

Pewless: When to head for the door

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 6, 2008](#) issue

This spring a certain Christian layperson has been criticized for not exiting his local church when he disagreed with something his pastor preached.

The experts on the subject have been, as far as I can tell, media personnel who never go to church, do not know what sermons are for, and have not experienced lively congregational participation; people who value fidelity very little and church hopping and sermon shopping very highly; those who have political stakes in their judgment; and people who pay no attention to the contexts of messages.

Less vocal are church members who are unsure when to advance toward the pulpit in appreciation, when to back away, or when to finally head for the door, slam it and shake the aisle-dust off their feet.

To help them, we offer this little gamelike guide, suggesting where they should sit in church to indicate affirmation or negation. Arrange your pieces on a hypothetical board and play along. Begin in your regular pew.

1. If the preacher offers the prosperity gospel, announces that you can serve both God and mammon, and uses as sermon text the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*:

Move ten pews forward and up your pledge.

2. If the preacher is not wearing a United States flag over her robe:

Back up 15 pews.

3. If the preacher avoids all controversial topics and lulls everyone to sleep:

No response—remember, you are asleep.

4. If the preacher uses scripture to affirm that all acts by the United States military in all wars have been and are just:

Move forward ten pews and smile. This is getting good.

5. If the proclaimer of the gospel announces good news to the poor, healing and hope:

Move up two pews, but tentatively. As a Christian, you should welcome that kind of message, as long as it is sufficiently vague.

6. If the preacher blasts secular humanists, Islamofascists, rappers and anyone other than standard-brand heterosexuals:

Move up three pews and volunteer for the committee to extend your preacher's call.

7. If the preacher finds that liberals and conservatives, blacks and whites and others, including himself, fall short of gospel-rooted living:

Stay where you are; ambiguity is confusing.

8. If the preacher includes a few seconds of strident and edgy language that will make a controversial sound bite at the next congregational assembly:

Be sure you've recorded it; it will be good ammunition when you are drawing the conclusion that you've had it and don't really belong in this congregation. But stay where you are so you don't look suspicious.

9. If the preacher asks those who are without guilt to pick up a stone to throw: *Head toward the back pew in a hurry.*

10. If a few angry words from the preacher can make you forget how she visited your dying mother, greeted your children as friends and urged you to work for justice with mercy:

By all means, leave. But admit it—you miss the community, the challenge and the gospel. It's lonely out here, and all you will hear of your former pastor from now on are sound bites.