

“Priscilla & Aquila”

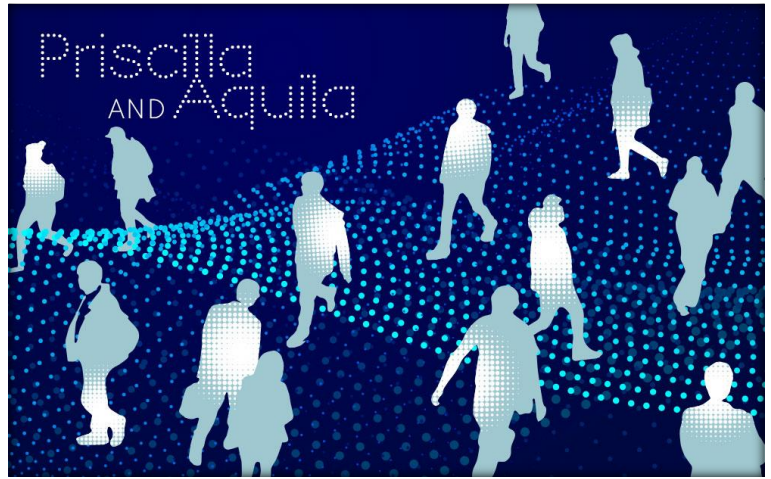
Acts 18:1–4, 24–28; Romans 16:3–4;

2 Timothy 4:19–22

Expelled from Rome.

Working hard for Jesus.

Last week, we met a disciple named Apollos who worked hard for the gospel but had something to learn, as we all do. Today, we meet two disciples who helped Apollos better understand baptism, Priscilla and her husband, Aquila. Theirs is quite a story.



Expulsion

The riots in Rome and throughout the empire had gone on too long. The Emperor barely tolerated the Jews as it was. Now, he had been pushed too far; Caesar ordered their expulsion from Rome. Priscilla, Aquila, their friends and neighbors . . . all of them. As they fled, they had little hope of ever returning.

Making a new home

In the days of Jesus and Paul, Jews lived throughout the Roman Empire, from Syria in the east to Spain in the west. Even Rome itself had a substantial Jewish population of perhaps 40,000 or so. The Romans generally left such Jews alone. To the average Roman, the Jews seemed more peculiar than threatening. The Jews believed that there was only one god (yeah, sure) and that this god had chosen them (how silly a thought). The Jews took off work on Saturdays (nice if you can get it!) and avoided all sorts of foods. They even performed some strange rite of physical mutilation on their newborn males. But . . . so long as the peace was kept, the Romans left the Jews in peace.

Keeping the peace was important throughout the empire. Controlling millions of conquered peoples was no small task. But nowhere was this peacekeeping more highly prized than in Rome and in 49AD the peace in Rome came crashing down. Suetonius,¹ a Roman biographer of the times, wrote “Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius, the Caesar] expelled them from Rome.” His reference to “Chrestus” is probably a reference to Christ. Evidently, followers of Jesus had come to Rome preaching Christ in the Jewish synagogues, triggering a violent response from many Jews. After all, something much like this happened nearly everywhere Paul traveled in the eastern end of the empire.

So, the Jews left Rome, forbidden to return. This would have included Jews who had become followers of Jesus, such as the married couple, Priscilla² and Aquila. They were better off than many. They had a portable business; they were tentmakers. They owned property. Priscilla even had had some family money. So they headed east toward the large, bustling Greek metropolis of Corinth. Corinth was a busy, commercial port on a narrow isthmus. There, Priscilla and her husband set up shop in a storefront and began to rebuild their lives.

Not long after their arrival in Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila met a fellow Jew who had come to Corinth to proclaim the gospel, the Good News, of Jesus Christ. His name was Paul. The three of them quickly formed a close bond, for Paul was a tentmaker too. Priscilla and her husband invited Paul to join them in their storefront business and for the next eighteen months the three of them grew their business and grew the young Christian house churches in Corinth. (see Acts 18:1-18)

¹ Suetonius lived and wrote about 100 years after Jesus. This quote is from his *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*.

² She is referred to as Priscilla in the book of Acts, though Paul refers to her as Prisca in his letters. Think of this as “Katherine” and “Kate.”

Moving on

Priscilla and Aquila were mature Christians when they left Rome. In Corinth, they committed themselves fully to Paul's work and the building of God's kingdom. When Paul decided that it was time for him to leave Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila left with him. All three made their way to Ephesus, another very important city. Priscilla and Aquila stayed there while Paul went on to Jerusalem. Not surprisingly, they quickly became leaders in the Christian community in Ephesus. Once, a well-meaning Jew named Apollos came to Ephesus teaching about Jesus and God's kingdom as best he could. But his teachings about Jesus were a little confused and inaccurate. Priscilla and her husband took him aside and taught him the full truth about Jesus and the new way. With their guidance and encouragement, Apollos went on to be an effective teacher and leader among the churches in Greece (see Acts 18:24-28). N. T. Wright reflects on this encounter:

But what was it that Apollos did not know, and so did not teach accurately, when he first arrived in Ephesus? How could such an evidently highly educated and intelligent man, who knew his Bible, knew about John's baptism, and knew the facts about Jesus and taught them accurately—how could he be missing out on something vital, something which Aquila and Priscilla knew and he didn't? It is true that Luke may well have included this little snippet in order to introduce the next story about Paul discovering some disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus, and he wants to tell that story, in turn, because it introduces his next major set piece, which is about Paul's overall impact in Ephesus and what happened as a result. And it is also true that Luke is not averse to making the point, this way and that, that women played an important role in the life of the early church, so that to have Priscilla helping her husband Aquila to teach a learned scholar from the great university city of Alexandria something he didn't already know is a pleasing and telling point. But this still hasn't got us right into the centre of things.

The heart of the matter seems to be something about Christian baptism in the name of Jesus, and about baptism in the holy spirit. It may well be that Apollos does indeed already possess the spirit, though verse 25, sometimes cited to prove this because literally it reads 'burning in spirit', can't be pressed into service to make that point. But, though he knows a lot about Jesus, and presumably already regards him as the Messiah, he only knows John's baptism. In other words, by whatever (to us) strange chain of circumstances, he has followed the story well into the ministry of Jesus, and perhaps also into his death and resurrection—the story which, we recall, is carefully anchored, even at the start of Acts, with reference to John the Baptist (1:5, 22). But nobody has told him that from the day of Pentecost onwards the church had welcomed people into its full fellowship through baptism in the name of Jesus (or, as it quickly developed, in the name of the Trinity, as in Matthew 28:19). And perhaps—just perhaps—he may after all be in the same situation as the 12 people in the next story, who haven't realized that God has been pouring his spirit upon the followers of Jesus, and that this is open to everyone who believes. Perhaps.³

Going home

Priscilla and Aquila stayed in Ephesus for several years. Paul would mention them when he wrote a letter back to Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 16:9). But they never lost their desire to return to Rome. After all, it was their home, where they had been raised, where they had met and married. In 54AD, Claudius died and his edict expelling the Jews from Rome died with him.⁴ So, Priscilla and her husband returned to Rome where they would carry on their kingdom building work. Later, when Paul was in Corinth a second time, he wrote a letter to the Christians in Rome urging them to find unity as the Jewish-Christians returned. In this letter, Paul sent a poignant hello to Priscilla and Aquila, noting that they had "risked their necks" for Paul and his work (Romans 16:34). But even though they were back in Rome, their work was not done. There were many house churches

³ N.T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 13-28*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 107–108.

⁴ When a Caesar died, many of his edicts would automatically expire unless renewed by his successor.

in Rome that needed help and encouragement. Later, it seems that they again headed for Asia Minor to work for the spread of the Good News of Jesus Christ (see 2 Timothy 4:19).

Two lives committed to marriage and ministry There are no extended stories about Priscilla and Aquila in the New Testament. Rather, their presence and service are woven into the accounts of Paul's ministry and their own. We meet them in the correspondence of the movement. We see that they were leaders in the early church and trusted co-workers of Paul, confident enough to instruct a respected teacher and preacher. They are always mentioned together and Priscilla is nearly always mentioned first. Though Paul saw advantage in his own singleness (1 Corinthians 7:32-35), we see in this couple that two disciples, committed to one another through the bonds of marriage, can work powerfully for the building of God's kingdom, always supporting, encouraging, and loving each other.

Something extra

One of the most helpful Bible study aids is a good Bible dictionary. What follows is the entry on Priscilla from the one volume Harper Collins Bible Dictionary. It is my favorite and I use it frequently. You might want to get a copy for your home.

Prisca (pris'kuh), **Priscilla** (pri-sil'uh), a prominent woman in the early Christian church, always mentioned in connection with Aquila, her husband. Paul calls her Prisca (a common Latin name), but Acts prefers Priscilla (18:2–28; cf. Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19). The fact that Prisca is often mentioned before Aquila, by both Paul and the writer of Acts, may indicate that Prisca had a higher social status (e.g., through inherited wealth) than her husband, or it could be a consequence of her assuming greater significance in the early church, so that Aquila was remembered primarily as her husband. Prisca and Aquila were driven from Rome by an edict of the emperor Claudius that expelled Jews from the city (49/50 CE). They moved to Corinth, where they came into contact with Paul. Like Paul, they were leatherworkers, and he stayed with them for a time (Acts 18:3). At this time, they were both Christians, but it is not known whether Paul converted them or whether they were already Jewish believers in Jesus by the time he met them. In any case, they left Corinth with Paul and settled in Ephesus, where, according to a story in Acts 18, they had a role in the education of Apollos. The latter was preaching enthusiastically about Jesus, but his knowledge was somehow deficient ("he knew only the baptism of John," 18:25); Priscilla and Aquila "took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately" (18:26). Prisca and Aquila are greeted by Paul in Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19.⁵

⁵ Allan J. McNicol and Mark Allan Powell, *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary (Revised and Updated)*, 2011, 830.