



Serve God, Save the Planet

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Dr. Sleeth’s medical stories are based on his experiences in Central America and in twenty-two hospitals throughout the United States. Names, genders, ages, and some aspects of medical histories have been changed to assure the privacy of patients.

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Contents

Foreword / 11

1

Genesis / 15

2

An Ounce of Prevention Can Change the World / 25

3

A Christian's Case for Earth Care / 34

4

The Earth Is the Lord's / 51

5

Moving from Faith to Works / 62

6

Too Much Stuff / 76

7

An Hour of Work, A Day of Rest / 88

8

Television: More Real Than Real / 102

9

Steward Parents and Servant Children / 114

10

Food for Thought / 127

11

A House Is Not a Home / 138

12

It's a Wonderful Life / 150

13

Power and Light / 161

14

First, Do No Harm / 170

15

Population Fallout / 180

16

God Is Love / 190

WORKBOOK

Serve God, Save the Planet Workbook / 199

APPENDIX A

Serve God, Save the Planet Energy Audit / 218

APPENDIX B

Stewardship, One Appliance at a Time / 226

APPENDIX C

Let It Begin with Me: An Earth Care To-Do List / 234

APPENDIX D

Luther, Calvin, Lewis, and Others on Creation Care / 240

APPENDIX E

Excerpts from The Evangelical Climate Initiative / 244

Acknowledgments / 251

Foreword

It is an honor and an enormous pleasure to write the foreword to *Serve God, Save the Planet*. Matthew Sleeth is a man of science, a man of faith, and a man of action. Physician, ER director, biblical scholar, writer, solar house builder, teacher, and preacher—these are just a few of his many callings. He is one of the most widely educated men I know. As I have spent time with him, I have come to understand that his concern about the future stems from his love of God and his deep commitment to his role as a father and husband.

Serve God, Save the Planet establishes Sleeth in yet another role, that of a prophet: he has news that most people do not want to hear. The earth is on the verge of ecological collapse, and we are the cause. Sleeth rightly frames this crisis as a moral one in which there is a clear right and a clear wrong. It is right to change our behavior and to start caring for God's creation. It is wrong to continue destroying that which belongs to God and to future generations.

Sleeth is also a man of action. When a member of the board of directors at his hospital asked why he was resigning as chief of the medical staff, Sleeth answered, "To serve God, and to save the planet." And that is exactly what he is working to do. Note that "serve God" comes first, as that is

Jesus's first commandment—to love God with all our heart and all our soul. Sleeth makes very clear in this chronicle of his personal journey that God always comes first, and that part of loving God is honoring and caring for all of His creation. Sleeth views the second part—“save the planet”—as both a form of faith in action, and a responsibility resulting from Jesus's second commandment: love our neighbor.

Matthew Sleeth has taken Christ's teachings to heart and acted upon them. Leaving his comfortable position in the ER, Sleeth and his family sold their home, gave away half their possessions, and dramatically reduced their energy usage. The Sleeths quickly found that as they brought their lifestyle in line with their values, their personal joy increased. Material downscaling brought them closer together, and closer to God. By quieting their lives, they were better able to hear God and appreciate His blessings.

Sleeth is a calm voice of reason in a frenetic world. He speaks to this generation—to the men and women in the pews who know that something is drastically wrong in their lives but don't know how to fix it. And he offers answers: turn off the TV and tune into God; give an hour of work and take a day of rest; and pray to know God's will rather than blindly pursuing the almighty dollar. These solutions worked for him, and they can work for you.

Serve God, Save the Planet is both an inspirational call to action and a blueprint for change. In a highly readable, James Herriot-like style, Sleeth uses stories from his life in the ER, in the third world medical mission field, and at home to illustrate what is lacking in our lives and how to fill the void. And like Rick Warren, Sleeth repeatedly emphasizes that creation care is not about us; it's about God. What Sleeth is calling for is

Foreword

nothing less than a change of heart.

As a man of science, Sleeth knows with certainty that we are heading down a path of ecological collapse and multi-system failure. As a man of faith, he knows with equal certainty that God loves all of his creation—every sparrow and every lily of the field. God wants us to love what he loves. With God's help, we can avert disaster and restore a healthy relationship with his creation.

Therein lies Sleeth's message. It is a message of personal accountability and hope. It is a message that bridges right and left, conservative and liberal, traditional and progressive. Now is the time to educate ourselves on this crucial issue; our children's lives literally hang in the balance.

Serve God, Save the Planet is a must read for every clergyman, every church leader, and every congregant. We can no longer be complacent. And we must never lose hope. With God, all things are possible.

*Rev. Richard Cizik
Vice President, National
Association of Evangelicals*



Genesis

A few years ago, on a sunny fall afternoon, I sat on a worn granite step just east of Saint Peter's Basilica. I had taken an article written twenty years earlier outside to study. The article, by John Paul II, was an impassioned plea to Christians, particularly wealthy Westerners, to stop harming the environment. Throughout his later decades, the pope wrote repeatedly and prophetically on this theme. His words watered a seed that had been growing in my Western, evangelical heart.

A dozen strides away from me, an ancient woman wrapped in black sat on the pavement with her back against a tall building. Her right hand rested on the ground. She was begging, and she was being ignored. I watched her for a while. An astonishing variety of people passed. Native Italians strolled by, as did a group of men with shaved heads and saffron-colored robes touring from the Far East. Dramatic, dark-skinned Africans wearing vividly dyed cotton clothing walked side by side with somberly dressed Muslims and women in burkas. Then I saw one of the most beautiful sights I have ever witnessed. Three nuns, all advanced in age, subtly detached themselves from the stream of pedestrians. One quietly stooped over and placed money in the beggar's outstretched

palm. A moment later, the nun and her friends were caught up in the flow of traffic. The gift was as subtle as a Cold War microfilm handoff. It was done with utter humility, intended to be witnessed by no one.

Seeing a need and acting to meet it is the central theme of this book. *Serve God, Save the Planet* is a call to individual action. It is a book about the environment written from a Christian's perspective. It proclaims that a problem exists, one as meaningful and real as a sinking ship with billions of passengers aboard. The earth is our ship, an ark for everything that lives. It is the only vessel available to carry humans through the ocean of space, and it is rapidly becoming unseaworthy.

God created the world to sustain all living creatures, and in turn to sustain humanity. He designed this elegant system to function naturally, but our ark of life is changing rapidly. Only a short while ago, my grandfather could drink water from a stream or lake without concern. The fish were not laced with mercury. The water did not harbor dioxin. The air was not yet full of haze. The bounty of nature seemed inexhaustible.

If we had continued in the lifestyle of our grandparents, we would not have the problems we currently face. Our grandparents lived in modest houses, one-half to one-quarter the size of today's homes. They did not travel distances the equivalent of five transatlantic trips annually in their cars. They did not require his and her walk-in closets but could fit all of their clothes in a bureau. A family of seven felt lucky to have one indoor bathroom. Our generation consumes five times more energy than my grandfather's.

We have gadgets that existed only in comic books, and yet many people today believe that life without these devices is unthinkable. Which of the items invented in the past fifty

years add to our lives, and which subtract? Which enrich our souls, and which only generate background noise? When a church congregation got together for a picnic one hundred years ago, was fellowship, love, or God any less present because the utensils, plates, and napkins weren't thrown in the trash after a single use?

One of the most popular inventions in my lifetime is the computer. For many life revolves around this hybrid of the adding machine, post office, television, movie theater, stereo, telephone, game arcade, shopping mall, virtual community, and more. Research scientists and computer programmers have an axiom—"garbage in, garbage out"—which means that no matter how good or powerful the computer, any answer that comes out is only as worthwhile as the data entered. Our lives are similar. We will come up with good answers only if we ask meaningful questions. The person who begins the day by asking, "What will I wear and how will it look?" may work just as hard as the person who asks, "How can I serve God and save the planet?" It is not the effort put into their actions but the meaning derived from their lives that will vary greatly.

Serve God, Save the Planet asks the following questions: How can I live a more godly, equitable, and meaningful life? How can I help people today and in the future? How can I be less materialistic? How can I live a more charitable life? What would happen if I led a slower-paced existence? What is the spiritual prescription for depression, anxiety, and anger? How can I become a better steward of nature?

When God called me to this ministry, I was a physician—chief of staff and head of the emergency department—at one of the nicest hospitals on the coast of New England. I enjoyed my job, my colleagues, my expensive home, my fast car, and

my big paycheck. I have since given up every one of those things. What I have gained in exchange is a life richer in meaning than I could have imagined. Not everyone can completely change paths, but each of us can periodically examine our lives to determine whether we need a course correction.

Over the past five years, my family and I have made significant lifestyle changes. We no longer live in our big house; instead, we have one 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 leaving 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.

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. We have seen miracles.

Today I preach about God and his creation. I am one of a growing number of those whom the Lord is using to educate people about his love for them and his love 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. It seems that 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.

Getting from point A to point B is not always easy, even if you know where A and B are located. For example, experts tell us that, nationwide, some 50 percent of all adults are overweight. A majority of these folks say that they would prefer to be thinner. As a physician, I can advise every single obese patient how to achieve this goal: Eat less and exercise more. It is that simple. And yet it is not. I doubt there is a publishing house in the world that would print a dieting book—even one that was scientifically proven, guaranteed to work, and written by a doctor of medicine—if all it said was “Eat less, exercise more.” The lesson is this: We need to know the thought processes that precede change before we can make similar changes ourselves.

Serve God, Save the Planet is about getting from point A to point B. It is based on the Bible and my experiences. It begins with an explanation of the problems that result from our lifestyle and looks at the biblical mandate for each of us to be involved in creation care. I share the lessons that most touched and motivated my family to move from thought to action.

There are chapters on tuning in to God, and there are chapters on tuning out the world.

Many ask me how my family has made so many changes. Did my kids balk at anything? Yes. Did my wife and I argue about any of these changes? Yes. Have I been hypocritical about anything? Yes, and I will share these experiences with the reader. As much as we all long for a magic pill that will effortlessly transform a family, there is none. Lighting candles, painting designs on our toes, and reciting repetitive incantations have not been responsible for the changes my family has made. True change begins in our minds and in our souls. God gives us the capacity to change. He is the source of all power in the universe.

A few days ago, my wife, Nancy, and I came home to find our seventeen-year-old son, Clark, hanging laundry with his fifteen-year-old sister, Emma. Earlier, he had been weeding the garden while his sister began making supper. This is not unusual behavior for my children in recent years, but the norm. The bickering of their younger days is gone. One “payoff” for adopting the lifestyle changes I advocate is that children and parents work together in a happier, more peaceful home.

The “consumer lifestyle” demands an enormous amount of work, worry, strife, and struggle by instilling a deep sense of longing and discontent. If all of us were suddenly happy with our homes, for instance, how many decorating magazines could be sold? There is a common belief that 50 percent of marriages fail because people no longer have a sense of commitment or a work ethic. This is nonsense. An average car buyer will sign a six-year loan. Our grandparents would have thought such a commitment insane and walked away. Many

today rely on college loans that will take twenty years to pay off. Consumers are willing to make commitments and to work hard, but what are they choosing to serve? A material world or a spiritual world? At the end of a materially rich day, Consumerism says, "Buy more." At the end of a spiritually rich life, God says, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

I believe that everyone needs to ask, "Is my life, or my family's life, too hard?" If the answer is yes, the solution may be not to work more or "smarter" but to change bosses. In my own life and in my observation of thirty thousand patients, I've seen that working for God and his kingdom has a better payoff than working for the consumer world.

Serve God, Save the Planet is meant to elicit personal accountability. Its lessons are meant to teach individuals, families, and communities not much larger than a congregation, and yet it looks at larger issues because they profoundly affect each of us. One of our country's greatest problems is our dependence on oil; it affects every aspect of our private, corporate, and church lives. Any material thing of such colossal importance detracts from our spiritual lives, whether or not we acknowledge the dependency.

And yet, global warming may not be the most harmful outcome of our oil habit. When people's lives become dependent on a substance, we call it an 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, we tend to start denying or overlooking things. We stop asking questions about where our substance of choice comes from. We fail to question its side effects.

We are willing to lower our standards. No one wants a drug dealer for a neighbor—unless, of course, you are an addict.

In *Serve God, Save the Planet*, we'll look at 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 United States now sends more than \$200 billion 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 on 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 northern evangelical ministers who preached against slavery. Other preachers from the south penned equally eloquent *pro-slavery* sermons. The church, like the country, found itself split by the slavery controversy. How could church leaders come to such different conclusions while reading the same Bible? Can we draw lessons from this defining moment in our history, or are we doomed to repeat it?

I have read many of the theological writings advancing both sides of the slavery controversy. The “new commandment” of

Jesus—that “ye love one another even as I have loved you”—shows us that one side was right, and one side was self-serving. The proponents of slavery never quote Christ in supporting their cause. Application of this same scripture allows us to see the right side and the wrong side of creation care issues. God and history teach us that we must love those least able to defend themselves, which includes the unborn generations of all species.

Serve God, Save the Planet asks each reader to take responsibility. Although I believed in the “environmental cause” before I accepted Christ as my Savior, my belief did not translate into action. “They”—Congress or business or anything other than me—were responsible for the insidious poisoning of our globe. I looked at the rate of forest destruction worldwide (one acre per second), the number of species going extinct daily (by conservative estimates, more than one hundred per day), and the loss of blue skies, and I despaired.

After I became a Christian, I went through a process of examining my life. It was filled with sin and hypocrisy. When it came to the area of stewardship, I decided to conduct an assessment and figure out a rough estimate of the actual environmental impact of my family. At the time, I considered myself an enlightened environmentalist. The United States uses more resources than any other country in history, and my crude audit showed that my family used slightly more energy than the average American household. Despite our modest recycling, carpooling, and electricity conservation efforts, we were living an unsustainable lifestyle. We were going about life as if we were the center of the universe, and there was no tomorrow to protect.

This honest inventory is what the Christian faith required of me. How could I say that I was being a good steward when I was causing so much damage to God’s creation? How could I

say that I cared about my neighbor when the poorest people are most affected by the climate change that I was causing? My lifestyle was not reflecting my espoused concern. I was a hypocrite. After my assessment, I knew my family had to make some drastic changes.

As a Christian, I felt a mandate to align my lifestyle with what I was saying. Seeing the spiritual benefits that went along with our lifestyle changes gave me great optimism. I began to have faith that the church could become a powerful part of the solution to global warming and the degradation of the earth. The environmental movement needed new leadership, and that leadership had to be motivated by moral conviction. I am convinced that when the church becomes fully engaged in the problems of creation care, we will overcome seemingly insurmountable odds. As the thirty million evangelical Christians—and all those who consider themselves people of faith—grow in their understanding that God holds us accountable for care of his creation, we will begin to see positive changes on an unprecedented scale.

This chapter opened with my witnessing a simple act of charity by a nun in Rome. Actions, deeds, and works of charity get heaven's attention. The words spoken on earth that autumn day in Italy are now forgotten. Yet the miracle I witnessed allowed me, for a moment, to glimpse what God sees—our hearts. In that humble gift to a beggar, I heard the trumpets of heaven sound. God's beautiful earth will not be saved by words or good intentions. It will be saved by humble, anonymous acts like turning off the lights, hanging clothing on the line, bicycling to work, and planting trees. People who are grateful for God's abundant gifts, people of faith who are not afraid to be held accountable for care of his creation, will save it.