

## CHAPTER 4

### MARRIAGE AND MINISTRY: THE HUSBAND AND WIFE TEAM MINISTRY OF PRISCA AND AQUILA

The ministry engaged and proposed in this project paper has its foundation in Scripture, specifically in the ministry of Prisca<sup>1</sup> and Aquila.<sup>2</sup> The ministry of Prisca and Aquila was a team ministry. They worked together leading a church in their home. In all the references to this couple in Scripture there is never a hint of subordination or competition between Prisca and

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<sup>1</sup>"Prisca" is the formal name by which she is referred to by Paul. Luke uses the diminutive, "Priscilla." Some argue that this could be a "put-down." See Jerome Murphy O'Conner, "Prisca and Aquila: Traveling Tentmakers and Church Builders," Bible Review, 40. others see it as a "nickname." See George Martin, "Prisca and Aquila" Liguorian 81(11): 28. While still others view it as a more friendly, intimate form of address. See Joyce Hollyday. Clothed With the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice and Us (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 158. We believe this demonstrates the personality of the authors. Paul was very good friends with Prisca and Aquila and referred to Prisca by her formal name, perhaps out of respect. We refer to her as Prisca for this reason.

<sup>2</sup>It should be noted that several scholars comment on the fact that four of the six times they are mentioned (two each by Paul and Luke), Prisca's name appears first. Scholars point to her possible social or spiritual status within the society or the church. See Martin, 28; O'Conner, 40; Luise Schottroff, The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics, ed. Norman Gottwald, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 424; Keith A. Gerberding, "Women Who Toil in Ministry, Even as Paul," Currents in Theology in Theology and Mission 18(4): 287; and finally, David M. Scholer, "Paul's Women Co-Workers in the Ministry of the Church" Daughters of Sarah 6(4): 4. However, our conclusion is that they were a team of equal partners. Cf. A. T. Robertson, Types of Preachers in the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), 53-57.

Aquila or with others. Their ministry was a "collaboration of equals"<sup>3</sup> as they worked together to build the kingdom of God. They were a husband and wife team who lived together, worked together, and ministered together: "they were involved in forming, nurturing, and leading house churches."<sup>4</sup> Their ministry was a "team ministry, co-leading a church in their home, providing an excellent example of leadership through an equal partnership of spouses."<sup>5</sup> They were a special couple who were allowed to pursue their ministry because they had become a part of a movement in which equality existed. Upon being baptized into the Christian religion, race, class, and gender became irrelevant<sup>6</sup> --at least in the first century.<sup>7</sup>

Their names are always mentioned together in Scripture<sup>8</sup> "as if they were inseparable".<sup>9</sup> Prisca and Aquila model a beautiful team ministry based on equality and mutual submission and respect. Their entire life was characterized by equality in marriage and ministry. In fact, tradition has it they were martyred together, perhaps in the time of Nero's persecution of

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<sup>3</sup>Florence Morgan Gillman, "The Ministry of Women in the Early Church," New Theology Review, 6(2): 90.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 90.

<sup>5</sup>Hollyday, 158.

<sup>6</sup>Gal. 3.27,28

<sup>7</sup>Hollyday, 160.

<sup>8</sup> They are mentioned by Luke in Acts 18.2, 18, 26 and by Paul in Rom. 16.3-5, 1 Cor 16.19, and 2 Tim. 4.19.

<sup>9</sup>David James Burrell, Paul's Companions (New York: American Tract Society, 1921), 89.

Christians in 64 CE.<sup>10</sup> This tradition is celebrated on July 8 in the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>11</sup>

Prisca and Aquila<sup>12</sup> are the best known husband and wife team in New Testament times, it would seem from the amount of information we have about them. Though Prisca and Aquila were not exceptions,<sup>13</sup> neither were they typical in view of the role of women in the culture in New Testament times. Prisca chose to follow her sense of calling instead of confining herself to homemaking.<sup>14</sup> The role of women in early Christianity has often been overlooked but it is evident that women performed a major role and held leadership positions in the early church

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<sup>10</sup>Hollyday, 160.

<sup>11</sup>Burrell, 87-88.

<sup>12</sup>Other resources about Aquila and Prisca, see the following: Robertson, 52-70; John S. Howson, Companions of St. Paul (Evangelical Reprint Library; Joplin, MO: College Press, 1969), 243-265; Edward Hayes Plumtre, Biblical Studies (London: W. Isbister and Company, 1873), 417-432. For notes on Prisca see: Edith Deen, All the Women of the Bible (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishing, 1955), 227-229; and Abraham Kuyper, Women of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1933), 100-103.

<sup>13</sup>Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Missionaries, Apostles, Co-Workers: Romans 16 and the Reconstruction of Women's Early Christian History," Word and World. 6(4): 431. Fiorenza says elsewhere that "very likely many workers in the early Christian mission were couples," Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Word, Spirit, and Power," in Women of Spirit, eds. Rosemary Reuther and Eleanor McLaughlin, (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 35. It seems that there were other husband and wife teams recorded in Scripture, though very little is said about them. For discussion about Junia and Andronicus, see Gillman, 91-92; Schottroff, 424; Gerberding, 288, and particularly, Ray R. Schultz, "Romans 16.7: Junia or Junias?" The Expository Times 98: 108-110. Scripture says this couple, Junia and Andronicus, is "outstanding among the apostles." See also, eds. Leonard Swidler and Arlene Swidler. Women Priests (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 141-144; and Herbert Lockyer, All the Apostles of the Bible, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1972), 183-184, 200. The implication is that Paul is calling a woman an apostle. Another couple is Philologus and Julia (Rom 16.17), also mentioned in Gerberding, 424. One other possibility is Philemon and Apphia, see Peter Richardson, "From Apostles to Virgins: Romans 16 and the Roles of Women in the Early Church," Toronto Journal of Theology, 2(2): 245.

<sup>14</sup>Robert Banks, Paul's Idea of Community (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 154.

period.<sup>15</sup> In fact, women played a major role in the foundational years of the New Testament church. Unfortunately, this has often been overlooked and, to some extent, ignored,<sup>16</sup> predominantly because many believe women to be inferior to men.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the major reason for the existence of the team ministry of Prisca and Aquila was the nature of their religion--their goal was not to fit in the world but to be members of a distinct community that believes in the equality of all people.<sup>18</sup>

Their names appear together six times in the New Testament in three different key places in early church history--Corinth, Rome, and Ephesus.<sup>19</sup> The fact that they were so well travelled in major centers of Christianity shows that they were prominent Christians in the history of the

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<sup>15</sup>Joan Morris, The Lady Was a Bishop (New York: MacMillan Company, 1973), 1. She also states that women held positions as church overseers. Cf. Aida Besancon Spencer, Beyond The Curse: Women Called To Ministry (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), 109-117. Sarah B. Pomeroy has written a major work out of a conviction that human history has been interpreted from a male-perspective and male-dominance. She has attempted to show that women played a major role in history in order to "right the balance," Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves (New York: Schocken Books, 1975).

<sup>16</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, The Role of Women in the Church (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 53. Cf. Adolf von Harnack's statement about the place of women in early Christianity, "no one who reads the New Testament. . . can fail to notice that in the apostolic and subapostolic age women played an important role in the propagation of Christianity and throughout the Christian communities," The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries (London: Williams and Northgate, 1908, II), 64.

<sup>17</sup>For a discussion on where such an idea began, see John Temple Bristow, What Paul Really Said About Women, (San Francisco: Cambridge, 1988), 1-30.

<sup>18</sup>E. A. Judge, Rank and Status in the World of the Caesars and St. Paul (New Zealand: Whitcouls Limited, 1982), 31.

<sup>19</sup>O'Conner, 40.

early Church.<sup>20</sup> Prisca and Aquila offer us a valuable example that validates the ministry of husband and wife co-pastoring.<sup>21</sup>

There is some discussion concerning their backgrounds. Aquila was a Jew from Pontus in Asia Minor. His wife, Prisca, is probably also a Jew, though we are not told specifically. Though Jews, they both have Roman names.<sup>22</sup> When we come into contact with them in Acts 18 for the first time, they were perhaps among Rome's first Christians.<sup>23</sup> Since we are not told about their conversion experience, it is assumed they were already Christians.<sup>24</sup>

Scripture states that they were "tent-makers."<sup>25</sup> Some historians say that they were slaves,<sup>26</sup> while others say they were not.<sup>27</sup> Some argue that as tent-makers they were

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<sup>20</sup>Wendy Cotter, "Women's Authority Roles in Paul's Churches: Countercultural or Conventional?" *Novum Testamentum* 36(4): 352. Cotter states, "whatever their activities have been, Aquila and Prisca have a high profile in the Christian community."

<sup>21</sup>Gillman, 90-91.

<sup>22</sup>Schottroff, 424.

<sup>23</sup>Martin, 28.

<sup>24</sup>Fiorenza, "Missionaries, Apostles, Co-workers," 429. The author states that Luke normally records in Acts the conversion experience of "prominent persons in the narrative, his failure to do so here speaks for the assumption that the couple had been members of the Christian community before their expulsion from Rome.

<sup>25</sup>Acts 18.3. See Peter Lampe, "Aquila," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 1, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 319. The writer states that Aquila and Prisca were "leather workers selling primarily to the military, they more likely sewed linen tents for private customers for use as tents on the beach, sunshades in the atrium, or market stalls."

<sup>26</sup>O'Conner, 43. The author states that "the evidence confirming this hypothesis is more suggestive than substantive," however. See also, Banks, 154. This author states that Prisca may have belonged to the "gens Acilia, an influential family among Roman nobility."

<sup>27</sup>Peter Lampe, "Prisca," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 5. (New York: Doubleday,

relatively wealthy<sup>28</sup> while others believe they did well simply to earn a living.<sup>29</sup>

While in Rome, they spoke in the synagogues, preaching and teaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This led to fighting in the city and the emperor Claudius expelled "trouble-makers" from the city. Among those expelled were Prisca and Aquila.<sup>30</sup> Upon leaving Rome they journeyed to Corinth. It is in Corinth that they met Paul when he came to the city during his second missionary journey<sup>31</sup>, thus embarking on a rich, enduring friendship among co-workers.<sup>32</sup> Prisca and Aquila became two of the most important people in the ministry of Paul.<sup>33</sup> They met one another because they were "of the same trade".<sup>34</sup> Perhaps, they quickly discovered a shared

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1992), 467.

<sup>28</sup>Wayne. A. Meeks, First Urban Christians (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 59. The author says that their wealth was "relatively high" even though their occupation was "low, but not at the bottom." Fiorenza, "Missionaries, Apostles, Co-workers," 431, states that Aquila and Prisca must "have been among such well-to-do Christians," primarily because they were able to conduct a church in their home.

<sup>29</sup>See Schottroff, 242-425 and Gillman, 90. Both authors say that the wives of tent-makers often had to work with their husbands in order to earn enough money to live on. See also, Lampe, "Aquila," vol 1, 319, where the author says, "like most independent craftsmen, Aquila belonged to the poor strata of society."

<sup>30</sup>Ibid. See also, M. J. Shroyer, "Aquila and Priscilla," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 176. See also, O'Conner, 48. See also, Shirley Stephens, A New Testament View of Women (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1980), 116, where the author says that this uproar in Rome was apparently "interpreted as Jews fighting among themselves rather than as a clash between Jews and Christians."

<sup>31</sup>See Leslie B. Flynn, The Other Twelve (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1988), 121.

<sup>32</sup>Acts 18.2-3. See Martin, 28.

<sup>33</sup>James D. G. Dunn, Romans: Word Biblical Commentary, (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), 891.

<sup>34</sup>Acts 18.3. See Shroyer, 176.

passion--serving the Lord Jesus Christ and expanding the boundaries of the Gospel. Later, when writing to the Romans and to Timothy, the first names that come to Paul's mind to greet, are Prisca and Aquila.<sup>35</sup>

After a lengthy stay in Corinth,<sup>36</sup> four co-workers, Prisca, Aquila, Timothy, and Paul, moved to Ephesus to do the work of the kingdom together.<sup>37</sup> It is here in Ephesus that Paul came upon tremendous opposition to his ministry. Aquila and Prisca, being faithful friends encouraged him and protected him. Perhaps this is what Paul referred to in his letter to the Romans, "(they) for my life, risked their own necks, to whom not only I give thanks, but all the churches of the Gentiles."<sup>38</sup>

In another event that took place in Ephesus we get a glimpse of this couple's ability to teach. It is there that Apollos, a man described in Scripture as "an eloquent man. . .mighty in Scriptures. . .fervent in spirit,"<sup>39</sup> speaks publicly. But when Prisca and Aquila heard him, they sought to teach him the Way of the Lord "more accurately."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Rom 16.3-5; 2 Tim 4.19

<sup>36</sup>O'Conner, 50. This author believes that they were in Corinth ten years as opposed to eighteen months. He also believes that the move was a missionary strategy for Paul because of the central location of Ephesus in the Pauline Community.

<sup>37</sup>Acts 18.18-19. See Hollyday, 158. Prisca and Aquila began a house church and also continued their trade while in Ephesus. See, John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, The New Testament in its Social Environment (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 41.

<sup>38</sup>Rom. 16.4. See Martin, 29 and Lampe, "Prisca," vol 5, 467.

<sup>39</sup>Acts 18.24

<sup>40</sup>Acts 18.25. See especially Martin, 29. See also, Hollyday, 159, and Mary La Grand Bouma, "Women Involved: Biblical Examples." Partnership, (November-December 1984): 71.

It seems that Prisca and Aquila moved at least one more time. The emperor who expelled them from Rome died in 54 CE, thus permitting them to return to minister there a year or two later.<sup>41</sup>

Unfortunately not more has been said about this couple in Scripture, but there is enough information to know they played a major role in the early years of the Christian movement. Prisca and Aquila were a gifted couple who gained the admiration of the Apostle Paul, in particular. In his letter to the Romans he calls them his "co-workers in Christ Jesus," a designation Paul uses to describe leaders in ministry.<sup>42</sup>

Prisca and Aquila's method of ministry was to start churches in their homes.<sup>43</sup> In the first years of Christianity, there were no church buildings, so Christian fellowship took place in homes. The house church served as the center of life for the Christian community within a particular area. Christians met in homes to worship together, to hear the Gospel preached, and to share in the Eucharist.<sup>44</sup> The house church in early Christian times was normally nothing

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<sup>41</sup>Martin, 29. See also, Lampe, "Prisca," vol 5, 468, who says that this move may have been strategically motivated just as was the previous one to Ephesus. Perhaps he wanted someone to go before him to Rome to establish a foundation for Paul's ministry there. See also, Lampe, "Aquila," vol 1, 319. See also, Flynn, 129, who says they may have made one more move back to Ephesus, perhaps to escape Nero's persecution.

<sup>42</sup>See Scholer, 4, and Gerberding, 285. Cf. Aida Spencer, 117-119. See also Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, eds. Henry S. Jones and Roderick McKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 1711-12. Liddell and Scott describe "co-workers" in reference to a "person of the same trade, a colleague."

<sup>43</sup>1 Cor. 16.19. See Martin, 29.

<sup>44</sup>Fiorenza, "Missionaries, Apostles, Co-workers," 431.

extravagant. It was probably a small room which was a part of the host's home.<sup>45</sup> During this period of Christian history, "the life of the church occur(red) in houses."<sup>46</sup>

Prisca and Aquila were ministering laborers with pastor's hearts. Their mission was not simply to go and reach lost souls for Christ only to be left in someone else's pastoral care, but wherever they went they established a church in their home because they believed in community. They knew the gospel was not an individual matter. It also has a "social dimension."<sup>47</sup> Prisca and Aquila were husband and wife pastors who were concerned about building community among believers.

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<sup>45</sup>Stambaugh, 55.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 139.

<sup>47</sup>Banks, 26-27. The author also says "to embrace the gospel. . .is to enter into community. A person cannot have one without the other." See also, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 179, where she speaks of the goal to build community.