

Priscilla and Aquila

ACTS 16:11-15

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This morning I would like for us to continue in our series on great women in the Bible. Last week, of course, we looked at Lydia in the book of Acts. This morning I'd like for us to continue with a lesson on a woman who is mentioned six times in the Bible, and every time her name is mentioned, she is always mentioned along with her husband. They are never referred to separately, only together. And as far as I can tell, this is the only couple in the New Testament mentioned by name this many times and in a positive way. I am referring, of course, to Priscilla and Aquila.

What I also find interesting about this couple is that in four out of the six references, Priscilla's name is mentioned first. Some people have tried to make a big deal out of that – but the bottom line is: We do not know why her name is mentioned first in four out of the six references. As I was thinking about it this week, I concluded that if you were to stay in our house for a year and a half (as Paul did with them), you might refer to my wife first as well – she is much NICER than I am, and staying in the house with HER would be the good part of your stay. And so you might tell your friends, "I stayed at Keola's house for 18 months...and there was this Baxter guy around there as well." But really, we do not know what Paul and Luke had in mind with this. What we do know is that Priscilla and Aquila were a husband and wife team who worked hard for the Lord and seemed to do a lot of traveling alongside the apostle Paul. And what a blessing that is, when a husband and wife can work together side by side, both working for the Lord – it is an awesome blessing to be on the same team.

The name Priscilla is the informal version of Prisca, which comes from Latin and means "ancient" – not that she herself was ancient, but it might be based on a family name, an old and respected family (perhaps similar to "Kennedy" or "Rockefeller" in our own nation's history). So, Priscilla and Prisca are the same, and she is referred to as Prisca in several of Paul's references. I might compare it to the difference between Betty and Elizabeth. Priscilla is more informal (like Betty would be), and Prisca is more formal (like Elizabeth might be). Today's lesson is not really about her husband, but the name Aquila means "eagle." It carries over into Spanish quite well. Those of you who are into shooting sports might recognize that name as the name of a discount ammunition manufacturer based down in Mexico. If you are familiar with this brand, then you might remember that they use an eagle as their logo.

As most of you know, I usually like taking one passage of scripture and sticking with it. This morning, though, we need to get away from that for just a little bit – mainly because the references to this woman’s life are so spread out. So what I’d like to do is to do just a brief overview of each reference, and then we will come back and bring some lessons from this woman’s life and the work she did alongside her husband.

I. But first, let us do an OVERVIEW.

And to do an overview of this woman’s life, we really need to understand that Priscilla and Aquila seem to be almost constantly moving. So what I’d like to have us do is to look at a map and make a few notes as we try to keep track of where Priscilla and her husband are moving.

1. The first reference to Priscilla and Aquila comes in Acts 18:1-5 as they move from Rome to CORINTH (p. 1735).

This takes place on Paul’s Second Missionary Journey. Last week, we studied Lydia. Lydia is baptized up in Philippi in northern Greece; Paul then keeps on going – to Thessalonica, to Athens, and then he makes his way to Corinth, which is where he meets Priscilla and Aquila for the first time. Notice, please, Acts 18:1-5,

¹ After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. ² And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, ³ and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers. ⁴ And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. ⁵ But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.

So we have Priscilla and Aquila in Rome, but they get kicked out. We know from secular history that Emperor Claudius most likely expelled the Jews in either 51 or 52 AD, and we find here that Aquila is a Jew. Since Luke (the author of this account) doesn’t tell us that Priscilla is a Jew, some have assumed that Priscilla is a Gentile. We do not know. But we also do not know whether these two are Christians at the time they are kicked out of Rome. Maybe, but maybe not. Back in Acts 2, and we find that there were people there on the Day of Pentecost not only from Rome, but also from Pontus, this place where Aquila is from. Pontus is a region up near the Black Sea. That is now 20 years in the past at this point, so it is possible that Aquila was converted back then and then moved back home to Pontus or maybe even to Rome. It is also possible, however, that these two were not Christians and that they were baptized by Paul right here in Corinth.

What we do know is that Priscilla and Aquila move in from Rome and that they are working together as tentmakers in the city of Corinth. We also know that Paul is a tentmaker, and we know from this passage that Paul, ***“...came to them, and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers.”*** So, they connect not because they are Christians, but they connect because of their trade. God, therefore, seems to use their common profession to make this connection. Paul comes to town to preach and teach, he is a tentmaker by trade, he searches out some fellow tent-makers, and he connects with Priscilla and Aquila for the very first time. I would also point out, though, that Paul’s tent-making was temporary. In verse 5, when Silas and Timothy finally catch up and come down from up north where he left them behind earlier, only then is Paul able to ***“devote himself completely to the word.”*** We assume this is because Silas and Timothy bring some kind of financial gift from Philippi (probably Lydia), and this gift allows Paul to get back to preaching full-time.

But the point here is: Paul stays with Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth for 18 months as that congregation is established. I would also point out that Priscilla and Aquila are pretty normal – we have a husband and wife working together making tents, working alongside the apostle Paul. Can we even imagine what that must have been like? What an experience that must have been – to live and work together for 18 months with one of the greatest preachers of all time. We know this must have had a huge impact.

2. **Well, that leads us to what happens next, because when we skip down to Acts 18:18ff, we find that when Paul leaves Corinth, Aquila and Priscilla go with him, and they all make their way together to the city of EPHESUS.**

Notice, please, Acts 18:18-21,

¹⁸ Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow. ¹⁹ They came to Ephesus, and he left them there. Now he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. ²⁰ When they asked him to stay for a longer time, he did not consent, ²¹ but taking leave of them and saying, "I will return to you again if God wills," he set sail from Ephesus.

So, they get to Ephesus, and Paul leaves them there. He makes plans to come back, but Priscilla and Aquila stay. And while they are there, they run into a man named Apollos. Notice, please, what happens next, in verses 24-28,

²⁴ Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. ²⁵ This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John; ²⁶ and he began to speak out boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. ²⁷ And when he wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace, ²⁸ for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.

So, we run into this preacher named Apollos, from Alexandria, Egypt. In the book of Acts, we have now had two major characters from Africa – the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8, and now a prominent preacher from Egypt. He is eloquent (that is, he is an awesome public speaker), he knows the Bible, he is fervent in spirit, but he is dead wrong on baptism! He only knows about the baptism of John. So, Priscilla and Aquila take him aside privately, and they correct his misunderstanding. Apollos apparently takes it well, he wants to go over to Achaia (or Greece) to do some preaching, the church writes him a letter of recommendation, and they send him on his way.

Now, sometime later, Paul will go on his Third Missionary Journey, and while he is in Ephesus, he writes to the church in Corinth. Remember: Priscilla and Aquila used to live in Corinth. So Paul is in Ephesus writing 1 Corinthians. I would make two notes on what happens in Corinth at this point. First of all, in Achaia (a region which includes the city of Corinth), Apollos apparently does quite well. You might remember from 1 Corinthians 1 that the church there had divided into four factions based on their favorite preachers – they had split between Paul, Peter, Apollos, and Jesus. That right there tells us what kind of preacher Apollos was.

People were comparing him to Peter, Paul, and Jesus! And I would just mention here that Priscilla and Aquila are at least somewhat responsible for his success. They are the ones who corrected his misunderstanding, and they are the ones who helped send him on his way.

Also, notice, please, 1 Corinthians 16:19 – at the very end of the book, Paul is sending some personal greetings from Ephesus to Corinth, and this is what he says (1 Corinthians 16:19), ***“The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.”*** So here we have the more formal variant of Priscilla’s name (Prisca), and we also find that the church in Ephesus is meeting in their house. And certainly this fits in with what we know about these two.

3. From Ephesus, it seems that Priscilla and Aquila then move back to ROME.

Notice, please, Romans 16:3-5. As Paul writes to the church in Rome and as he closes that letter, he basically says, “Say ‘hello’ to Priscilla and Aquila!” This is Romans 16:3-5,

³ Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, ⁴ who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; ⁵ also greet the church that is in their house. Greet Epaphroditus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia.

I believe the edict banning Jews from Rome was lifted with the death of the Emperor in 55 AD, so this would have allowed Priscilla and Aquila to then move back to Rome, which is exactly what they did. They go back, and the church once again is meeting in their house. We also find in this passage that at some point they actually risked their lives to save Paul somewhere along the line. We don’t have any details, just this passing reference.

4. And then, from Rome, it appears that they eventually move back to EPHESUS.

And chronologically, this is the last reference to Priscilla and Aquila in the Bible. It is found in 2 Timothy 4, in the last chapter of the last book Paul would ever write. We are now roughly 16 years from the time Paul first met this couple in Corinth. And looking back on his life, right before his own execution in Rome, Paul writes to the young preacher Timothy from prison, and at the time, Timothy is preaching in Ephesus. And we have this passing reference right at the end – notice, please, 2 Timothy 4:19, ***“Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus.”*** We assume that Priscilla and Aquila moved back to Ephesus from Rome to escape the persecution that began under Emperor Nero in AD 66 and 67.

II. As we think back over the life of Priscilla (and also the life of her husband Aquila, I suppose), I want us to just briefly bring out THREE OBSERVATIONS AS WE APPLY SOME LESSONS FROM THEIR LIVES TO OUR LIVES TODAY.

- 1. And the first observation I’d like to make looking over their lives is that PRISCILLA AND AQUILA SERVED GOD TOGETHER, FROM THE HEART – THEY WORKED HARD, THEY WERE COURAGEOUS, THEY DID WHATEVER NEEDED DOING TO ASSIST THE APOSTLE PAUL AND TO ENCOURAGE THE GROWTH AND STRENGTH OF THE EARLY CHURCH. BUT ABOVE ALL, THEY SERVED GOD TOGETHER.**

As I mentioned before: These two are always mentioned together, never separately – from Rome, to Corinth, to Ephesus, to Rome, and back to Ephesus – they are always found side-by-side, working, earning a living, supporting the mission of the church, adjusting to new situations, and working their way into a new community – always together. These two did what needed to be done, and they did it together. What an encouragement they must have been for each other! I think of a preacher in the Chicago area who moved up from down south, and at some point during the first winter, his wife decided, “This is not right! It is too cold up here!” She decided to move back south, and her husband followed soon after. That is not a move that Priscilla would have made without her husband. Instead, they went where they were needed most. As a married couple, they were a team. And, according to that passage in Romans 16, they even put their lives on the line at some point. As Paul said, “*for my life [they] risked their own necks.*” Not Aquila on his own, not Priscilla on her own, but together they put themselves on the line so that God’s message could be taken into some of the most difficult mission fields of the Mediterranean world. So first of all, we have an example of teamwork – a husband and wife working side-by-side doing important work for God’s kingdom, even though much of what they did was completely behind the scenes.

2. **There is a second major idea we can take away from Priscilla this morning, and that is: SHE AND HER HUSBAND KNEW THE WORD OF GOD AND USED THAT KNOWLEDGE TO TEACH PRIVATELY AS THEY HAD OPPORTUNITY.**

They knew that accuracy in what we teach is very important. And so when this outgoing and powerful preacher came to town, they listened, but as they listened, they noticed that everything almost right on, except this man failed to properly explain and emphasize the importance of baptism. Now at this point, they had several options. When we hear the preacher preach something wrong, 1.) we can ignore it, 2.) we can quietly talk to other people about it, 3.) we can stand up and scream and shout and walk out on the man, or 4.) we can do what Priscilla and Aquila did here – the Bible tells us in Acts 18:26 that “*they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.*” Isn’t that awesome! They handled this according to the Golden Rule. They treated Apollos just as any one of us would like to be treated. They pulled him aside; that is, they did not embarrass him publicly, but they pulled him aside (they didn’t pull EVERYBODY aside) and they had a private conversation about the matter. And thankfully, that seems to be the end of it. In fact, they then help vouch for this man as they send him along to another congregation needing help.

We don’t have time to read what happens in Acts 19, but I should at least mention it, because it seems to be connected. Basically, when Paul comes back to Ephesus, he runs into some men who seem to have been baptized improperly. Paul teaches these men correctly, and then they are baptized correctly. Some might say that this is the only example of “re-baptism” in the Bible. And in a sense, that is true. In another sense, though, their first baptism was not valid (since they were taught wrong the first time), so technically, I suppose, these men are actually baptized (properly) for the first time in Acts 19. I bring this up, because they seem to be men who had been listening to Apollos. This is one of those times when the chapter division is rather unfortunate. If we could take out that chapter division between chapters 18 and 19, we would see the connection between Apollos, Priscilla and Aquila, and Paul, and these twelve men who are re-baptized. And so we have this account as a reminder: If I have been improperly baptized (perhaps as a baby, or maybe as an adult for the wrong reason or without the proper understanding), there is no dishonor at all in doing it “again,” only this time in the right way and for the right reasons.

I should also make a few comments here concerning the role of women in teaching the word of God. Some have seen this as perhaps contradicting what Paul said over in 1 Timothy 2, where he said that women are not allowed to 1.) Teach over a man, or 2.) Exercise authority over a man. There is no conflict between what Paul

says there and what happens here. When we look at the context in 1 Timothy 2, he seems to be addressing more of a public setting – not just a worship assembly, but also what we might describe as a Bible class or a devotional today. In those settings, the Bible teaches that the men of the congregation are to take a leading role when it comes to teaching over other men. The situation in Acts 18, though, is private. This is a private discussion between a husband, a wife, and a misinformed gospel preacher. Remember, Luke tells us that, ***“they took him aside.”*** This is not a matter of Priscilla teaching a class or preaching a sermon. This is private.

Now, on the other end of this, I should remind you of something we had to deal with here maybe ten years ago or so. We had a man who pretty much thought that women are not allowed to impart any kind of Biblical knowledge to a man in any setting, even in private. I remember discussing this with him right here in the aisle after one of our Wednesday evening Bible classes, and I said, “So, if a woman walks up right now and joins in the discussion between you and me, she would need to be silent?” And he said, “Yes.” I brought up the example of Priscilla and Aquila, and his response was that she didn’t do any teaching in that setting, but that her job was to “fluff the pillows.” I had to take him back to the text, because as we have already noted today, Luke tells us that, ***“they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.”*** “They” did the teaching – ***“they,”*** referring to Aquila AND his wife, Priscilla. The point for us is: This husband and wife team absolutely worked together to explain the word of God to somebody, it was in a private setting, but there is nothing in this text relegating Priscilla to any kind of pillow fluffing.

There is, though a lesson for all of us here: What we teach matters, and even when we teach in a private setting, that teaching can have a huge impact. Again: Apollos went on to be one of the most powerful preachers in the First Century, even to where he was being compared to Peter, Paul, and Jesus himself. And yet until he met Priscilla and Aquila, he was wrong. We are thankful, then, that Priscilla and Aquila pulled him aside.

3. **There is a third big idea we can take away from the life of Priscilla, and that is: THIS WOMAN (ALONG WITH HER HUSBAND) OPENED HER HOME AND USED HER HOME FOR THE BENEFIT OF GOD’S KINGDOM.**

To them, their home was a tool – a tool to be used in whatever way God needed it. Their home was open to the church. We’ve noted that in several of those cities where they lived, the church met in their home. So I would ask: Do we use our homes for the Lord and his work? Do we open our homes to our Christian family? Do we open our homes to the young people of the congregation? Have we thought about it? For those who are married, perhaps we need to think about this together: How can we use our home to strengthen the church? What can we do to open our home to the congregation?

Over in Romans 12:13, we are told that Christians need to be ***“practicing hospitality.”*** I don’t know if we’ve ever thought about this before, but as the church in Rome read those words for the very first time, they were sitting in Priscilla and Aquila’s living room! Remember: The book of Romans is addressed to the church that met ***“in their house”*** (Romans 16:5). So we learn from Priscilla, then, the value of opening our homes for the benefit of God’s kingdom.

Conclusion:

As we summarize our thoughts on Priscilla, I’d like to close by reading the note that was turned in by one of the young women of the church here as she requested this lesson. Several suggested Priscilla, but this is what she said:

I picked Priscilla because I feel she does not get as much recognition as some others. She worked alongside her husband and many times Paul as well, while doing work in ministry. She wasn't a queen or the wife of a high ranking man, but more of a worker-bee. She knew her strengths and stuck to them. In Acts, we also see her along with her husband correcting/helping Apollos in the truth of the gospel. She saw a problem and addressed it. To work alongside her husband as she did is a unique relationship in the New Testament. Her livelihood would also require her to move quite often, which worked well with ministry and teaching others about Jesus. Her position and story I find unique and she may not have been the most influential of women, but she worked hard, was diligent, and did her part.

Amen to that! We need more women (and men, for that matter) who are willing to follow in the footsteps of Priscilla (and her husband). I look at the map up here again and at the three cities where Priscilla and Aquila lived – Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus. These are four very important congregations in strategic cities for the long-term growth and health of God's church. We know that Priscilla and her husband had a part in that. And so we close this morning with the reminder that every person here this morning has the ability to make an eternal difference in God's kingdom.

Our influence begins with our own obedience to the gospel. Like Priscilla, we know that baptism is a key part of God's plan. Jesus died for our sins, he was buried, and he came back from the dead. We obey the gospel by turning away from sin and by allowing ourselves to be buried with Jesus in baptism. Our sins are forgiven at that point, and we are raised up to live the Christian life. If you have any questions, pull us aside after the service, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

NOTE: I created a rather unique PowerPoint presentation on this lesson (screenshot below), animating Priscilla and Aquila's various moves around the Roman Empire. If you're interested (and I'm still alive, etc.), please send me a message (fourlakeschurch@gmail.com).



To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com