
Aquila and Priscilla – The Enablers

Romans 16:3

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**A Personal
Word**

For those of you who may be visiting, I want you to know that I am a guest in this pulpit in fulfillment of course requirements for my Elder Internship. Now I don't mean that as a disclaimer- it is my sincere desire that your indulgence and the raw power of God's word will make this evening together a meaningful event. I am very excited about this opportunity to open the word of God with you. I have gained some valuable insights preparing this second installment in our Ministry Partners series, and I hope you find my excitement infectious.

Preface

Our subject for this message is Priscilla and Aquila, but before we focus on them I would like to examine their context so that we might broaden our perspective enough to develop our principles for ministry. So we will start by surveying the movement of God's favor in the establishment of the church, then focus on the few details we are given in scripture regarding Priscilla and Aquila's role in that emerging church, and finally develop principles we can apply to our own hearts to stimulate our work with the grace of God in his church today.

Before we get underway, lets pause to welcome God's favor on our study tonight. Let us pray "Our Father in heaven, we invite you to open the eyes of our understanding to your ways so that we might walk in them. Let my diligence in speaking and our diligence in listening work together with your purposes to accomplish your will tonight. We seek the pleasure of your glory in Jesus name. Amen"

Introduction

Now to begin. We are going to go surfing- not on the internet or at the ocean but in the book of Acts. Just as we would put on a suit, wax our surf board, and feel the excitement of the crashing surf, I would like us to feel the tide of history as we read through these passages together. Turn with me in your Bibles to Acts chapter four where we will begin our survey of the movement of grace in the emerging church.

Movement of Grace in the Acts

Post Pentecost- Borne by Peter

Ch.4:³²Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul....³³ ... and great grace was upon them all.

Now we recognize that this is the post-Pentecost church and it isn't much of a surprise that Luke would explain these dramatic events with the term "great grace." But we are given a clue here by Luke that where we find "grace" we will find a wave big enough to surf. Let's keep our eyes out on the horizon- we want to be ready to catch that wave.

Sanhedrin

In chapter five we see the opposition to the church mounting with the Sanhedrin very close to murdering the apostles when Gamaliel intervenes with these words of wisdom:

Ch.5: ³⁸ "... for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; ³⁹but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!"

Well their restraint was short lived until Stephan (who was full of grace and power) was dragged from their council and stoned to death. This initiated a great persecution that displaced the disciples from their community and scattered the church. We then see what should have been a formidable omen to the Sanhedrin when Saul is converted to Christ in the very act of his zealous house-to-house hunt for disciples.

Antioch- Borne by anonymous "men of Cyprus and Cyrene"

Turn with me now to chapter 11 and look at what we find in verse 19: "Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus." (The Hellenists were Greek-speaking non-Jews.)

Are you watching with me? We have some action here that might be a swell. Let's read on.

Verse 21:

Ch. 11: ²¹And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. ²²The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad...

Okay, there's our clue from Luke- "grace of God" in verse 23. We definitely have a swell and it is HUGE! We need to get into position for the wave.

What does Barnabas do? Verse ²⁵"So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians."

Wow! The surf is UP! Are you with me? Am I making this up or do you see it also?

Paul's 1st Missionary Journey

Chapter 13. ¹Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ²While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. ⁴So, being sent out by the

Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews.

Okay. We have some action here- definitely supernatural but a bit difficult to interpret. This may be another swell, but how can we know for sure? What are the principles that we can apply to our lives today? Well speaking metaphorically, these preachers and teachers were most likely the ones who surfed that wave at Antioch. Quite possibly they were on the beach reflecting over one of the best surfing days of their lives. Perhaps they were reasoning about the relatively spontaneous nature of that event and wondering if God was going to perpetuate the concept. If this speculation is accurate, Paul and Barnabas basically had an invitation from the Holy Spirit to go with Him and make waves together (continuing the metaphorical thought). At any rate, they engaged the idea and ventured back out into the surf. Let's read on.

Verse ⁴²As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath. ⁴³And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God. ⁴⁴The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him. ⁴⁶And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth." ⁴⁸And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. ⁴⁹And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region."

There in verse 47 is the answer to our question about how we should interpret that supernatural event: "For so the Lord has commanded us." Paul and Barnabas interpreted their previous observations and experiences for us. They did this by way of two Scripture passages (Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6) that were very obviously about the Messiah. What are they saying? They are saying that the Messiah Jesus is working through them to shine His light on the nations and bring salvation to the ends of the earth. At the risk of abusing our analogy, they are no longer merely hunting waves to surf; they are now working with the Wave Maker.

How was this actually happening? Let's look ahead to

Ch. 14: ³So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.

They were speaking the word of His grace and God was bearing witness that it was indeed His word and grace. Now it is easy to get distracted from the main event here so let's "gird the loins of our minds" for just a minute. Just

as the word of His grace was on the lips of the apostles, so was His witness on the lips of the Gentile converts. Remember back in chapter 13 verse ⁴⁸“And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.” While there were signs and wonders being done by the hands of the apostles, I suggest that these were opening and closing acts to support the main event which was the making of disciples.

Luke confirms this all in a summary statement in verse 26.

Ch.14:²⁶and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. ²⁷And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

Paul’s 2nd Missionary Journey

We can see this pattern of going out repeated on Paul’s 2nd missionary journey. Look with me at:

Ch. 15: ⁴⁰but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.

Apollos

Surprisingly we see Apollos (who was not part of the original apostle’s journey or message) working with this grace in his ministry.

Ch. 18: ²⁷ When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed

Ephesian Church Elders

We are now approaching what I consider a major transition in this concept of grace that we have been observing. We caught just a hint with Apollos, but it will become apparent in this next passage. Paul is on his way to Jerusalem and has stopped to give a parting encouragement to the Ephesian Elders. Look with me at:

Ch. 20: ²⁴But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. ³²And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

This same word of grace that we saw sustaining Paul in the establishment of the church is now being described as causing its growth and nurture. Notice that Paul is not commending the word of God’s grace TO THE ELDERS. This was not something Paul controlled and dispensed as he saw fit. Paul is commending THEM to the word of God’s grace. It controlled him and set the trajectory of his life in voluntary sacrifice to the purposes of God. Paul and his sending church at Antioch were completely submitted to the power of God. Paul is now pointing the church leadership at Ephesus to that same power as the Source of their new life and placing them in its care. The word

of grace is the power of God for their own salvation as well as for the church of God in their care.

Movement Confirmed in the Epistles

Church at Colossae

We have seen how Luke has portrayed this movement of God in the book of Acts. Before we move on from this idea to our main subject let's see if we can confirm this perspective from the epistles. In fact we see this very thing happening at the church of Colossae. Turn with me to:

Colossians 1: ⁵ Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶ which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing--as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth

Now that we have seen the movement of God over great geographical distances and various people groups, let's focus in and see what that movement looks like in the life of our subjects- Priscilla and Aquila.

Priscilla and Aquila- Partners in Ministry

Their Scriptural Debut

Our story begins in Acts 18 with verse one.

Acts 18: ¹After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ²And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, ³and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. ⁴And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

Displacement v.1

Let's focus for a moment on the reason Priscilla and Aquila were in Corinth. Claudius was Emperor of the Roman Empire and in his ninth year (49-50) he commanded all the Jews to get out of his city. So essentially Priscilla and Aquila were refugees.

Dispute and Edict

Look for a moment with me at the historical evidence for this edict.

“As the Jews were indulging in constant riots at the instigation of Chrestus, he banished them from Rome.” Suetonius Life of Claudius xxv.4

F.F. Bruce in The New International Commentary on the New Testament The Book of the ACTS makes the following statement about this evidence. “Chrestus was a common slave-name in the Greco-Roman world, and appears as a spelling variant for the unfamiliar Christus. (In Greek the two words were pronounced alike.)”

Disposition

Hospitable v.3

Okay, so moving back briefly to our previously surfing analogy, we see a swell developing- at least for Priscilla and Aquila in this dispute over Christ among the converts of Judaism in Italy. The swell matures into a wave with the edict of Claudius, their displacement to Corinth, and the arrival of Paul in Corinth.

Notice also that the text tells us that Priscilla and Aquila were strangers in a strange place, but they were very hospitable to Paul. They shared with him not only their home but their livelihood as well.

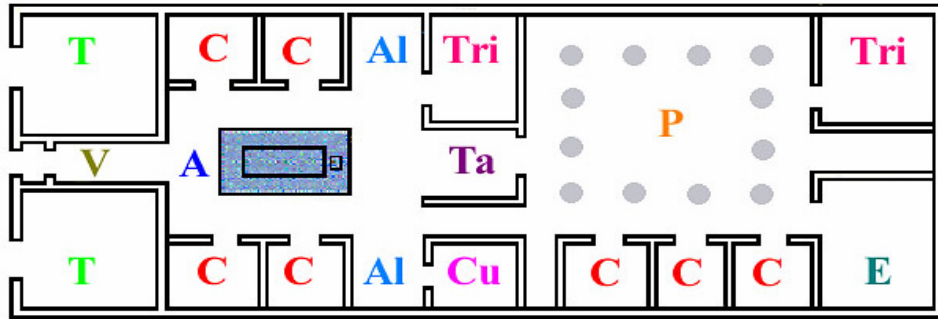
Below is a map of the region. The distance between Rome and Corinth is about the same as the distance between Chicago and Jacksonville in north Florida- 600 miles as the goose flies.



Corinth was a major trade center in that time. As you can see on the map, the isthmus (the body of land between the two seas) was only four miles wide and had a major port on each end. I found some historical information that said Periander constructed a five foot wide rock-cut tract in the 7th century BC for wheeling small ships and their unloaded cargo from one gulf to the other. By 400 BCE, a double wall was constructed to protect a two mile rock paved street, about 40' wide, between the ports.

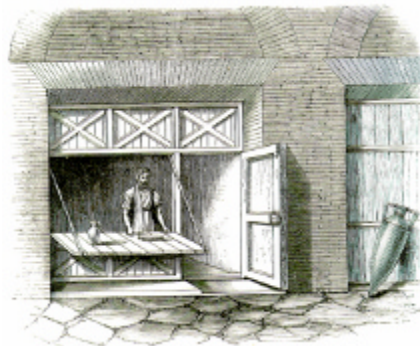
Being people of means and commerce, they likely would have traveled to Corinth by boat. Here is a model of what those vessels would have been like in that day.





Back in Acts 18, notice with me that Paul lived and worked with Priscilla and Aquila. Above is a floor plan of a Roman house of that period that may have been similar to the house of Priscilla and Aquila. I estimate this to be about 2,500 square feet on the main floor with two or three floors typical. The *cubiculum* was their name for a bedroom. This is a photo of a period bedroom similar to the one Paul may have stayed in. Notice also the *taberna* or shop out on the street front. It had no inside doors and could be leased without granting tenants access to the rest of the house.

Here is an artist concept of a shop as viewed from the street side.



Brief Stay vv.5-7

Back in our passage we read on. (Acts 18: ⁵) “When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. ⁶And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” ⁷And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue.”

It is difficult to say with certainty, but when Luke says in verse seven that Paul “left there” he may have meant that Paul moved from Priscilla and Aquila’s house to live and teach out of the house of Titius Justus. This could have occurred simultaneous to Paul’s transition in ministry from the Jews of Corinth to the Gentiles. At any rate, this was a period of relative stability for Paul as we see in verse 11 “And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.”

Notice in verse 12 the reference to Gallio. We have in the historical record that Gallio was proconsul of Achaia from 51 to 52.

Surprising Commitment vv. 18-21

Beginning with verse 18 we see Paul in transition from Corinth to Ephesus.

Acts 18:¹⁸After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow. ¹⁹And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. ²⁰When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. ²¹But on taking leave of them he said, "I will return to you if God wills," and he set sail from Ephesus.

Isn't this surprising? We see Paul with Priscilla and Aquila for a relatively short time in Corinth. With the little information Luke disclosed one could easily conclude that Paul's relationship with them was simply one of convenience. But that all changes in verse 18 with Priscilla and Aquila relocating to Ephesus at the same time Paul moves there. Their relationship was obviously more than a convergence of mutual convenience, but what was it exactly? The question becomes even stronger when we see in verse 19 the statement by Luke that "he left them there" suggesting another short period of time together. So we have two fairly intimate and bonding experiences with Paul choosing to part company with them relatively soon after.

In Action

With Apollos vv.24-28

The next passage of scripture finds Priscilla and Aquila in action.

Acts 18: ²⁴Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. ²⁵He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and explained to him the way of God more accurately. ²⁷And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, ²⁸for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

Now this strongly suggests that Priscilla and Aquila were more than mere wealthy merchants on a parallel trajectory of coincidence with Paul. We can safely assume that they were at least vaguely familiar with the teaching about Jesus being the Christ. It would have been reasonable for them to have some knowledge about the purpose of their exile from Rome. But this event demonstrates more than a familiarity. Notice that they explained to Apollos "the

way of God more accurately” even though Apollos “spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus.” In fact scholars have argued that Priscilla and Aquila were believers before they left Rome and may have had thorough knowledge of the gospel.

It is important to notice the apparent results of their relationship with Apollos. After engaging him in the synagogue, they apparently brought him into the gathered church who then endorsed his ministry. Luke was careful to document the effect of this relationship as “greatly help[ing] those who through grace had believed.”

Okay. Now that is the extent of the record we have of Priscilla and Aquila in the book of Acts. But thankfully that does not finish the account of them in scripture.

With church at Ephesus

The next reference we have chronologically to Priscilla and Aquila comes in 1Corinthians chapter 16. Please turn there with me.

1Corinthians 16: ¹⁹The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.

Paul wrote the first letter to Corinth from Ephesus during his 3rd missionary journey- Sometime between 52 and 56. This brief statement indicates that Priscilla and Aquila (Paul refers to her by her formal name while Luke preferred the informal) had much more than a personal relationship with Paul. They had fully engaged his ministry and were hosting a church in their home. The not-casual greeting to the church at Corinth further suggests that this engagement began back there.

Let’s take just a minute to look at some pictures of a Roman house and imagine what it must have been like for them to host a church in their home.

With church at Rome

Look with me now to the next chronological reference to Priscilla and Aquila- Romans chapter 16 verse 3.

Romans 16: ³Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, ⁴who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. ⁵Greet also the church in their house.

There are several significant statements Paul makes about them here.

Their Return

First of all notice that they had moved back to Rome. The historical record gives the date of Claudius’ death at the hand of an assassin as the fall of 54. Recall that it was Claudius who gave the edict to evict all the Jews from Rome four to five years previous? Likely with his death and the reign of Nero at the age of 17 via his mother meant all previous edicts were “off.” Now this is speculative, but one can reasonably imagine that

Priscilla and Aquila made a rather hasty departure from Rome following the edict and may have wanted to get back and salvage what remained of their former life. At any rate we find them back there receiving a greeting from Paul who was continuing his third missionary- probably writing from Ephesus in 56 or 57.

Risked Their Necks

Second we see that they risked their necks for Paul's life. They were not so attached to their affluence as to shrink back from standing with Paul during his crisis. Paul, not given to platitudes, suggests again that this was more than just a personal relationship but that there was something in the resolution of the crisis that served all the Gentile churches.

Workers in Christ

Third we see that Paul refers to them as “my fellow workers in Christ Jesus.” Now it is upon this statement that I have based the theme of this whole message. Priscilla and Aquila are in the scripture to show us today how to engage the command of Jesus to make disciples. We will look more to this when we extract principles in a moment. For now let us look quickly at Romans 15:¹⁸ where Paul establishes what he means by a “worker *in Christ Jesus*.” He says of his own ministry “for I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me....” In 1Corinthians 15:¹⁰ Paul further elaborates his standard of service by declaring that “... by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” It is a reasonable inference then to say that Priscilla and Aquila had the same standards of ministry and Paul valued his relationship with them to that level.

Continued Hospitality

Fourthly we see that Priscilla and Aquila were hosting another church in their house in Rome. Now when I checked my dates I was very impressed to learn that the scriptures document that they hosted two churches in two distant metropolitan centers in less than five years: one church in Ephesus at the beginning of Paul's 3rd missionary journey and one in Rome toward the end of that same journey. That in my opinion is worthy of recognition.

The final Scripture reference for Priscilla and Aquila is found in 2Timothy 4:¹⁹. It simply states “Greet Prisca and Aquila.” This puts them back in Ephesus before Paul wrote 2nd letter to Timothy (who was in Ephesus) from Rome sometime during 63-64

Principles for Ministry

Maintained transcendent ministry relationships

We see this in Paul's reference to them as "my fellow workers in Christ." Theirs was a relationship based primarily on ministry and secondarily on similar interests.

Theologically equipped and engaging

This was demonstrated by how they engaged Apollos. Remember how they explained to Apollos "the way of God more accurately" even though Apollos "spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus."

Practiced Christian hospitality as a lifestyle

This was evidenced by how they received Paul into their home and business even though they were strangers in a strange place and their consistent hosting of churches.

Possessed a proven *cling-free* materialism

They obviously possessed "mobile wealth" or "portable capital" sufficient to acquire houses large enough to host these two churches, yet they are said to have "risked their necks" for Paul's life.

Mobility

They had a mobile lifestyle and moved frequently. Sometimes involuntarily but other times voluntarily. When they moved they continued their same work for the Lord at their new location.

Maintained a *world-renowned* yet church-centered ministry

After engaging Apollos, they apparently brought him into the gathered church and endorsed his ministry. Paul, not given to bragging or overstating spheres of influence, said that "all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks" to Prisca and Aquila for their ministry to him.

Husband and wife team

They were always referred to as a couple. They apparently performed their Christian service in unison. If you are married or are preparing for marriage, consider that Priscilla was likely just as theologically competent as Aquila. Contrast our knowledge of this couple's ministry with the anonymous wives who traveled with the "rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas" documented in 1Corinthians 9:5. We don't even know their names.

Challenge

Reflect with me for a moment on the surfing analogy we developed earlier. Remember how the grace of God moved through the church at Jerusalem and then by way of the persecution to Antioch? Remember how the grace of God was the active ingredient establishing and maintaining the churches on Paul's missionary journeys? Perhaps we do not see masses being converted to Christ, but does that mean that the grace of God is dormant? I think not!

Reflect for an instant on your own conversion. Can you clearly see the grace of God working in that process and continuing to work to present you faultless at the coming of Christ? In the slough of our fleshly contentment, is there a channel open to our senses for detecting an opportunity to work with that same grace in the making of another disciple? Is there a taste in our soul for the eternal that will abandon every temporal comfort to work with that grace? Hear me! That channel is called hospitality and that taste is called Jesus Christ. Let us clothe ourselves with Light and ride the dawn of this glorious gospel of grace into our desperate circumstances and tentative spheres of influence.

Consider Hebrews 5:13-14 "...the word of righteousness.... is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil...." Do we have our senses trained to recognize the goodness of God actively pursuing His own glory in our circumstances? That same passage in Hebrews puts our "work and ... serving the saints" squarely in the context of the preservation of our souls. Do we place that same priority on Christian hospitality or is the grace of God toward us proving fruitless?

Are we confident enough in our ability to rightly handle the word of truth that we might engage the grace of God at that level or are we dependent on someone else to stand in our stead?

Won't you resolve with me not to be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises?