

If the church were Christian, saving the earth would be more important than saving our souls.

Sam and I went camping in southern Illinois this past week in an area called the Garden of the Gods. It's a series of sandstone cliffs and deep gorges formed when a great inland sea burst through a narrow gap 350 million years ago and carved these stunning geological features.

On Tuesday evening, we hiked to the tallest cliff, sat at the top, and watched the sun set into the trees across the valley miles away. On our way up the cliff, I was anxious, thinking about the yearly meeting and my work responsibilities and Joan's mom passing away and Joan losing her job. **I wasn't carrying a backpack, but it felt as if I were bearing a heavy load.** Have you ever felt like that? When we reached the top, I stared out at the vastness and thought of all the ancient people who'd sat in that exact same place mulling over their problems, as I was doing. **Then I thought of how majestic the view was around me and how one day I will die and how all my current problems that now feel so large and looming were so insignificant in the great, grand scheme of life.** And the world and our future, instead of seeming so fragile and hazardous, seemed solid and enduring and powerful to me.

I was reading a biography of the writer, E.B. White, not long ago and it mentioned how E.B. White was a hypochondriac and spent most of his life, from the age of ten on, worrying he would die. Instead, he lived to be 86 years old. **At the age of 81, when it finally occurred to him he might not expire anytime soon, he bought a canoe, tied it to the top of his car, went on a trip, and finally began enjoying life.** But it took him 81 years to realize his situation wasn't as precarious as he'd imagined.

I'm a lot like E.B. White. If there is the smallest wisp of a cloud in the sky, I will see a thunderstorm, maybe even a tornado. **My anxieties have not been helped by my childhood religion, which didn't teach me about faith and trust, so much as it taught me that my soul was in jeopardy and that I was one sin away from damnation.** Saving my soul became an early priority for me, and even when I began questioning those doctrines, I did so fearfully, with fingers crossed.

But we must question them, lest we live in bondage to them, and be like E.B. White, who discovered, almost too late, that our situation isn't nearly as dangerous as we'd imagined.

Think about it. Christianity created a theological theory which asserted that the soul of every person was at risk of eternal damnation. **The church created that premise, not God.** God never came to us and told us we were at risk of damnation. God gave us a beautiful creation and majestic views and peaceful vistas to calm our anxious spirits. God never came to us, pointing a finger, threatening us with hell. The church did that. **Then the church said, “We know how to save you from eternal damnation.”** Which was ironic, since the church was the one who invented it. Then the church held itself out as the remedy for the very peril it created. The church has behaved like a bully I knew growing up, who made us give him money each day so he would protect us from the bullies. **But he was the only bully.** He was the very threat from which he promised to save us.

Over the centuries, this belief has caused no small amount of misery and worry, as people fretted not only about their own salvation, but about the salvation of those they loved. **I was speaking with a woman not long ago who was utterly bereft because her husband, who wasn't a Christian but was a kind and gentle man, had died.** The woman feared her husband was in hell and nothing could persuade her otherwise. She was in agony about it. It consumed her. Now who told her that her husband was in hell? **Did God tell her that?** Or did the church tell her that? We know who told her that. Don't we?

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I was speaking about caring for the earth at a conference a few months ago, just a few remarks in response to a question at a talk I was giving, and a man came up to me afterwards and said he was tired of this new emphasis on caring for the earth. New emphasis? How is that new? **It was the first responsibility God gave us.** The environmentalists didn't dream this up. God did. Genesis 1:26 "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth...'" This idea of earthcare isn't new. **We just haven't been doing it, so it seems new to us.**

"Have dominion over..." The Hebrew word used here means "to lead in procession." **Isn't that an interesting image?** So God creates the earth and the heavens and all the animals and plants and humanity, then says to men and women, "I'm putting you in charge of leading the way." Well, that's a privilege, but it's also a responsibility. It's a sobering thought. **Because humans have the responsibility for caring, for leading the way, for setting the example.** That's part of the deal. We humans get to be up front, but we can't ever forget that others are coming behind us. We have to be mindful of that.

That's why our land is in such jeopardy right now, why our nation is in such peril. **There has been a collective forgetfulness that others were coming behind us.** Our churches forgot it. Our political leaders forgot it. Our business leaders forgot it. We were leading the procession, but forgot others were behind us and would have to suffer the consequences of our decisions.

From an early age, most of us were taught it was our job to save souls. **But what if our souls were never at risk?** What if God loves us as we love our own children, who have nothing to fear from us? **What if we began to think seriously and deeply about the real work God called us to—having dominion over the earth, leading the way.** Not in an oppressive, dictatorial sense, but with a sense of stewardship, mindful of those coming behind us. Mindful of our children, their children, and their children.

Perhaps that's what that wise Quaker, William Penn, meant when he said, "True religion doesn't turn us out of the world, but enables us to live better in it and excites our endeavors to mend it."

That Friend speaks my mind. If the church were Christian, saving the earth, which is at risk, would be more important than saving our souls, which are not at risk.