

Prisca & Aquila
Romans 16:3-5a
ABC 9/24/17

As we move further into Rom 16 we meet a couple who made a difference with their lives for the glory of God. If you want to have a lasting legacy so that your life matters & your time on earth means something, we'll see a few characteristics in this couple you should want to describe you. Of the many people Paul mentions, this couple appear 1st in the list. Turn to Rom 16, where their names appear. 16:3 begins, **Greet Prisca & Aquila**. These 2 names are the ones we know the most about in this list. They give us an example of the impact a faithful Christian couple can have in serving together. We surmise they served together because they're always mentioned together in Scripture, sometimes with her name 1st & sometimes with his. Much speculation has been made of this, but no one knows why & there appears to be no significance to it. This morning I want to answer 2 questions about Prisca & Aquila: 1) Who were they? 2) Where & how did they work with Paul? & then, 3) apply it to our lives. **3-5a** PRAY

1. Who Were Prisca & Aquila? They were a husband & wife who were a *tent-making* ministry team. We get the term *tent-making* referring to those in ministry who work secular jobs from them. Whenever this couple is mentioned in Scripture (6x) they're both named. Luke mentions them 3 times in the book of Acts & Paul mentions them 3 times in his writings. It's interesting that in 4 of those 6 references, Priscilla's name is given 1st. Both Luke & Paul use the names in both orders. Prisca & Aquila present a wonderful picture of what it means to be a Christian couple, 2 people who not only allowed one another to serve God, but encouraged it. From the clues we're given in Scripture, this couple served God together as volunteers in the church. We don't know if they had kids or not since it's never mentioned. The woman's name was **Prisca**, which means *ancient*. Personally, I can't imagine naming a new born *Ancient*, but what do I know? This is the formal Latin name of a woman who was also called by the more personal form, Priscilla. Like our youngest child's name is *Emily*, but we most often call her *Em*. It's interesting that even though Paul stayed in the home of Priscilla & Aquila, he always referred to her as Prisca, the more formal name. Luke always called her by her more personal & conversational

name, Priscilla. What can we learn from this? Beats me, but it's interesting. Many honors were heaped upon her by early Christian writers. It was even suggested she was the author of the book of Hebrews, although there is no evidence to that. **Aquila**, also a Latin name, means *eagle*. He was a generous & successful businessman who, along with his wife, appeared to have a prosperous business. We assume this because in Ephesus & Rome the church met in their home, implying it was larger than most of the others homes. Though we aren't told how Paul 1st met Aquila, we do know it was customary in the synagogues for men & women to sit on separate sides, & perhaps for the men to sit in groups according to their profession or trade.¹ Since Paul was a tentmaker by trade & Aquila had a tent making business, they may have met in the synagogue as they sat next to one another. Whenever it was, their chance encounter wasn't by chance! Paul calls them **my fellow workers in Christ Jesus**. The word Paul used for **fellow workers** is the one that gives us our English word *synergy*, which refers to different components that are unable to accomplish as much separately as they do by working together. It's a creation of a whole that's greater than the simple sum of its parts.² Paul is saying, *This couple & I were able to accomplish so much for the Lord because we worked together*. Neither Paul nor Prisca or Aquila were lone-rangers in ministry. I get that from the description Paul used for Aquila & Priscilla. He called them **fellow laborers** or coworkers, meaning they were together with him & joined with him in the work of the gospel as partners. Paul could've meant this as tent-makers because they had the same job he did, but he clarified that this was **in Christ Jesus**. The significance of Paul saying this is not merely what he was saying about Prisca & Aquila. It's also what Paul was saying about himself. Paul wasn't a lone-ranger: he realized he didn't work alone. Throughout this section of greetings, we see Paul's dependence on others like Phoebe for her generosity & hospitality. Since Paul had worked together with Priscilla & Aquila in gospel ministry & making tents, they were precious co-laborers in Christ. & that reminds us that we can't do everything on our own. We must partner with other Christians with different gifts so we are mutually blessed & so our efforts are multiplied (Rom 12:4-13). Other believers bring help & perspective & wisdom &

¹ John MacArthur, *Romans* p 363

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synergy>

experience & encouragement to situations where we desperately need it. We profit by laboring together in partnership with fellow Christians & even with other faithful churches in our area & around the world. We are not alone if we are in Christ Jesus. We are to be **fellow laborers** with one another. With that as background...

2. Where & How Did Prisca & Aquila Work With Paul? Before we answer that question, note that it appears they had a special relationship with Paul. There's not a single word of any contention between them anywhere. During his missionary career Paul had many colleagues & fellow workers. But it was necessary that he oppose Peter to his face (Gal 2:11ff). With Barnabas he had such a sharp disagreement that the 2 parted company (Acts 15:39). There was a time when Paul refused to allow John Mark to remain one of his companions (Acts 15:38). He reprimanded Euodia & Syntyche (Phil 4:2). & Demas deserted him (2 Tim 4:10). But even though Prisca & Aquila, in a sense, stood closer to him than any others, for they were his companions both in trade & in faith, & he lived with them for an extended time, as far as we know there was always harmony between them!³

There are 4 scenes where Priscilla & Aquila are seen either working with Paul or for the sake of the gospel they loved.

A. Corinth The 1st scene is in Corinth. Luke provides the details of this in Acts 18. Turn there & notice the circumstances that originally brought this couple & Paul to the same city. Luke writes in Acts 18:1-2,

After these things Paul left Athens & went to Corinth. & 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.

We learn here that Aquila was of Jewish descent & that he was from Pontus which is modern-day Turkey, south of the Black Sea. At some point he'd migrated to Rome. Prisca, on the other hand, we don't know for sure if she was Jew or Gentile. But both Aquila & Priscilla had been in Italy, probably in Rome, before Emperor Claudius had commanded all Jews to leave. Why did he do this? He'd tired of the disruption & conflict of Christian Jews & non-Christian Jews. The 1st century

³ William Hendricksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p 503

Roman historian Suetonius mentioned this decree by Claudius & wrote, *Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus (Christos), he expelled them from Rome.*⁴ In other words, to rid himself of the religious controversy that was continuing to boil over because of Jesus, he issued what came to be known as the *Nazareth Decree* & expelled all the Jews from Rome. It must have been terribly upsetting to Priscilla & Aquila to be banished from their home & business. However, God meant it for their good & ultimately, for the good of the church. One author wrote, *When Claudius threw them out of Rome, he threw them into intimate fellowship with the apostle Paul.*⁵ This was nothing less than God's providence. You might notice in the text that nothing is said about Priscilla & Aquila being Christians. It simply says that Paul met them in the synagogue where, according to Acts 18:4, **he was reasoning ... every Sabbath & trying to persuade Jews & Greeks.** They may have been unbelieving upon arriving, but they *happened* to meet Paul, Christianity's greatest missionary. Acts 18:3 says, **because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them & they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers.** Paul didn't have anywhere to live. Evidently Priscilla & Aquila had been exiled sometime earlier & had already established their tent-making business. They were apparently only too happy to find a man who was a tent-maker & needed work, so they boarded him & gave him a job. They became associated by a common trade & by a common faith. If they weren't yet Christians, can you imagine how long it took for Paul to lead them to faith? This is like inviting Billy Graham to stay in your guest room. Imagine every night at the supper table or all afternoon in the shop talking with the apostle Paul. The Bible doesn't record the conversions of Aquila & Priscilla, but they were probably already Christians when Paul met them. They'd come from Rome, where a church already existed (Rom 1:7-8), & they aren't listed among the Corinthian converts, either in this chapter or anywhere else in the NT. Had 2 such prominent individuals been saved under Paul's ministry, their conversions would no doubt have been recorded.⁶ One thing is for certain, Priscilla & Aquila will become so skilled in the Word of God & in the gospel over the 1½ year that Paul

⁴ D. Edmond Hiebert, *Personalities Around Paul*, p 37

⁵ *Ibid*, p 37

⁶ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, p 147

stays with them, this couple will later, straighten out a brilliant OT scholar named Apollos, who didn't have his facts quite right. When Paul received generous gifts from the Macedonians (18:5) through Timothy & Silas, he stopped making tents & began full time evangelistic work throughout Corinth. Acts 18:5 tells us that he was **solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ**. In other words, Paul was telling them Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed One, God incarnate. It's fascinating that while we're not told whether Paul ever moved out of Priscilla & Aquila's home, we do know when Paul left Corinth for Ephesus, he didn't travel alone! When Paul put out to sea, guess who came along? Priscilla & Aquila. **Acts 18:18-21**

B. Ephesus The 2nd scene opens in Ephesus. Here Priscilla & Aquila are once again involved in the ministry as volunteers. Paul left them in Ephesus to help begin a new work. One week while Priscilla & Aquila were in the synagogue, a gifted man showed up to teach. This time, it wasn't Paul who would teach them, it was a man by the name of Apollos, & they would actually teach him about the gospel of Jesus. Notice Acts 18:24-25.

Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; & he was mighty in the Scriptures. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; & being fervent in spirit, he was speaking & teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John.

In other words, Apollos accepted John the Baptist's message that Messiah was coming. He even believed Jesus was the Lamb of God (John 1:29) & Messiah. He surely expounded with force & persuasion the OT Scriptures that pointed to Jesus. But he didn't yet understand the significance of Christ's death & resurrection. He didn't really understand the finished work of the cross. Nor was he acquainted with the coming of the Spirit & the birth of the church on the Day of Pentecost. He didn't understand the ministry of the Spirit & hadn't heard about the use of spiritual gifts for the edification of the church, & probably a whole lot more. In short, he was a redeemed OT saint; he was saved but wasn't able to be called a Christian yet. In many ways, Apollos was still living in the OT. Acts 18:26 tells us Apollos **began to speak boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla & Aquila heard him, they took him aside & explained to him the way of God more accurately.** I can imagine Aquila leaning over to Priscilla after hearing Apollos preaching & saying, *Honey, I'm not sure he gets it fully. Let's explain the gospel to him if we get*

the chance. However it happened, Priscilla & Aquila explained the gospel to Apollos **more accurately**; they told him the rest of the story. They took him aside & didn't embarrass him publicly. Maybe they invited Apollos to their home & Aquila grilled pork chops to illustrate the end of the old covenant & the beginning of the new covenant, but probably not. This couple invited to their home the visiting teacher, who had every reason not to listen to them. Apollos knew the Scriptures, he was **mighty in them**, the text says. Furthermore, he'd been educated in Alexandria. The greatest library in the world was in Alexandria, containing 400k – a million scrolls & parchments. This was the city of Euclid & Philo. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, was translated in Alexandria. It was a translation quoted by Paul & by Jesus. Apollos was **an eloquent man**, Luke wrote. He'd probably read Aristotle's famous work, *Rhetoric*. He could hold a crowd in the palm of his hand. Apollos was speaking with fervency of spirit (18:25). **Fervent** means burning or boiling hot. Apollos exemplified D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones' definition of preaching *as logic on fire! Eloquent reason!*⁷ However, waiting for him in the lobby of the synagogue that Saturday morning was a couple who wouldn't let him refuse their invitation to dinner. Apollos accepted & came, more than likely, to their home. Even more, he listened. Priscilla & Aquila had been discipled well by Paul, & they together discipled Apollos. They explained to him the rich fullness of the truth concerning the Messiah's atoning death & resurrection. That the mighty preacher & scholar would consent to be taught by a lowly tentmaker & his wife attests to his godly humility. This says a lot about Apollos. He was gifted, educated, eloquent, impressive, & persuasive, but here he exhibited the most important quality of his life, he was humble. His host & hostess were tentmakers. Apollos could have, without a doubt, spent the afternoon at the table of the chief rabbi or in some dignitary's home. Instead, we can picture him at the table of a man & his wife who give him the rest of the story of God's redemption of mankind through the death & resurrection of His Son, Jesus. I'm certain Apollos was forever grateful that he was willing to listen to this couple who radically changed his life. Apollos listened & learned well! He would go

⁷ www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-is-logic-on-fire

on to Achaia & later to Corinth where his ministry would become legendary. He'd be greatly used in the church. **Acts 18:27-28**

The designation of Christians here as **those who had believed through grace** is the Spirit's way of reminding us that faith is a gift of grace (cf. Eph 2:8). Apollos assisted the believers in their spiritual growth through his powerful preaching. Paul would later write to the Corinthians that he had sowed the seed of the gospel in Corinth, but Apollos had watered it & God had brought forth great fruit (1 Cor 3:6). Priscilla & Aquila weren't finished in Ephesus. A while later, we know that Paul returned to Ephesus & played a significant role in the life of the church there. While at Ephesus, Paul wrote these words to the Corinthian believers: **Aquila & Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house** (1 Cor 16:19). Tradition says Paul was again lodging in their home. So this couple is again hosting a church in their home, as well as the apostle Paul. It's obvious from Scripture that their home & their lives belonged to God. Their occupation was only a means to an end for advancing the kingdom of God. For Paul, his friendship with Priscilla & Aquila was so critical in the support of his ministry & work, that after learning what we've learned about this couple, it's hard to imagine Paul without them. It's hard to imagine the possibility of Paul serving the way he did without their financial assistance, physical assistance, & no doubt, spiritual encouragement & prayer support as well. We all need Aquilas & Priscillas in our lives. It's been suggested there are 3 different kinds of people in the church:

- There are people who sap vision, they drain any possibility of vision from ever getting a foothold.
- There are people who appreciate vision, they cheer from the sidelines, but don't want to be involved; they like what's being done but don't want to be included or to financially support it. But they want it known that they appreciate what's being done.
- Then there are people who share vision. They speak the same ministry language; they have the same heartbeat for God's work; they are willing to make the same sacrifices.⁸

This was Priscilla & Aquila. Do one of the 1st 2 descriptions describe you? If so, how can you make your way into the 3rd group?

⁸ Stephen Davey, wisdomonline.org

C. Rome The 3rd scene in which we find this godly couple mentioned is here in Rom **16:3-4**.

All the Gentile believers are grateful for what this couple did to save Paul's life. I wish Paul had given us a clue what this was about, but he didn't. We don't know when they risked their neck for Paul. The word used by Paul can be understood in this context to mean they *placed* (their necks) *under the axe of the executioner*.⁹ We don't know when this happened, but it could be connected to the riots in Ephesus when the mob was filled with rage (Acts 19:23-41). Maybe it was during one of the difficult times Paul referred to as a trial because of the plotting of unbelieving Jews to harm him (Acts 20:19). We don't know the details, but whatever happened, Paul never forgot their act of heroism for his own life. We do know that when Paul left Ephesus, Priscilla & Aquila left for Rome. Paul had probably talked with them about his plans to travel to Rome & then on to Spain. There's no doubt in my mind that Priscilla & Aquila went ahead of Paul to Rome to set up their tent-making business & prepare a home for Paul. We know that Priscilla & Aquila did make it to Rome & did impact the church as usual. Notice, embedded in his greeting to Priscilla & Aquila, Paul writes, **also greet the church that is in their house** (5). Wherever they went, they served faithfully. What a couple. What humble, available, sacrificial servants for the cause of Christ!

D. Ephesus The final scene where we discover Priscilla & Aquila is back in Ephesus working with a young pastor & former disciple of Paul, named Timothy. Timothy is now pastoring the Ephesian church. This fits, doesn't it? It doesn't surprise me to learn that since Paul can no longer use Priscilla & Aquila in ministry, because he's under house arrest & only a short time from his own death, Timothy, his son-in-the-faith, has with him, helping him, like they helped Paul years earlier, this remarkable, faithful couple. Paul writes to Timothy, his final letter. At the end of the letter, the 1st people Paul says *Hello* to are these 2 dear friends, Priscilla & Aquila (2 Tim 4:19).

3. Application What do we learn from Prisca & Aquila? It's people like them who have been moving the church forward for the last 2,000 years. They advanced the church wherever they lived. They are behind the scenes, humble servants who've opened their hearts & their homes.

⁹ Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek NT*, p 384

They're willing to travel through life at God's command. There are 3 characteristics of Priscilla & Aquila that have traveled down through the centuries, from Corinth to Rome to Ephesus, from their church to ours. These are the characteristics of Christians who willingly choose to live for Christ & His kingdom.

A. Sacrifice Personal Safety People like Prisca & Aquila are willing to sacrifice their own personal safety. Remember, they were willing to die. They risked their own lives to save Paul's life & to preserve the ministry through Paul. From a human perspective, they prevented Paul's life & ministry from being cut short before he'd fulfilled his role in God's plan. Paul has good reason to give thanks for them, but so do **all the churches of the Gentiles** (4). We don't know whether these thanks from the Gentile churches are due specifically to Prisca & Aquila's rescue of Paul or more generally, to their significant ministry in these churches over many years & it really doesn't matter. How does the wide breadth of ministry of Prisca & Aquila happen? It happens by being large-hearted & not small-minded. It happens by being open to give, open to go, open to serve, open to invest, open to meet new people, deal with messy lives & issues & continue to love & serve. It comes by praying with a growing faith that wants God to use us & with a longing for God to do big things for His glory. Like Priscilla & Aquila, we still need Christians who are willing to lay their lives on the line. Christians who make a difference in ministry to others are concerned about others, not about themselves. That concern extends to taking risks to love others rather than worshiping the idol of our own comfort. Around the world today, are Christians who are dying because they won't deny that Jesus Christ alone is **the way, the truth, & the life** (Jn 14:6). They place their neck under the axe. Most of us don't know anything of this, for which we thank God. But what can we do to risk our necks for them? At the very least, we can pray. Our focus must never be on how hard this will be for me or how much this will cost me or how I'd rather take it easy or escape or not to try. Christians who make a difference for God aren't self-absorbed & self-protective, which frees them to serve sacrificially. The glory of God & the advancement of His kingdom is more treasured than their own lives.

B. Sacrifice Personal Profit Aquila & Priscilla viewed their occupation as a means to an end, a way to support & advance the cause of Christ. They were more interested in their standard of giving than in their standard of living. They were people who were willing to give away their stuff. They hosted a church in their house & traveled as needed for ministry & were open to God working through them. Even their risky rescue of Paul was known so broadly that all the Gentile churches were thankful for them. These are Christians who seem to give away more than they receive & we wonder why they always seem to be smiling. We still need Christians like this. Sacrifice personal safety, personal profit, & 3rdly ...

C. Sacrifice Personal Convenience Do you realize that about the time Aquila established his business in Corinth, he & Priscilla had a decision to make. They could start over again in Ephesus or stay in Corinth. They decided to forgo comfort & go along with Paul. Then, about the time they got established in Ephesus, this couple had another decision to make. They could stay in Ephesus or return to Rome. When they finally got settled in Rome, they had a decision to make. Would Priscilla & Aquila put their boots back on, travel back to Ephesus, & help Timothy, or would they say, *Enough is enough! We've done enough; we've given enough; we've moved enough! It's time to settle down & enjoy the scenery.* Not Priscilla & Aquila. They were willing to sacrifice their personal convenience for the sake of Christ. As one author worded it, *The future of the church is in the hands of ordinary Christians who aren't afraid of mud puddles.*¹⁰ I agree. May God give us men like Paul & Apollos & Timothy. But may He also give us Priscillas & Aquilas who make the ministries of Paul & Apollos & Timothy possible by opening their hearts & their homes. People who are willing to mess up their shoes & alter their plans & withdraw from their savings & clutter up their calendars with the needs of others for the sake of Jesus Christ. These are the people who move the church forward. We must crawl out of the cushions of life that tempt to smother us in endless indulgence. Wherever you find effective, productive ministry, look behind the scenes, away from the spotlight & you'll discover people like Aquila & Priscilla. They are the ones with mud on their shoes, aprons around their waists, activity in their hands, & people on

¹⁰ Dwight Robertson, *The Laborer's Journal*, p 26

their hearts. They are the servants of Jesus Christ. They gladly serve Him, by gladly serving you & me. May the spirit of Priscilla & Aquila multiply here & around the world for the sake of the gospel & the glory of God.