



Serving God by Going Green

A conversation with environmental activist
Matthew Sleeth | BOB SMIETANA

GOD WANTS CHRISTIANS TO SAVE THE WORLD. At least that's what Matthew Sleeth says.

A former emergency room doctor, Sleeth, the author of *Serve God, Save the Planet* (Zondervan, 2007), has spent most of the last four years traveling the U.S., trying to persuade Christians to go green. The first step, he says, is taking the Bible's commandment to honor the Sabbath literally.

If Christians were to stop driving, shopping, and working one day a week, Sleeth says, "We'd use 14 percent less energy."

Sleeth says that reading Jesus's Ser-

mon on the Mount made him an environmental activist. Not only did God create the world, Sleeth came to believe, but God sustains every creature in it.

"The Bible says that God cares about every bird that dies," he says.

Sleeth says that the more time he spent in the Bible, the more he came to believe that his lifestyle didn't fit Jesus's teaching. At the time, the Sleeths owned a four-bedroom, 3,500-square-foot house and a pair of cars, and more stuff than they knew what to do with.

So they sold their McMansion and moved into a house that was half as

big as their old place. When they realized that they consumed the equivalent of 4,800 gallons of gasoline a year to power their lifestyle—the average Italian family consumes about 1,300 gallons a year—they sold off their cars and bought a hybrid. They installed energy-saving light bulbs, turned off lights wherever they could, and cut their trash output down from two barrels a week to one trash bag every two weeks. They gave up their dishwasher and clothes dryer. They bought and consumed less and were happier for it.

Convinced that more Christians could do the same—and in doing so make the world a healthier place to live—Sleeth quit his job and began traveling to spread the message of Christian conservation.

Bob Smietana, former *Companion* features editor, sat down with Matthew Sleeth recently for the following interview.

You became a Christian before becoming an environmental activist. How did that come about?

I did not live my adult life as a Christian. About seven years ago, I went looking for God. In the ER department you see a lot of evil, you see a lot of death, you see things you can't understand. I tried to make sense out of it, and I went reading through a number of the world's sacred texts. The last I read, for whatever reason, were the Gospels. I started in Matthew and read through the Gospels, and they were just profoundly different.

There was a lot of wisdom that is similar across the sacred texts, but there is no one like Jesus there. That began a faith journey, and I have no idea where it's going to go.

When you talk to a church about the environment, where do you start?

One thing I do is to establish the biblical mandate for what I am talking about. We have a Bible where God uses the tree as his symbol, and there are 1,000 trees in it, and his Son comes as a carpenter and dies on a tree—so we

probably should start paying attention to the trees.

There's only one time that God does the writing on the wall in the Bible and that's with Belshazzar. Otherwise, God is revealing himself through a star, through doves, through bushes that don't burn, through water that's calm, through whales that protect the prophet. That's the way God chose to tell us about himself.

I also talk about how in history the church has understood the importance of creation. Augustine said that God

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wrote two books—one in ink and the other with trees and birds.

In Romans 1:20, Paul says that simply observing nature is enough to know God. And that you are “without excuse” for knowing God if you've simply opened the door and taken a walk in the wood. That's pretty challenging.

You've mentioned that Jesus's teaching about taking the log out of your own eye before trying to take the speck out of a neighbor's eye has had a profound effect on the way you talk about the environment. Can you expand on that?

I think that just having the message is not enough. The message is not strong enough unless it changes the messenger. So I tell people how it has changed my life—how we went from living in a doctor-sized house to living in a house the size of our former garage.

To me, what is so compelling about the gospel isn't how it relates to science, but its ability to change and to redeem—it's the story of redemption. If the gospel doesn't have the answer to redeem us from the problem, it's not a very powerful gospel. But it does have the power to do that.

It was powerful enough for me to want to quit my job, which was a good job. I don't think anyone can say that being an ER doctor is bad work. But still, the gospel trumps everything.

After learning about God's creation in the Bible, what comes next?

One of the most practical things is to keep the Sabbath. You won't find that in a standard how-to-be-green book. But keeping the Sabbath is key.

In what way?

If we focus more on God we'll be focusing less on material things. And we'd use 14 percent less energy if we all came to rest one day of the week.

What other steps can people take to conserve energy?

My electric bill averages about \$20 a month. People are curious about how you get a \$20-a-month electric bill. We don't have solar panels on the roof or anything. But we have changed our habits and lifestyle. We don't have a clothes dryer, and we haven't owned one in years. We wash the dishes by hand. Every light in the house is compact fluorescent or LED.

Conservation is crucial. I could spend \$30,000 and put solar panels on my house and create about 150 kilowatt-hours a month. But if I put a clothesline up outside and hang my clothes on it, I'd save 150 kilowatt-

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hours a month at very little cost.

I suppose you don't have a surround sound home theater in the new house?

I don't.

Did you have one before?

No, but we had a bunch of stereos and TVs and we don't have that now. We have a TV but it doesn't connect to the airwaves. I can watch DVDs.

Do you have a computer?

I have a computer, but even there we have laptops just because of the energy use. People can even go to having a black screen saver, because the white background takes more than the black.

How did you manage to reduce your trash?

We recycle, but then we also pre-cycle—we don't buy something if it's got a lot of packaging.

We try to focus on these questions: Does this purchase bring me closer to God, and does it help me love my neighbor better? And if the answer is no to one or both of those, then we rethink the purchase.

You have two children who were ten and twelve when you started conserving. Did they buy into this new lifestyle?

They have over time. It wasn't a perfectly smooth transition. But they have become in some ways better than me. And more important, we know what we are doing as a family. It's been a spiritual discipline. My son just graduated from college this year, and he will go to medical school. He wants to be a missionary doctor. And my daughter is in her second year of college. She has a book coming out with Zondervan about being a green teen—it's called *It's Easy Being Green*.

What role does gratitude play in conservation?

One of the things I have challenged

myself and churches with is trying to have a grateful heart. As people of faith, we don't think twice about saying thanks when we eat a meal. We do that because we know the food is God's blessing and not everybody has enough. It's not an entitlement—it's God's sustaining hand in our lives.

I will ask people, "Have you said a prayer of thanks when you've filled your gas tank up? And if you didn't, was it because you felt entitled to it, or did you think everybody had enough?"

Does this purchase bring me closer to God, and does it help me love my neighbor better?



And as I speak, I can see people working through that.

When we came off the farm, we lost that direct connection to God as the sustainer in our lives. If you've got a credit card, you don't need God.

Why does conservation matter so much?

I use technology to conserve—I use LED bulbs or compact fluorescents. I have a hybrid car. I have a front-loading washing machine. But technology only gets you so far. The bulk of energy savings that we have been able to achieve is simply conservation.

For me, conservation is a spiritual discipline. If you are in the shower, and you decide to take a five-minute shower instead of your usual fifteen-minute shower—there's no one in the world that is going to pat you on the back or say you are a good person or thank you. But if you do it out of your faith, you grow as a spiritual human being.

We don't have a lot of disciplines left—we don't tend to fast, we don't tend to meditate on God—but this is a way of acting out your faith every moment of the day. If you are doing it for faith reasons, you grow every time you conserve.

If you have an ungrateful heart, getting more stuff will only be a temporary fix. If you have a grateful heart, then the smallest thing can make you happy.

Are you happier now?

Definitely—and it's not the size of the house we live in. It's serving the Lord. It's having a family that knows why we exist as a family. It's having a boss who is kind and who gives me a day off every week even though I don't necessarily take it when I should.

What else would you want to say that I haven't asked?

Here's a question I get asked all the time: "What happens if I live in a neighborhood where clothes lines are not allowed?" Someone asked me this in Texas, and here's what I told her: You put up a seven-foot wooden cross in the backyard as a symbol of your faith and then put up another seven-foot cross thirty feet away and run some lines between them. Then, as an act of faith and obedience to God, you hang your clothes out on the line—and if somebody tells you to take them down, you tell them, "It's a symbol of my faith, I can't."

If they persist, call a Christian defense fund, and they will send a Greyhound bus full of lawyers to help you.

Two months later, I got an email from that woman. It said, "I did what you suggested, and they changed the neighborhood rule." □