

If you can't have the Bible you'd love, love the Bible you have

By [James F. McGrath](#)

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I probably shouldn't [tamper with the wording](#) of a song for the title of this post. [Cee Lo Green](#) has [sparked a lot of controversy with his New Year's Eve rendition of John Lennon's "Imagine," in which he changed "no religion, too" to "all religion's true."](#)

But in fact, what Cee Lo did with the song illustrates the point I want to make in this post nicely. When is it OK to rewrite a song to say what you want it to, and when is that going too far and showing disrespect for the song and its author?

One can ask the same question about the Bible. A certain amount of interpretation aimed at showing the Bible's relevance for one's own time may be an act of appreciation. But at some point, it crosses the line into disrespect as one insist on reading texts against the grain.

That's what made [Cee Lo's rewriting](#) so [offensive to so many](#). He didn't merely tweak the lyrics, he *inverted* them.

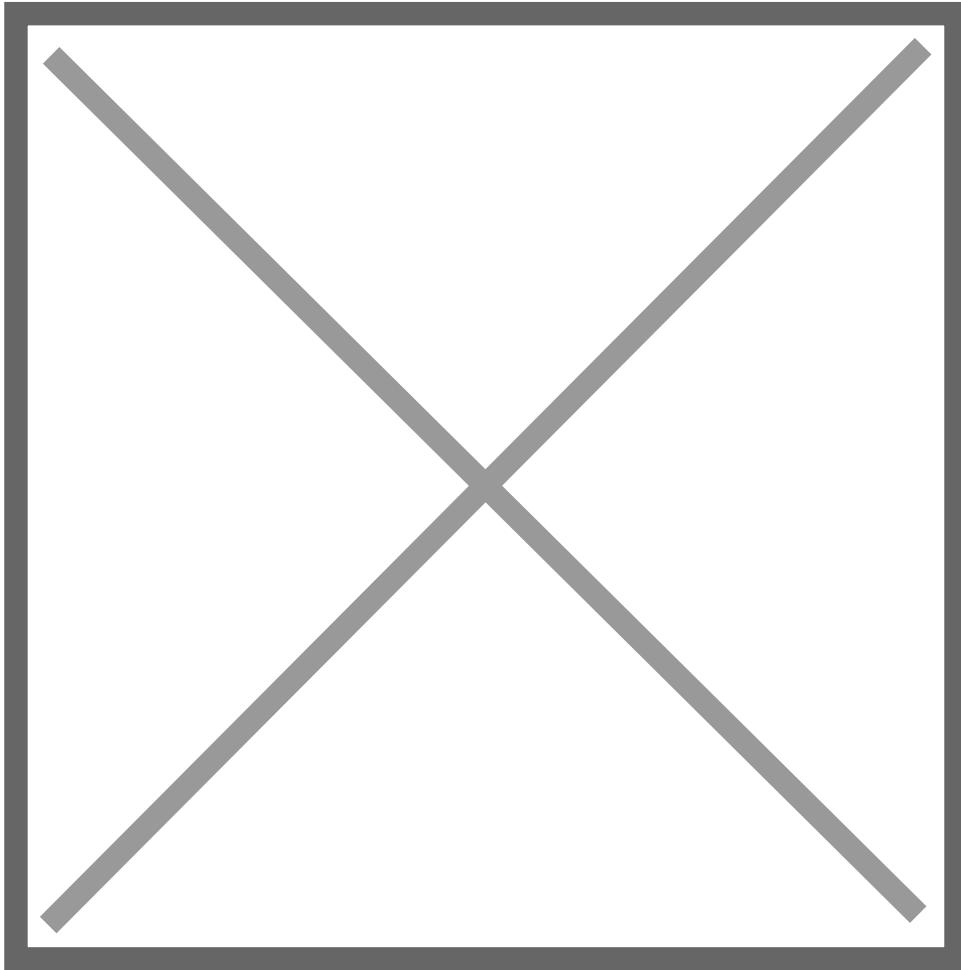
[Rachel Held Evans has written a post on "Loving the Bible for what it is, not for what I want it to be."](#)

This is an important point. Those who highlight places in the Bible where we encounter outmoded cosmology, historical problems, or simply things that seem weird to modern readers are frequently regarded as *attacking* the Bible. The irony is that most of us who highlight these things are interested in being honest about the Bible, not attacking it. For many of us, the acknowledgment that the Bible contains such features was difficult. If one has to defend the Bible against people who are merely

pointing out what it contains, then you aren't actually defending the real Bible, but an imagined one, made in your own image.

On

the subject of making the Bible, or God, in one's own image, let me include this cartoon that Hemant Mehta shared on his blog today:



I absolutely *love*

that the cartoonist made an angel deliberately refrain from doing what humans are shown as doing in the cartoon, namely presuming to know the mind of God!

Steve

Douglas shared a letter from C. S. Lewis to my former colleague at Butler University, John Beversluis. The topic is the genocidal slaughter of Canaanites in the Bible. Here's a sample quote:

The

ultimate question is whether the doctrine of the goodness of God or that of the inerrancy of Scriptures is to prevail when they conflict. I think the doctrine of the goodness of God is the more certain of the two.

Lewis was honest enough to acknowledge that his own view of divine goodness was at odds with what the Bible actually says in places.

On the possibility of the Bible and/or Jesus being wrong, one also must consider the prediction of the dawning of the Kingdom of God found in passages such as Mark 7:1 and [Mark 13](#). There have been recent posts on this passage by [Ken Schenck](#), [Brian LePort](#) and [Mike Kok](#).

Returning

to Cee Lo's reworking of "Imagine," perhaps the biggest problem with his reworking is that he replaced something John Lennon wrote which, whether you agree with it or not, was clear, putting in its place something that doesn't seem to make any sense. In the same way, it is better to acknowledge the Bible says what it says and disagree with it, than to distort it so as to be obscure or nonsensical.

In my opinion, an equally big if not bigger contradiction in [Cee Lo's rendition](#) was between his singing "Imagine no possessions – I wonder if you can" while covered in gold bling. But there too there is a nice connection with the theme of this post. While some conservative Christians engage in heated debates about the scientific and [historical accuracy of the Bible](#), what the Bible says about possessions and wealth isn't even debated, but sits in a blind (or is that bling?) spot of American cultural Christianity.

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