope you will each see bread and fish, and bread and water, in new ways.⁸¹ I hope you will find delight, adventure, and inspiration in the interweaving of scriptural accounts, gospel principles, and the words of the living prophets and apostles as you fulfill your sacred trust to help our students better know our Savior and come reverently to Him.

I hope you remember “the earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof.”⁸² His is a world of loaves and fishes, and His sacramental promise is there is abundantly enough and to spare.

I gratefully testify of God, our Eternal Father; His Holy Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ; and the Holy Ghost. I gratefully testify of the restored truths and unbroken succession of priesthood authority from the Prophet Joseph to President Thomas S. Monson today, of the holy scriptures, and of the comfort, direction, and joy we receive as we have His Spirit to be with us as we always remember Him.

No matter where you are, no matter your circumstances, no matter your joys and challenges, I hope you have felt in our evening together how much the Lord and His Church love you. He does. We do. In the sacred and holy name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, amen. **RE**

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Notes

1. See 2 Nephi 25:26.
2. See Matthew 18:20.
3. John 6:35.
4. See John 10:10.
5. D&C 104:14–15, 17.
6. “The Feeding of the 5,000,” from *The Life of Jesus Christ Bible Videos*.
7. Matthew 14:13–23; Mark 6:30–46; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–14.
8. Matthew 15:30–39; Mark 8:1–9.
9. Elder Bruce R. McConkie suggests that those fed among the five thousand were largely Jews, setting the foundation for our Savior’s sermon on the bread of life. Later, many fed among the four thousand were Gentiles, where Jesus symbolically taught that in the future, living bread would be offered to the gentile nations. See *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 1:375.
10. Mark 6:30–31, 33–34.

11. Luke 9:11.
12. Matthew 14:15.
13. Mark 6:36.
14. Matthew 14:16.
15. Mark 6:37.
16. John 6:8–9.
17. Matthew 14:18.
18. Mark 6:39.
19. John 6:10.
20. Mark 6:40.
21. Luke 9:16.
22. John 6:11.
23. Matthew 14:19.
24. Mark 6:41.
25. John 6:11.
26. Matthew 14:20.
27. Luke 9:17.
28. John 6:12.
29. Matthew 14:20.
30. John 6:13.
31. Mark 6:43.
32. John 6:13.
33. Matthew 14:21.
34. Mark 6:46.
35. John 6:14.
36. See Exodus 16:31.
37. Mark 6:34.
38. Mark 6:36.
39. Mark 1:41.
40. Mark 9:22.
41. Luke 7:13.
42. Luke 10:33.
43. Luke 15:20.
44. Luke 15:17.
45. Mark 6:45; an alternate translation from the Greek means “bid them farewell”; see Mark 6:46, footnote *a*.
46. John 6:9.
47. Matthew 14:18.
48. John 6:9.
49. 2 Nephi 25:23.
50. Mark 6:39.
51. Mark 6:40.
52. Mark 6:39.
53. John 6:10.
54. Luke 9:16.
55. John 6:11.
56. Matthew 14:19.

57. Matthew 14:20.
58. Luke 9:17.
59. John 6:12.
60. See Elder Richard G. Scott, “To Acquire Spiritual Guidance,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 7, the section beginning “As each impression came, I carefully wrote it down . . .”
61. Mark 4:24.
62. John 6:39.
63. Matthew 14:20.
64. John 6:13.
65. Mark 6:43.
66. John 6:13.
67. John 6:14.
68. Mark 8:18–20.
69. John 4:14.
70. See John 6:31.
71. John 6:32.
72. John 6:35.
73. John 6:47.
74. Luke 22:19.
75. See 3 Nephi 18:3–5.
76. 3 Nephi 20:6–7.
77. 3 Nephi 20:8.
78. 3 Nephi 20:9.
79. 3 Nephi 12:6.
80. Moroni 10:32.
81. Please consider, for example, our Savior’s use of fish to teach and testify in Luke 5:5–6; 24:41–43; John 21:5–6, 8–13.
82. Psalm 24:1.