



B REVEALING WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS

Men, women and God



Why use this Bible study?

This Bible study helps us explore what God says about the roles of men and women, and helps a group to begin to reflect on the issue of sexual violence.



Mutual authority

It is easy to let our own cultural ideas and assumptions influence our understanding of biblical texts. For example, the idea that men are called to lead in the church, and women only to follow, has dominated the thinking about gender for centuries. This is in spite of the large list of women leaders whom Paul greets in the last chapter of Romans. It's also in spite of the fact that he refers to Phoebe, who has taken the letter to Rome, as a *minister*.

He uses exactly the same Greek word for her (*diaconos*) that he uses to describe his own ministry, and that of Timothy. It doesn't help us that translators have so often watered down this word, in Phoebe's case, to simply *servant*.

We need help from the Bible to understand God's plans for all areas of our lives, including sexual relationships. Throughout the world, women are very vulnerable to sexual violence. Both rape and assault are happening now on a large scale. Even within marriage there can be violence, often justified by some misguided Christians who hold the view that wives are in subjection to their husbands, and this includes in sexual relationships. St Paul, however, has very different ideas.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:2-7. This passage challenges our attitudes to the sexual relationship between a man and a woman. First of all, Paul places it firmly within the commitment of marriage. Next, marriage is always to be between one man and one woman.

Already, those two provisions are protective towards women. But the most radical part comes when Paul talks about sex between husband and wife. The wife does not have authority over her own sexuality: but her husband does – nothing surprising about that. The surprising thing is the next sentence. The husband does not have authority over his sexuality either – but his wife does. This is dramatic indeed. It is the only passage where Paul uses the actual word *authority* within the marriage relationship, and it is to be entirely mutual. Husbands and wives are to consider each other's bodies with respect and consideration. If this biblical teaching were followed in sexual relationships throughout the world, it would mean an end to so much human brokenness, sexual violence and sex-related epidemics.



Awareness-raising

Children & youth

Climate & environment

Conflict & peace-building

Corruption & governance

Disaster risk management

Discrimination & inclusion

Food & livelihoods

Gender & sexual violence

Health & HIV

Influencing decision-makers

Migration & trafficking

Water, sanitation & hygiene

Awareness-raising	Children & youth	Climate & environment	Conflict & peace-building	Corruption & governance	Disaster risk management	Discrimination & inclusion	Food & livelihoods	Gender & sexual violence	Health & HIV	Influencing decision-makers	Migration & trafficking	Water, sanitation & hygiene
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Key points

We should not get our ideas about women and men's roles from the culture around us. The Bible clearly tells us that women and men can both be leaders. It also tells us that women as well as men both have equal authority over each other's sexuality.



Questions for discussion

- What does this passage tell us about God's views on people having more than one sexual partner?
- Why is this biblical view protective towards women?
- What happens to the idea of gender inequality in this passage?
- What are Paul's underlying principles in the sexual relationship between husband and wife?
- What stops the worldwide church from living out this vision for men and women?



Reflection

Think about your own personal relationships with people of the opposite gender. How can you help relationships to be more equal?



Notes

This Bible study was written by Dr. Elaine Storkey and first published in Tearfund (2006) Footsteps 66 – *Human rights* http://tilz.tearfund.org/en/resources/publications/footsteps/footsteps_61-70/footsteps_66/

Related tools

- A1 – Revealing violence against women and girls: information for facilitators [A1: *Gender & sexual violence-1*]
- A2 – Understanding how men and women use their time [A2: *Gender & sexual violence-1*]
- A2 – Exploring men and women's control over resources [A2: *Gender & sexual violence-2*]
- A2 – Why address violence against women and girls [A2: *Gender & sexual violence-3*]
- A2 – What are the root causes of violence against women and girls? [A2: *Gender & sexual violence-4*]
- A2 – Exploring gender roles and power [A2: *Gender & sexual violence-5*]
- A2 – Men and women: listening to one another [A2: *Gender & sexual violence-6*]
- A2 – Self-discovery tool (Violence against women and girls) [A2: *Gender & sexual violence-7*]
- B – Gender and restoring relationships (Bible study) [B: *Gender & sexual violence-1*]
- B – God's view of women (Bible study) [B: *Gender & sexual violence-3*]
- B – God's view of men (Bible study) [B: *Gender & sexual violence-4*]
- B – Protecting those vulnerable to sexual violence (Bible study) [B: *Gender & sexual violence-7*]
- B – Sexual violence in the Bible — the story of Tamar (Bible study) [B: *Gender & sexual violence-8*]