

Serve God, Save the Planet

What does it profit my brethren if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? . . . For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead. - James 2:14 and 26, NKJV

It was a triple “H” day in the nation’s capital—hazy, hot, and humid. A dome of smog hung over the city and extended far beyond the capital beltway. The weatherman told those with illnesses to stay indoors, but eight-year-old Etta and her brother went to a neighborhood playground.

I began my afternoon shift in the ER wing of the children’s hospital while Etta and her brother were running through a sprinkler to cool off. As Etta exerted herself, her airways began reacting to the smog. The muscles that line the bronchioles of her airways involuntarily contracted, while the mucous cells began a pathologic overproduction of thick fluid. Within a few seconds, this fluid buildup became what we call an asthma attack.

Etta’s brother ran back home for her inhaler, and bystanders called 911. Within a few minutes, a rescue unit was on-site and began treating and transporting Etta. They radioed ahead that things were not going well.

A nurse flipped on the lights in a trauma room, and we assembled there. The doctor in charge of the team called out what he wanted everyone to do. I was given the job of intubating Etta, if needed. The ambulance crew arrived. She was being “bagged,” meaning that the paramedic was trying to oxygenate her with a mask over her mouth and nose and an Ambu bag that

forced air into her lungs. Her thin, limp body was quickly transferred to our trauma gurney.

Etta’s pulse was ominously slow, and her oxygen saturation level was barely readable. The Ambu bag was hard to compress because of the resistance in her clogged airways.

“Matthew, go ahead and intubate. Tammy, get an art [arterial] line in; I want her paralyzed too,” the leader called out. I lifted Etta’s small hand and held a few endotracheal tubes next to her little finger. Then I selected the one closest in diameter to her finger, a trick I’d been taught for



Dr. Matthew Sleeth, author of *Serve God, Save the Planet*

quickly getting the correct size. I paused a second to lean down and whisper in Etta’s ear, which is the only way to communicate with a patient in a crowded, noisy room.

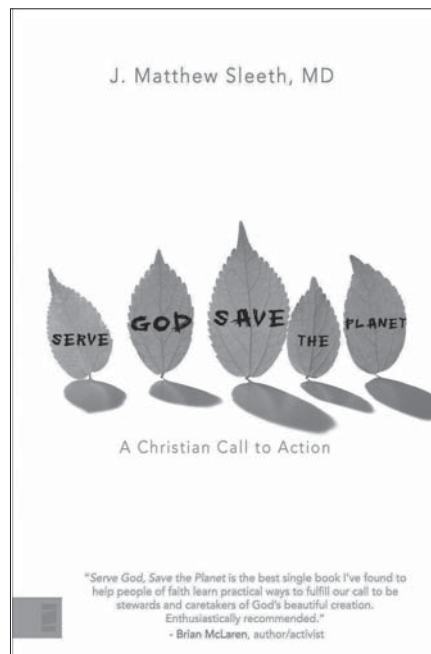
“Etta,” I whispered, “I’m Dr. Matt. I’m going to put a tube in your mouth and get you breathing right.” I looked into her frightened eyes. “I’m not gonna let anything bad happen to you, sweetheart,” I promised. Her left hand still rested in mine, and I thought I felt a weak squeeze.

Two images from that scene still haunt me. The first was her little finger held next to those plastic endotracheal tubes. That hand was so small and vulnerable in my oversize palm. The second image came thirty seconds after I intubated Etta. The team leader yelled for quiet. He held his stethoscope on her chest. “Give her a breath,” he ordered, and I squeezed down on the bag. Etta had on a bathing suit the color of a fluorescent green hula hoop. Pictured on its front was a happy, smiling whale blowing a spout of water into the air. Etta must have loved that bathing suit. One couldn’t help but smile at the frolicking whale. Trying to lift that whale by forcing air into her lungs is my second haunting memory. Despite the rescue squad, and despite the best efforts of an entire pediatric emergency department, I broke my promise to Etta. She died of air pollution on that summer day.

A decade ago, I would have told you that our family was concerned about the environment. I would have said that we were true “conservatives,” working to preserve nature. That was talk. We have progressed from talking a good talk to walking a better walk. How did we go from saying we were concerned to actually making a difference?

When God called me to this creation care ministry, I was a physician—chief of staff and head of the emergency department—at one of the nicest hospitals in America. I enjoyed my job, my colleagues, my expensive home, my fast car, and my big paycheck. I have since given up every one of these things.

We now live in a house the exact size of our old garage. We use less than one-third of the fossil fuels and one-quarter of the electricity we once used. We’ve gone from leav-



ing two barrels of trash by the curb each week to leaving one bag every few weeks. We no longer own a clothes dryer, garbage disposal, dishwasher, or lawn mower. Our “yard” is planted with native wildflowers and a large vegetable garden. Half of our possessions have found new homes. We are a poster family for the downwardly mobile.

What my family and I have gained in exchange is a life richer in meaning than I could have imagined. Because of these changes, we have more time for God. Spiritual concerns have filled the void left by material ones. Owning fewer things has resulted in things no longer owning us. We have put God to the test, and we have found his Word to be true. He has poured blessings and opportunities upon us. When we stopped living a life dedicated to consumerism, our cup began to run over.

Today I am one of a growing number of evangelical Christians whom the Lord is using to witness to people about his love for them and for the natural world. The earth was designed to sustain every generation’s needs, not to be plundered in an attempt to meet one generation’s wants.

As I go around preaching and teaching, people share their concerns. Many want a less hectic daily schedule; others long for meaning and purpose, and the security of a rich spiritual life. Still others know what is keeping them from a closer walk with God but cannot overcome inertia to make the necessary changes.

I spoke recently with a group of men. Each described himself as born again, and yet one told how he could not stop himself from buying cars—cars he cannot afford. Another complained of a persistent problem with credit card debt. A third described the pain—both economic and emotional—of going through a divorce. Being born anew in the Lord is crucial, but spiritual growth must follow. Spiritual growth is a journey we must actively seek.

One area we must change is our dependence on foreign oil. Despite what many think, global warming may not be the most harmful outcome of our oil habit. When people’s lives become dependent on a substance, we

call that addiction. The addictive potential of a substance does not necessarily correlate to the “high” it delivers. A more accurate way to judge addictive potential is to see how willing someone is to go without the substance, or how painful life becomes when it is suddenly withdrawn.

When we are addicted to something, we tend to start denying or overlooking things. We fail to question its side effects. We are willing to lower our standards.

As a Christian and a physician, I’m interested in the moral implications of our fossil fuel dependence as well as its health effects. What does devoting so much of our lives to obtaining and delivering oil do to us as a country and as individuals? The U.S. now sends

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more than two hundred billion dollars a year to distant lands in exchange for oil. That means that every man, woman, and child in America is sending about \$700 a year to foreign countries just to feed our oil habit. One of those recipients officially forbids religious freedom. Its constitution mandates that the earth is flat. It declares democracy a capital crime. And this country is a major, not a minor, supplier of U.S. oil.

Ours is not the first generation to be morally blinded by building a lifestyle based upon energy from foreign shores. Slavery was the importation of cheap energy without regard to its moral cost. States that initially forbade slave energy, such as Georgia, eventually sanctioned it out of envy of the material wealth of their neighbors.

Upon meeting Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, President Lincoln was purported to have said that it was nice to meet the woman who started the Civil War. Stowe’s father was among the evangelical ministers who preached the cause of abolition. Other preachers penned eloquent pro-slavery sermons. The church, like the country, found itself split by the slavery controversy. How could church leaders come to such dif-

ferent conclusions while reading the same Bible? Can we draw lessons from this defining moment in our history, or are we doomed to repeat it?

The Golden Rule allows us to see the moral side of many issues, including environmental ones. Love thy neighbor as thyself—one cannot claim to be a Christian and ignore the Golden Rule. It isn’t a suggestion or a guideline; it is a commandment from God. What is the connection between the Golden Rule and the environment? Isn’t our choice of homes, cars, and appliances just a matter of lifestyle, and therefore not a moral or spiritual matter? Does God care whether I drive an SUV, leave the TV on all night, or fly around the world skiing? The Bible doesn’t mention any of these things.

They didn’t exist in Jesus’ time. Yet Jesus taught the spirit of the law, not the letter. From the spirit of the law, and from the example of his love, we can determine the morality of our actions.

When I speak in a church, I bring along a case of efficient lightbulbs to give to people. I refer to the Energy Star Web site (www.energystar.gov) which urges us to consume less energy. Formed by the Environmental Protection Agency under George Bush Sr.’s administration, the Energy Star site states that if every household changed its five most used bulbs to compact fluorescent lightbulbs, the country could take twenty-one coal-fired power plants off-line tomorrow. This would keep one trillion pounds of poisonous gases and soot out of the air we breathe and would have the same beneficial impact as taking eight million cars off the road. ... Some sixty-four thousand American deaths occur annually as a result of soot in the air.

Throughout my childhood, I knew of only one schoolmate with asthma. Now on a hazy day, dozens of kids in every school reach for inhalers to aid their breathing. God did not design

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the air to make us short of breath. It was meant to sustain us. The Harvard School of Health looked at the impact of one power plant in Massachusetts and found that it caused 1,200 ER visits, 3,000 asthma attacks, and 110 deaths annually. Nationally, the soot from power plants will precipitate more than 600,000 asthma attacks. These are just numbers, albeit large ones. For me, those numbers boil down to Etta—one young girl who died because of our poor stewardship of God’s creation.

Because of our consumer lifestyle, we are all responsible for Etta’s death. Little sacrifices—changing lightbulbs or hanging laundry on the line—are the small gestures that can help us save the next little girl’s life. **CC**

Editor’s Note: *Matthew Sleeth, MD, is a former emergency room director who now has a full-time ministry devoted to creation-care. This excerpt from *Serve God, Save the Planet* (Zondervan, 2007) was used with permission of the author. See www.servegodsavetheplanet.org.*