

Good sermon, Reverend: Listening is even better

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [April 8, 2008](#) issue

Martin Copenhaver's insightful "[Handshake ritual](#)" catches the preacher's attention. The more I am in this business the more ambivalent I feel about the traditional ritual of greeting worshipers after the service. I know myself well enough to understand how much I love those compliments, how seductive and addictive it is to hear "Good sermon, Reverend," even though the same people say it every Sunday, regardless of what happened or failed to happen in the pulpit that morning. I know that their remark may be no more than an extension of "Good morning." And I know myself well enough to laugh at the way I begin to tighten and feel anxious if three or four parishioners shake my hand and don't say it.

I'm grateful to Copenhaver for the reminder about how much is going on in the ritual of shaking hands at the church door—for both the people and the minister. Copenhaver says all ministers have a collection of at-the-door stories. One of my favorites happened when I was preaching at an installation service for a friend in North Carolina. One of the great things about preaching in the South is that people there are so nice. It's not that northerners aren't nice; it's just that southerners are more inclined to exude graciousness. After the service I was enjoying the compliments when a well-dressed woman shook my hand and said, "Mr. Buchanan, thank you so much. It was so wonderful of you to come all the way down here to be with us this morning. I just hated your sermon." She said it with such sweetness that I thanked her and only later realized what she had said.

Years ago my family and I had the chance to live in Scotland for a brief time. For our first Sunday there, I pulled from the file what I considered to be one of my better sermons. I preached the sermon and felt pretty good about it. I was expecting, if not raves, at least an outpouring of welcoming hospitality. I got nothing. People shook my hand and said "Good morning," but that was all. No "We're glad you're here," no "Great sermon." I was devastated. I thought: "They don't like my preaching. They're not even glad we're here." After a few weeks I learned that these were actually people of deep affection and hospitality and that they were glad we had been there.

“I loved your sermon” was just not something it would have ever occurred to them to say. I learned that they were listening. And I’ve concluded that that’s far better.