

From abortion, to contraception, to...

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Be sure to read [Amelia Thomson-Deveaux's article](#) on the emerging evangelical-Catholic alliance over contraception. I think her historical analogy is entirely fair: evangelicals haven't always been opposed to contraception, but then they weren't always galvanized against abortion, either. And I appreciate that she doesn't simply endorse one of the two standard narratives on how evangelicals came to hate abortion—that either they came around to this opposition organically as they learned about the facts OR they were cynically manipulated by political operatives. There's truth in each of those stories; they aren't mutually exclusive.

Thomson-Deveaux traces the history of evangelical engagement with the politics of sex and reproduction. She highlights a number of positions taken by evangelical leaders over the years, such as Billy Graham's 1959 statement that he could see nothing in the Bible forbidding birth control. Are we headed for a place where evangelicals are less friendly to contraception than they were in the 1950s? Perhaps, says Thomson-Deveaux:

Just as they adopted the Catholic notion of fetal personhood, evangelicals are now using Catholic rhetoric to argue that birth control is incompatible with a pro-life philosophy. Catholic doctrine teaches that sex can't be separated from procreation through artificial means. Although the Catholic Church sanctions natural family planning, a form of birth control that works by tracking a woman's fertility, pious couples must always be ready to accept an unplanned pregnancy.

Until recently, few evangelicals shared this view... Now, qualms about contraception—not just alleged abortifacients like Plan B and the IUD, but the pill as well—are filtering into the mainstream.

Fred Clark [is more adamant](#):

I want you to print out a hard copy of Thomson-DeVeaux's article... Write: "It is March, 2014, and most American evangelicals do not believe that using contraception is a sin." Then write today's date and sign it.... This time capsule

will make for strange reading in 2024. Thomson-DeVeaux's words will seem alien and insane, and so will those astonishing words written next to Dolan's picture in your own handwriting. "It is March, 2014, and most American evangelicals do not believe that using contraception is a sin."

That claim will seem unbelievable. Your future self will have a hard time accepting those words. *Everyone knows* that evangelical Christians are anti-contraception, your future self will think. Everyone knows that evangelical Christians have *always* been anti-contraception.

I'm less convinced than Clark that we're past the point of no return on this. Still, as Thomson-DeVeaux notes, Al Mohler (for one) has laid some groundwork for [such a shift](#). If Clark's prediction comes true, that will be a bad thing for women's health and evangelical witness alike.

But I do wonder about the potential for a silver lining here. If evangelicals partner with Catholics long enough, is it plausible to imagine a major evangelical movement to, say, end the death penalty? After all, the age demographics already suggest that such a thing is possible.

Maybe not. As [Mohler makes clear](#)—he's quite forthright about this actually, uncommonly so for public evangelical rhetoric—any evangelical pivot from abortion to contraception will have at least as much to do with "rais[ing] an alarm about the entire edifice of modern sexual morality" as with a Catholic-flavored take on the dignity of human life, potential or realized. That is: it's about the sex itself, not the life. Hardly an opening for [the seamless garment](#).

Still, if you hang out with Catholic friends long enough, you just might start to borrow their books. A person can hope.