

Priscilla and Aquila

Paul's Firm Friends and Model Tentmakers

by Mans Ramstad

In Acts and the Pauline letters around 95 individuals are recorded to have been associated with Paul during his ministry. They are participants in his preaching, teaching and writing. The presence of these people in Paul's life shows the extent to which his ministry was one of teamwork and camaraderie, and was not a "one-man show". Further analysis shows that of these 95 individuals, 36 of them were intimate coworkers of Paul (Hawthorne, Martin et al. 1993). Among the ranks of coworkers was the couple from Rome, Priscilla and Aquila. Paul referred to them as his *synergoi* (coworkers), and they ministered together for a period of over ten years. During this time, Priscilla and Aquila¹ ministered relatively independently of Paul, as he was often traveling or living in other locations, but their commitment to common ministry is sure.

Although Paul is often considered the primary example of tentmaking ministry in the New Testament, and although the information we have on his ministry is the richest and most complete, we find among Paul's friends other examples of good tentmaking ministry from which we can learn. I find Priscilla and Aquila to be excellent examples of how to be successful tentmakers and church planters in cross-cultural contexts. In this paper I would like to tell their life story as an example of successful tentmaking ministry.

Background

Aquila was a Jew born and raised in Pontus on the Black Sea coast of Asia Minor (Acts 18:1). He was a convert to Christ, possibly having heard the gospel from Pontian Christians who had been present at Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2:9). For reasons unknown, he immigrated to far away Rome. Aquila was a businessman who made and traded leather (please see Table for chronology and references).

In Rome, Aquila met and married a high Roman girl by the name of Priscilla (sometimes called by the affectionate name, Prisca). Together, Priscilla and Aquila became stalwart members of the church in Rome. They lived in Rome for approximately nine years.

Mans Ramstad and his family have been involved in tentmaking ministry in an Asian country for ten years.

In 49 AD, Emperor Claudius issued an edict expelling all the Jews from Rome, so that Priscilla and Aquila moved to the port city of Corinth. Once in Corinth, they continued their trade in leather. It is important to note that in Corinth they are foreigners, so their ministry bears this similarity to that of we modern tentmakers.

Encounter with Paul

At this time, the Apostle Paul was in Corinth, working in the leather business and preaching the gospel. He preached in the synagogue every Sabbath trying to persuade Jews and Greeks (Acts 18:3). One day Priscilla and Aquila happened to meet Paul, because they were of the same trade. They invited Paul to their home, and showed hospitality to him. This was the beginning of their ministry teamwork. It all began, not because they belonged to the same mission board, but because they were in the same public work. They didn't become ministry partners as a result of long-range planning, but became ministry partners because first they were professional colleagues. Their professional skill was crucial to having a legitimate existence in Corinth, where they were foreigners, and as the best channel to make friends. People were able to identify with them. Many traditional missionaries find their most difficult task to be making friendships that have ministry potential. Tentmakers don't have this problem, because their work naturally puts them in contact with many people. As we go into new contexts, we need to have eyes and ears that are open to seeing the ministry potential of the people around us. We must avoid being too insular in this regard.

By being able to work with their own hands (II Cor 11:9, I Thess 2:9, 4:11; II Thess 3:10-13), tentmakers also have the advantage of not being a burden on local people, or of confusing the local people about the source of their support. They can see that you are being paid (including being supported by churches back in one's home country) to do a task with which they can identify.

Priscilla and Aquila worked and ministered in Corinth for around three years.

Move to Ephesus

In 52 AD Priscilla and Aquila moved with Paul to Ephesus. They may have even had branch offices for their leather business in Rome, Corinth and now Ephesus. Eventually Paul left for Syria, leaving Priscilla and Aquila in charge of the ministry in Ephesus. In Ephesus they worshipped regularly in the synagogue, so they ministered both to the busi-



ness community and to the religious community. Paul showed a great deal of trust in Priscilla and Aquila, leaving them in charge of the ministry. This brings up an important lesson for us today. If our long-term goal is a strong indigenous ministry, led by local people, we need to trust people with responsibility, and allow them to move ahead in leadership according to their gifts and their vision. It is easy to be overly controlling, and then later wonder why the local people don't want to assume responsibility. For one thing, by being left out of leadership, they haven't been able to develop the skills necessary to lead. Second, you may have unwittingly established a leadership style which so resembles yourself that nobody feels able, or wants to assume leadership for it. We can learn much from Paul's example of empowering and trusting local people to lead, right from the beginning. Eventually Priscilla and Aquila were able to start a church in their home in Ephesus (I Cor. 16:19).

One day Priscilla and Aquila heard a man named Apollos preaching in

the synagogue. Apollos was a Jewish traveler from Alexandria, Egypt (Acts 18:26). Apollos was a learned man with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. Although he preached of Jesus, and was able to refute people with the Scriptures, his doctrine was in error, for he only knew the baptism of John (Acts 19:4). Aquila and Priscilla recognized this, so they invited Apollos to their home where they taught him correct doctrine.

This good example of Priscilla and Aquila shows the role of the home in ministry. In many of the countries we live in, we are not allowed to evangelize and preach publicly, but we have tremendous freedom in what we do with individuals or small groups of people in our homes. They seized on this opportunity and were able to successfully correct Apollos. This also shows the importance of being able, and willing, to teach sound doctrine and correct errors (II Tim 3:16). It must have been intimidating for Priscilla and Aquila to challenge Apollos, but they were willing to do so. Although they may have seemed unspectacular in ministry, primarily opening their home to ministry, they were obviously steeped in sound doctrine and able to teach accurately. This is a skill we need as well. Many people who have a limited amount of Biblical and theological training hope to go into missions. It is a mistake to cut corners on the training one receives.

It is difficult to predict who will turn out to be key ministers of the gospel. In Apollos, Priscilla and Aquila had identified a key person. Eventually they encouraged him to visit Corinth (cf I Cor 1:12; 3:4-6, 22; 4:6; 16:12). In Achaia, Apollos became a tremendous help to the brothers and evangelized Jews there. We should give our best to everyone the Lord entrusts to us in ministry. One never knows if a disciple the Lord has entrusted to you might become an Apollos. If we have the chance of raising up one Apollos in our lifetime, it would be a life well spent.

In late 52, Paul returned to Ephesus and probably lived with Priscilla and Aquila during that fruitful three years of ministry (Acts 20:31). In Romans

16:4 we read of Priscilla and Aquila having risked their lives for the sake of Paul. We don't know what the incident was, but it is possible that it was during the incident in the theater in Ephesus that they protected him. This shows their love and support of each other, risking even their very lives.

Priscilla and Aquila are known for their unswerving support for leaders in ministry—including both Paul and Timothy. From the example of Priscilla and Aquila, we learn of the important role the tentmaker can play in evangelism, showing hospitality, discipling believers, and teaching and correcting. What's more, we learn from them that the most important thing we can do is to serve others to the end of them becoming the leaders of the church. They did not compete with the leaders or gossip about them, but supported them, in this case, even risking their lives for Paul. How many of us support the Christian leaders around us in that way? How often do we hinder the work of the gospel by our own pride, or jealousy? Especially given our status as foreigners, whom the government often fears are aiming for authority or control, we need to serve and build others as the key leaders. We should build up the local believers, and not draw attention to ourselves. This is the example of Priscilla and Aquila. What models they are for tentmakers like us.

Return to Rome

Around 57 AD Paul was in Corinth, and from there wrote to the believers in Rome. Being in Corinth, Paul is likely associating with people who are a part of the church Priscilla and Aquila had started there, and no doubt the events of their time together came to mind. In Romans 15:3-5, we read words written specifically to Priscilla and Aquila, so we know they are back in Rome by this time. In 54 AD, a new emperor had arisen in Rome, and with him elapsed Claudius' expulsion edict, so it is likely that this is what led to Priscilla and Aquila's return to Rome around 55 AD.

In Romans 16 Paul refers to Priscilla and Aquila as his coworkers (*syner-*

goi). He praises them for their fruitful Christian lives, and points out that they are known to "all the churches of the Gentiles". They obviously have

*The peripatetic
Apostle Paul is unrivalled
as a missionary and a
tentmaker. However, not
everyone has the same
gifts as Paul or works
in situations resembling
Paul's.*

had a good witness in the lives of many people all around the region.

In Romans 16:5 Paul writes, "Greet the church that is in their (Priscilla and Aquila's) house." It appears that they have started another church, or perhaps have picked up the ministry they had been a part of in Rome ten years earlier. Wherever they go, they use their home for fruitful ministry and church planting.

Later History

During 60-61 AD Paul was in prison in Rome. During that time he wrote Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians and Philippians. Priscilla and Aquila were not mentioned in any of those letters, suggesting that they had probably left Rome again and returned to Ephesus. It is thought they were ministering with Timothy in Ephesus. Once again they are showing their gift of supporting church leaders. They may have supported timid Timothy in his duties in that church (I Tim 1:3; II Tim 4:19). They may have also served the widow and son of Onesiphorous, Paul's dear friend (II Tim. 1:16).

Priscilla and Aquila showed a willingness to move frequently. They moved every three to five years. It seems modern tentmakers also need this kind of flexibility and willingness to move.

Summary

Priscilla and Aquila stand out as glowing examples of successful

tentmaking ministry. Lessons we modern-day Tentmakers can learn from the example of Priscilla and Aquila include:

1. Priscilla and Aquila spent most of their time ministering across cultural lines. Most of the information we have about their lives is away from their "hometowns".
2. Work with your hands and if possible, support yourself.
3. Identify with other professionals. Do real ministry through your work.
4. Engage in **intentional ministry**—evangelism (in the synagogue), Bible teaching (Apollos), discipleship (Timothy), church planting (Rome, Corinth and Ephesus) and hospitality (toward Paul).
5. Priscilla and Aquila seem to exemplify the "whole life" type ministry Paul refers to in Phil 4:9, "The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace shall be with you." It includes one's teaching ("learned, received and heard"), as well as one's life ("seen").
6. Depending on your context, it may be effective to minister primarily out of your home. Hospitality was a large part of Priscilla and Aquila's ministry.
7. Function as lay workers. Support the vocational church leaders (pastors, full-time elders, etc. such as Paul and Timothy) and their churches.
8. Moving to a new place didn't change their lives or ministries. They had the same strategy wherever they were. This shows the importance of ministering according to your gifts. It also shows the importance of building one's ministry abilities by repetition and experience rather than

Table. Chronology of events in the lives of Priscilla and Aquila.

Year (AD)	Location	Events	Reference
Birth~40	Pontus	Aquila, a Jew, born and raised in Pontus. Immigrated to Rome. Priscilla (Prisca) born a high Roman girl.	Acts 18:2
~40-49	Rome	Aquila practised his trade in leather. Priscilla and Aquila meet and marry. Become stalwart members of the church in Rome. Expelled from Rome by edict of Claudius against the Jews. Go to Corinth.	Acts 18:3 (Acts 18:2) (Rom 16:3) Acts 18:2
49-52	Corinth	Showed Paul hospitality, and plied their trade with his help.	Acts 18:3
52-55	Ephesus	Sailed from Corinth to Ephesus with Paul. Carried on Paul's ministry when Paul left for Syria. Ephesian church met in their home. Instructed Apollos in Christian doctrine. Late 52 Paul returned to Ephesus, and may have lived with Priscilla and Aquila during this fruitful 3-year ministry.	Acts 18:18-19 Acts 18:19-21 I Cor 16:19 Acts 18:26 (Acts 20:31)
55-60	Rome	Priscilla and Aquila return to Rome. As in Ephesus, the church in Rome meets in their home.	Rom 16:3-5
60-64	Ephesus	Supported timid Timothy (II Tim 1:7) in his work in the Ephesian church.	II Tim 1:7, 16; 4:19

following the trends or dabbling in a little of everything.

The peripatetic Apostle Paul is unrivalled as a missionary and a tentmaker. However, not everyone has the same gifts as Paul or works in situations resembling Paul's. Therefore while learning from Paul's example to us, we need not woodenly copy him. The Bible is rich in teaching and example that can inspire and guide us as we seek to be effective tentmakers today. Priscilla and Aquila are two such examples. I hope this introduction to their lives and ministry is an encouragement and an example to you in your own ministry situation. **IJFM**

Endnote

¹I will use Priscilla's name first, which is the order used all but once in the New Testament. Some scholars say this shows that Priscilla's had higher status than Aquila, or perhaps was the most gifted in ministry of the two.

References Cited

Hawthorne, G. H., R. Martin, et al., Eds. (1993). *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Downers Grove, IL, Intervarsity Press.

Credit

Inspiration for this chapter came from professor emeritus Murray J. Harris of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and the work of F.F. Bruce as found in *The Pauline Circle*, Eerdmans, 1985.

MAKE SURE YOU GET THESE

CONTACT IJFM

telephone (915) 775 2464

e-mail 103121.2610@compuserve.com

address 7665 Wenda Way
El Paso, TX 79915

EXCITING ISSUES!

DISCOUNTS AVAILABLE FOR QUANTITY ORDERS

Islam 11:2, 13:3, 13:4, 17:1, 17:4

Hinduism 1:4, 18:4

Buddhism 10:3

Tribal Peoples 14:4, 15:2

Nomadic Peoples 17:2, 17:3