

What the Bible does and does not say about sexuality

By [Randall Balmer](#)

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It's a kind of parlor game in some circles. Rattle off various misperceptions about what the Bible says:

- Cleanliness is next to godliness.
- God helps those who help themselves.
- Spare the rod, spoil the child.
- God moves in mysterious ways.
- Money is the root of all evil.
- This, too, shall pass.

Stephen Prothero noted some years ago that a surprising number of Americans believed that Joan of Arc was the wife of Noah, and who can forget Stephen Colbert's interview with a member of Congress who was sponsoring legislation to mandate the posting of the Ten Commandments in public places? When asked to list the Ten Commandments, however, the hapless congressman sputtered after "Thou shalt not kill."

All of this comes to mind after I [published an op-ed](#) about evangelicals and same-sex marriage in the *Los Angeles Times* last week. Part of the argument was that, contrary to their protestations, evangelicals have indeed altered their rhetoric about matters of marriage and sexuality over the years. I recalled the excoriations of divorce I heard while growing up in the 1960s. Anyone who was divorced was ostracized in evangelical congregations, and many faced the rescission of church membership.

That changed dramatically around 1980. By then, tragically, the divorce rate among evangelicals was roughly equivalent to the larger population. But the real catalyst for evangelical leaders' relative silence on divorce was the Religious Right's embrace of Ronald Reagan, a divorced and remarried man, as their political messiah in the 1980 presidential election. After 1980, I argued, evangelical denunciations of divorce

all but disappeared. All of the heated “family values” rhetoric during that campaign and in the years following included robust denunciations of abortion, feminism, and “homosexuality”—but, curiously, almost nothing about divorce.

My argument was that, despite evangelical protestations that their positions are “biblical” and therefore immutable, history proves otherwise. I suggested that the ratio of evangelical denunciations about divorce and about same-sex orientation was directly inverse that in scripture, and I noted that “Jesus was much clearer on [divorce] than he was about homosexuality, about which he said nothing whatsoever.”

I’ve been responding to irate, indignant e-mails ever since.

Some of my correspondents wrote simply to vilify. Al Mohler’s publicist sent me a list of Mohler’s writings about divorce (together with a series of gratuitous insults), but when I tried to load Mohler’s far more voluminous condemnations of homosexuality, the website froze.

The more interesting responses came from those who insisted that Jesus indeed had condemned same-sex orientation. I patiently asked them to provide the references and received in return passages from Leviticus and Romans and Jude. When I reiterated that I was looking for a quote from Jesus—not Leviticus, not Paul—the tone grew desperate: “Is not Jesus called the Word, the actual author of the whole Bible?”

One correspondent came closest to making the argument with the point that Jesus affirmed the law, which of course he did. But in the Sermon on the Mount he also declared the law adequate, that the disposition of the heart was far more important: You’ve heard it said, don’t commit murder; but I tell you that if you hate your brother, it’s as though you’re guilty of murder. Same with adultery. And Jesus himself repeatedly flouted the law, especially the law concerning the Sabbath—which is explicitly forbidden in Leviticus and elsewhere. And he did so why? Because the hallmark of his ministry was that love trumps law. Always. That’s the message of the gospel.

This, I believe, cuts to the heart of the gospel; Jesus always insisted on the primacy of love over law. And I find it difficult to believe that this good news doesn’t have some relevance to contemporary conversations about same-sex orientation.

At some point in this discussion, however, we should be clear about what the Bible does and does not say.

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