

Handshake ritual: Ministry at the church door

by [Martin B. Copenhaver](#) in the [April 8, 2008](#) issue

Worship is over and I am standing in the doorway shaking hands. In front of me is a couple I do not recall seeing before. I say, "Good morning! I'm Martin Copenhaver." By my manner and my tone of voice you might think that I am greeting long-lost friends, rather than introducing myself to these people for the first time. The woman of the couple responds, "Good to meet you. We are Jill and Bob Townsend."

"Welcome. So good to have you here." I think, *Focus on their names. Catch the names before they simply drop to the floor.* But while I am chatting with the new couple I see out of the corner of my eye the person next in line, whose grandmother just died. I give a nod in her direction to let her know that I want to speak with her, but not yet. I need to be attentive to the new couple for at least a few more moments: "Are you new to the area or just new to us?" *What is their name? Townsend! Whew. Still got it.* My thoughts spin back toward the one who is next in line and I begin to second-guess myself. *Wait, was it her grandmother who died or her grandfather? Actually, I think it was her grandfather.* And then my mind lights ever so briefly on the person she is talking to, a parishioner I have not seen in worship in some time. I think, *It's been, what . . . almost a year? I wonder why she is back today.* But I need to stay focused on the new couple. *Quick, file away their names before you lose them. Townsend. I can remember that because they are "new in town."* Jill Townsend says, "We've lived here for years, but we're looking at other churches." *OK, Townsend, as in "not new in town."* I say, "Well, I hope you can stay for some coffee." She smiles and says, "Not today, but I'm sure we will be back." I look for someone to introduce them to, but they are out the door before I have a chance.

Next is the woman who lost her grandfather. Or was it her grandmother? I say, "I'm so sorry to hear about your loss." She says, "Thanks. I so appreciate that. But it was a blessing." I ask, "Was your whole family able to gather for the service?" It's a rather lame question, but I am stalling for time, hoping that she will drop a personal

pronoun. Before she can respond, my teenage son comes up behind me and drapes his arms over my shoulders: "Dad, you know you want to give me money so I can get something at the bake sale." Normally I would remind him that this is no way to ask me for something, but I don't have time for a lesson in manners. "Sure, Todd, here." I give him a ten-dollar bill. It's all I have. "Thanks, Dad."

I turn back to the grieving grandchild. She says, "Yes, the whole clan gathered. He would have been very pleased." *I should have remembered that it was her grandfather.* I say, "Well, I know you were very close to him. We will continue to hold you in our prayers." She responds, "Thank you. And you know Mary, don't you?" indicating the member of the flock who has been missing in action. And I do remember her very well. I say, "Of course. It's great to see you, Mary." Mary says, "Yeah, well, I haven't been around for a while. There's just been a whole lot going in my life." I think, *OK, there's something to follow up on.* I say, "Well, it would be good to catch up when you have a chance." She says, "Sure. Any time." Using a common pastoral way of closing a conversation, I say, "I'll call you." And then I hope I remember to call.

A teenager approaches with a cast on his right arm. I search my memory: *Did he have that cast on last week?* I playfully extend my right elbow and he does the same. As our elbows touch we share a little laugh. I say, "How are you hanging in there?" He responds, "OK. I broke it playing soccer." *So the cast is something new.* I ask him how it happened and he tells me the story. When he is finished I put my hand on his shoulder and say, "I'm so sorry. But you should see the other guy, right? I'm just glad you play soccer instead of tennis so that you can keep at it."

A man about ten years younger than I, who has been waiting in the wings, suddenly steps forward for his moment: "You don't remember me, do you?" He does look rather familiar, but in the way a person can remind you of someone else you know. He bails me out: "I was in the first confirmation class you taught, 25 years ago." I say, "Of course I remember you. Absolutely. But I have become very bad with names in my old age. Help me with yours." He replies, "I'm Scott Harrison." Shaking my head in contrition, I say, "Of course you're Scott Harrison. Absolutely, I remember you. That was a great confirmation class. How have you been?" Then, after a few more snippets of conversation, I offer him my hand again as a way to draw this conversation to a close.

Someone else approaches who says, “I really have to take issue with your sermon today.” I say, “The sermon is just the beginning. Then comes the conversation, which often is the best part.” He says, “Well, maybe that’s a conversation we’ll have.” I say, “Great. I welcome that. Will you call me?” In this instance I want to put the onus on him to call.

That entire sequence lasts only about 90 seconds, but it contains worlds within worlds. And that represents only a small portion of the line of people who wait to shake my hand. No wonder I come home from worship ready for a nap.

I do think that the sermon is just the beginning, that one sign a sermon has done its work is that it prompts continued conversation. And I do remember that confirmation class of 25 years ago. Sort of. I really do want to offer a word of comfort to the person who has just lost a loved one. In the moment I may not remember whether it was that person’s grandmother or grandfather, but it is a loss that needs to be acknowledged. I want to make the newcomers feel welcome, as well as the person I have not seen in 25 years. I really do want to remember everyone’s name. It’s not merely that I want people to know I care, although that is part of it. I want each person who comes through the line to experience something of the embracing love of God. After all, not a sparrow falls without God’s knowing and caring. Then again, sparrows do not have names and I am not God.

Through the years I have learned the historical and theological foundations of practically every word and gesture in the liturgy, but no one has ever explained to me why pastors stand in doorways and shake hands with worshipers following worship. I just know that you better do it. It is an essential part of Sunday morning. If after worship one Sunday, rather than stopping at the door to shake hands, I went directly to my study instead, I imagine that there would be a bit of confusion and perhaps even some grumbling, as if something were terribly amiss.

One reason the ritual of shaking hands after worship seems indispensable is easy to identify: it is an intensely concentrated time of interaction. As a pastor, you learn a lot about what is going on in your parishioners’ lives while shaking hands—much of it mundane, but some of it momentous as well. People often are willing to say remarkable things at such a moment. Perhaps that is because, with their hearts fresh from worship, they are more willing to take risks. Perhaps it is because they can say something quickly and then immediately leave without having to face an extended conversation. Perhaps it is simply because they are seizing the moment.

There was the man who said, as dispassionately as if he were reporting on the certainty of rain that afternoon, “The doctor has given me three months to live.” Or the woman who looked at me with begging eyes and said, “I just learned that my son is a drug addict.” Or the man who was barely able to get out the words, “My wife left me last night,” before collapsing in my arms. I do not remember how I responded, but I vividly recall their words.

Then there was the time when a woman I had never seen before, obviously great with child, stopped at the door and rubbed her belly with what I took to be both wonder and pride, and asked, “Will you bless my baby?” I hesitated, not because I was reluctant to offer a blessing, but because I wasn’t exactly sure how to go about it. So I asked, “Do you have a picture of how you would like me to do that?” She responded, as if giving me remedial instructions, “Well, I’m not sure exactly, but I would like you to put your hand over the baby and say a prayer.” So I put one hand on her shoulder, the other on her belly, and I offered a prayer. It was a brief prayer, but before I finished, the line at the door had turned into an intimate little circle around the bold expectant mother and the suddenly shy pastor.

In much of our worship there can be so many words offered, often at a distance, from talking heads that peer over pulpits—like television newscasters who seem to exist only from the shoulders up—that one can get the impression that worship is about disembodied words. But the ritual of shaking hands—not to mention putting your hand on the belly of a woman you have never met before—reminds us that the Christian faith is insistently incarnational. The word is always enfleshed—in Jesus, of course, but in the preacher and the worshiper as well.

Not all of it is that serious. Every preacher I know has a collection of memorable comments that have been made by parishioners as they shake hands following worship. Perhaps the most prized example in my own collection is the comment I received not long after seminary from a man who said to me, “You know, Martin, every sermon seems better than the next one.” He was in his car and driving away before I realized what he had said.

There are the comments that every preacher has heard that communicate in a kind of code. Someone says, “I wish my sister were here to hear that sermon. I’ve been saying something like that for years.” Translation: “She has stopped listening to me. Maybe you can get through to her.”

Someone else says, “Well, you certainly gave us a lot to think about.” Translation: “I don’t agree with what you said this morning.” Alternative translation: “I didn’t understand what on earth you were talking about.”

Or someone speaks about what a sermon meant to him and paraphrases what he found so helpful—and it seems as if he is talking about someone else’s sermon. The thought that he is so joyfully carrying away is not the thought I meant to convey. When that happens I wonder: is that merely an example of someone hearing what he wanted to hear, or is it an indication that the Holy Spirit has taken my words and spoken through them in ways I did not intend?

Then there are the various compliments one receives for one’s sermons which, when I started in ministry, I used to prize like glittering gifts. These days I am more likely to question their value. Now when someone shakes my hand and says something like, “That was a wonderful sermon,” I want to hold on to that person’s hand for an extra moment and ask, “Yes, but what did it do?” I remember one of my professors saying, “We have too many preachers who want to hear their parishioners say, ‘What a great preacher we have,’ and not enough who long to hear them say, ‘What a great God we have.’”

When preachers stand in doorways and shake hands it is a reminder that the clergy are not performers and the congregation is not an audience. Rather, in worship we are all performers before the true audience of worship—that is, God. Some preachers—mostly the celebrity preachers, the leaders of megachurches—do not shake hands. I can see why. Celebrity requires some distance and at least a dash of illusion.

In the theater there is a tradition that actors are not to be seen by the audience before or after a performance, and particularly not in costume. A certain illusion is to be maintained that requires some kind of divide between player and audience. If, for instance, you see the actor who is playing King Lear munching on a bagel backstage before the curtain goes up, it will be more difficult to fully accept the actor as Lear once the play begins. Also, it would be odd, and more than a bit disconcerting, to have Lear and his daughters greeting theatergoers at the door following the performance. Actors collaborate with members of the audience to create, for a time at least, a kind of illusion that they are the characters they play. Anything that exposes that illusion is usually unwelcome.

As a preacher who shakes hands, I believe worship leaders have a quite different job: to expose illusions at every turn, including the illusion that they are something more than fellow players in the drama of worship. Shaking hands after worship is one way of putting the worship leaders in their place.

I have learned that this is a time in which the worshipers rightfully take charge. The preacher has had a chance to speak, sometimes at great length and perhaps from a high pulpit that is “six feet above contradiction,” as one parishioner of mine wryly put it. During worship the members of the congregation have sat in silence or have read words that someone else has written for them. This moment of greeting the worship leader is an opportunity for them to offer their own words. It is a chance to say a word about their lives as a kind of testimony in miniature or to add a coda to the sermon by pointing out something that, in their opinion, the preacher left out or got wrong.

On the eve of the Gulf War, I preached a sermon in which I expressed my opposition to the imminent invasion. I did not want to use the pulpit merely as a soapbox from which to expound my political views. I wanted the people in my congregation to hear a reflection on the war that they would not find in the editorial pages, to help them think about the issues as Christians, not merely as citizens. So I was careful to interpret my opposition to the war through my understanding of both scripture and Christian tradition. I spent a good deal of time preparing that sermon and I delivered it with confidence, even though I knew that there would be many in the congregation who would take issue with it, because I believed that what I was saying had integrity.

After worship I shook hands at the door. Some people found various ways to tell me that they agreed with me. Others wanted to let me know that they did not. Many did not comment at all on the sermon, which left me free to interpret their reactions. Then one older member of my congregation approached me, a retired general who was normally quite soft-spoken. I don't remember what he said. I just remember how angry he was. I do remember what I said in response: “Reg, you are a military man. You of all people understand the chain of command. Well, in the chain of command I am obliged to follow the orders of Jesus. And that's all I was trying to do this morning in saying what I did—obey orders.”

I do not even remember what he said after that. I just know that I immediately regretted saying anything. I had already had my turn to speak. This was my turn to listen.