

Editing the Bible

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Does my pastoral role call upon me to edit the Bible?

On most Sundays, the call to worship printed in our bulletin is taken directly from liturgical resources from the denomination. Usually it adapts a psalm so that the leader (a liturgist, not me) and the rest of the congregation alternate speaking the verses.

But a while back I did a double take when copying and pasting a call to worship based on Psalm 103. After a brief discussion on Twitter (a service that [makes me a better pastor](#)) I decided to scratch Psalm 103 and write a call to worship I deemed more appropriate for my setting. Was I being a good pastor, sensitive to the congregation's needs? Or a bad one, editing out the parts of the Bible that make me uncomfortable?

My HarperCollins Study Bible calls Psalm 103 a psalm of "Thanksgiving for God's Goodness." It's a well-known and well-loved psalm:

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name."
Beautiful, epic, a perfect call to worship.

But the psalmist continues: "[Bless the Lord,] who heals all your diseases." One of our members had recently found out she had cancer spreading throughout her body. While she has some treatment options, the doctors say the cancer will eventually take her life. Yet the call to worship aimed to focus and direct our worship with the psalmist's claim that the Lord "heals all your diseases."

I briefly considered editing just that line. Instead, I cut the entire thing and wrote another.

When a congregation meets for worship, members come as they are. Each brings the trials, tribulations, joys and concerns of individual living. It's impossible to lead a worship service that accounts for the full expression of everyone's feelings, and that's not the point. Indeed, I've heard poignant testimony from people who in life's most troubling moments have counted on the thanksgiving and joy found in worship to carry them through. Some want the church to offer thanks even when they are in deepest grief.

But others, while grieving, can't stand to see anyone giving thanks to God, or even smiling. For these people especially, worshipful words of thanksgiving, joy and celebration fall flat.

Balancing these needs is an impossible task for a pastor. But if I know of a particularly compelling or concerning issue affecting many in the congregation, I feel it's irresponsible to pretend the hearts and minds of the worshipers are on an even keel.

Some might make the fair point that it's foolish to even begin editing the lectionary (or a liturgy based on it), as a pastor can never know all the feelings of her parishioners. Some will say that even in the shadow of the valley of death, we must give thanks for God who loves us and sees us through. If that's you, great-say a prayer for me, edit it as you wish, and heal me of the disease of oversensitivity.