

Our God-Sponsored Projects

I spent an hour reading the giving pages of eleven churches.

Some were large – the kind with a music label and a broadcast arm. Some were small parishes with a few dozen people on a Sunday. Between the oldest and the newest there were five hundred years, two continents and about as much theological distance as you can travel and still be in the same religion.

They asked for money in different dialects. The big ones asked for it in the language of momentum: give *over and above*, *sow into what God is building here*, *fuel the vision*. The old ones asked in the language of custody: help us maintain the fabric, care for what our predecessors handed us, keep this place standing as it has stood for centuries. One was raising money to floodlight its own steeple and called it a light on the hill.

Then I looked at what the money was actually for.

Campus acquisition. Broadcast equipment. New buildings. A campus relocation. Stonework. Roof slates. A pipe organ. A boiler. Heating. A rectory. Church planting. Staff.

All of that is legitimate. Roofs need doing, and a church that lets the water in is not more spiritual for it. Someone has to pay the minister. Buildings are where people meet, and I have never yet met a congregation that

could gather in a concept. I am not going to pretend there is something corrupt about a boiler.

But eleven churches, over and above their ordinary giving, asking for money – and I could not find the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick or the prisoner on any of the appeals.

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There is a passage that sits behind this, and it is not the one you would expect. Peterson translates it like this:¹

Knowing the correct password – saying “Master, Master,” for instance – isn’t going to get you anywhere with me. What is required is serious obedience – doing what my Father wills. I can see it now – at the Final Judgment thousands strutting up to me and saying, “Master, we preached the Message, we bashed the demons, our God-sponsored projects had everyone talking.” And do you know what I am going to say? “You missed the boat. All you did was use me to make yourselves important. You don’t impress me one bit. You’re out of here.”

Our God-sponsored projects had everyone talking.

That is a giving page.

And look at what is not said back to them. He does not tell them they made it up. They preached and it was preaching. They cast out demons and the demons went. The projects were real and people really were talking. Every item on that list stands.

What he says is: *all you did was use me to make yourselves important.*

So the trouble is not the work. It is that there was a list, and what the list was for.

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Now put that next to the end of the same gospel.

At the door in Matthew 25, five women stand outside calling *Lord, Lord, open to us*. At the throne a few verses later, the goats say *Lord, when did we see you hungry?* And in chapter 7, the crowd comes up with *Master, Master* and a list of everything they have done.

Everybody in these stories arrives with an account of themselves.
Everybody except one group.

The sheep have nothing to submit. They are asked when they did it and they cannot answer, because they have no record. Whatever they had been doing, they had not been keeping it anywhere. They are the only people in the chapter who turn up empty-handed, and they are the ones who are welcomed.

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Here is the picture I keep coming back to.

A sheep church is an iceberg. Most of what it does is under the water. There is a service on Sunday and a sign out the front, and somewhere

below that there are people taking meals to a neighbour, sitting in a hospital, driving someone to a court appearance, and none of it has a name or a logo or a line on the website. The minister does not know the half of it. He finds out by accident, years later, at a funeral.

A goat church is the same iceberg turned over.

The mass is still there. The work is real – the food is handed out, the programme runs, the people are visited. Nothing has been faked. It has simply all been rotated up where it can be seen, and there is nothing left underneath.

An iceberg floats because most of it is submerged. Turn it over and it cannot hold.

. . .

So here is the test, and it is a cheeky one.

The website is not the problem. It is just the only bit you can see from outside.

Open your church's website. Not the beliefs page. The giving page, and the announcements, and whatever sits on the front.

Do not look for the six. That is the mistake I made first, and it does not work. A sheep church might well list the food van and the prison visits, because to a sheep church that is not an achievement – it is just what happens here, and it goes on the site next to the service times and the playgroup. Absence proves nothing and presence proves nothing.

Look at two other things instead.

What is this church asking you to give toward, over and above? Not once, but across the last five years. If the answer is always the building and never a person, that is worth sitting with.

And who is the description for? Read the sentences out loud and ask who they are trying to impress. *Sowing into what God is building here. Partnering with us to see lives transformed. Our God-sponsored projects had everyone talking.* Some of those are ours and some of them are Peterson's, and I could not always tell you which.

Then the harder version, and this one is for anyone who leads.

How much of what your people do did you find out by accident?

If you can produce the list, you have a problem. Not because the work is not real — it is real, it is all real, that was never the question. But a minister in a sheep church does not know what his congregation is doing, because nobody thought to tell him. It never occurred to them that it was a thing to report.

I have run this on my own church. The language is the same as the other ten. Over and above, sowing in, what God is building here. I did not find the prisoner on our giving page either — and I have spent years going into a prison a few minutes up the road from where we meet.

If God sorted us by our websites, where would he put us?

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This article did not begin with artificial intelligence. It began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During its development, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words here emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.