

Priscilla & Aquila Today? – Supporting Side-by-side Leadership

In the early 50's AD, the apostle Paul travelled from Athens to the city of Corinth and commenced his ministry there. As he arrived, Acts 18 records one of those divine appointment moments.



*...Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.
Act 18:1-3 NRSV*

We're not told how Paul came to know of them, but he *seeks out* a "Jew named Aquila" and his wife Priscilla. He shares in their tentmaking business venture, he joins their household, and they work together in gospel ministry. These companions of Paul are invariably referred to *as a couple*. They are "Priscilla and Aquila" or "Prisca and Aquila."

Priscilla and Aquila accompany Paul when he leaves Corinth (Acts 18:18). They part ways in Ephesus (Acts 18:19) as Paul travels on to return to Jerusalem. In Ephesus their *leadership* role is clear. When it happens that Apollos arrives in Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila offer him both hospitality and *guidance*:

He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and

Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. Acts 18:26
NRSV

Paul sends them greetings when he writes his letter to the Romans. He refers to them as ones who “work with me in Christ Jesus” (Romans 16:3) to the point of risking their lives. Tradition has it that they were martyred together upon returning to Rome.

What an intriguing couple! They are lovers, co-workers, co-ministers. We do not know if they had their own children, but they certainly opened their home and hearth and “parented” (as it were) some of the leaders of the church.

Priscilla and Aquila are indeed a *side-by-side* team, in it together, and always spoken of together. We know of many couples who would seem to be of a similar kind. Gill and I are a couple in ministry. And, while we don’t want to inappropriately lay claim to Priscilla and Aquila, they are before us as an example and something of an inspiration.

So what can we learn from them? How can we think about this sort of side-by-side ministry in our own times? It’s something we want to explore more.

To explore it, we need to define it, or at least to describe it:

1. We are talking about couples, **married couples**. There are other duos in Scripture who minister together – e.g. Peter and John (Acts 3-4), Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13), Paul and Silas (Acts 16). These partnerships exhibit synergies and complementarities, but for Priscilla and Aquila there is a sense in which the charism extends to the marriage identity also. What I mean is this: when we consider Paul’s apostolic ministry we can conceive of it not just in terms of *function* but of *person*;

he *embodies* the gospel in a 2 Corinthians 4 sort of way. With Priscilla and Aquila that *embodiment* extends to who they are as a married couple and is expressed in their relationship and their home. Their *family* is apostolic in this sense; it certainly was for Apollos.

2. We are talking about **something other than “I’m right behind you” partnerships**. By this we mean the form of partnership where either husband or wife (or both) releases the other into their individual ministry. This is much more than the unfortunate stereotype of housewife looking after the children so that a Reverend Gentleman can be about the “the Lord’s work.” We know husbands and wives who self-sacrificially provide the financial, familial, and moral support necessary for the other to be released into ministry. This is genuine partnership and of great value. The demarcation might be blurry, but the side-by-side partnership of Priscilla and Aquila in home, work, and ministry seems to be distinct from this by more than just a matter of degrees. They are released into *their* shared ministry.
3. What we are talking about is perhaps indicated by the increasing phenomenon of couples who are both ordained but **this is not just about ordination**. We know some ordained couples who minister effectively apart, as individuals, in entirely separate contexts. We know lay couples who operate side-by-side, and similarly couples where there is a difference in ordination or institutional training or recognition. We know side-by-side couples who are remunerated differently, and often inequitably. Institution finds it hard to recognise or respond to them, rather, the side-by-side togetherness often derives from a deeply shared journey in the real world.

The subjective indicator is this: when we think of a couple who minister among and with God’s people, do we first think of

“X” and “Y” or do we first think of “X and Y” together? As an exercise, Gill and I went through our experience, naming those who we thought of in this way. Invariably they have blessed us. Priscilla and Aquila, side-by-side, exemplify the people that we were thinking about.

Church History is usually a useful discipline to consider methods and manners of ministry; there is nothing new under the sun and we can learn from those who have gone before. But in this case, it is more difficult. The predominant influencers in early and medieval church history are mostly unmarried, and usually men. Perhaps Martin and Katharina Luther are an exception and mark a turning point, although they are rarely spoken of in the same breath. Early Protestantism through the 17th and 18th Centuries record male leaders who are married, but there is no sense of them being together in ministry. Both Wesley and Whitefield had unhappy marriages, unsurprising given their treatment of their wives.

It's not until the 19th Century that there is a clear emerging sense of partnership. William & Catherine Booth are often described as founder and “mother” of the Salvation Army, and similarly Hudson & Maria Taylor with respect to the China Inland Mission. In the 20th Century, the number is beyond counting (although Loren & Darlene Cunningham, founders of Youth With A Mission are a personal favourite of mine). The 20th Century might correlate with the advent of Pentecostalism, but I suspect other cultural shifts as well.

Question for feedback: *Can you think of side-by-side couples in Christian history?*

Let us know in comments or contact me.

So, on the face of it, we have a fundamental form of vocation that has biblical precedent and contemporary reality, but with little historical understanding or reflection. So how do we offer support to couples who are in ministry in this way? What issues do they face?

Some of the issues are ***internal***:

Nearly everyone wrestles with vocational questions: Who am I? What is this God-given gospel-shaped passion, longing, yearning, that calls me forward? How refined and redeemed is it? What selfishness and sin does it feed when I do not approach it in submission and surrender? How must I lay it down? How must I cling to it in fervent faith?

The same questions come to the side-by-side couple. They must wrestle with them as individuals, but also together: Who are we? What is this God-given gospel-shaped passion, longing, yearning that calls us forward, together – which neither of us can follow on our own? How refined and redeemed is it? How do we express it healthily or unhealthily? How do we lay it down? How do we cling to it?

It's often a journey of discovery. In our ministry life Gill and I have had to learn to be close: drawing boundaries, negotiating the wedge issues, laying down self and individual ambitions not just for the sake of the other, but for the sake of "us together." We have also had to learn to be open: letting others in so that we're not a "closed shop" but are properly connected with the wider body, and freeing each other so that we can grow as whole individuals. It involves a lot of emotional and relational risk! But that's the stuff of life.

We have had mentors and helpers on this journey. However, there are few general resources to draw upon.

Some of the issues are ***external*** to the couple:

Institutional systems simply don't cope well with couples. It's true with secular systems (e.g. tax and immigration) and so it is in ecclesial institutions. Generally speaking in mainstream institutions: Individuals, not couples, are selected for ordination (the least effective selection processes give little consideration to the marriage relationship, most give some). Individuals, not couples, are

authorised for ministry. Individuals, not couples, are remunerated (and usually only one of them).

There are exceptions, often torturous. We know of a ministry couple who were able to argue for remuneration for the wife's contribution to the work of the church, but only after the husband was formally released to attend to an external ministry part-time. We know of a large parish in which the ministry team structure slowly evolved to recognise what was actually the case: the vicar *and his wife* were placed in the same location in the team diagram, an internal document.

There are misconceptions. One of the most deflating comments that side-by-side couples hear is, "Ah, two for the price of one!" It's usually well-meant but not helpful. The "price" of a minister to an organisation isn't just about money – it's about giving that minister understanding, support, and an appropriate voice – a *place* in the family. "Two for the price of one" usually means one or 'tother, and therefore both together, are not going to have that place. Underneath it is, "thanks for tagging along."

Of course, some institutional wariness is warranted. There are unique issues relating to family welfare, safeguarding, and professional supervision. Of course, there are also couples who are vocationally broken, co-dependent and operating out of injury reflect a negative synergy; there are couples who internalise all decision-making and exclude those who should have a voice; there are couples who are inconsistent, double-minded, and you're not sure where you stand with them; there are couples who haven't done the vocational and emotional work. But all of that can be said of individuals also.

So how do we help institutions respond to side-by-side couples, and how might we support and help such couples with these internal and external issues? This is something we want to explore.

To that end, if you are a couple in ministry, **we would love to hear your story.** What follows are some questions that might help you tell it. If you are able to, please contact me, we would love to hear from you. We would also love to hear from you if you have experience of a side-by-side couple in ministry, maybe as a co-worker, a church volunteer, but especially as a *child* of such a couple.

TELL US YOUR STORY

1. *Please give us an outline of your story. What is your history, individually and as a couple? Where are you located now?*
2. *How much do you see yourselves side-by-side in ministry like Priscilla and Aquila? Do you agree with how we've described it here?*
3. *How do you describe your vocation/call/purpose, individually and together?*
4. *What have you learned about being together as a couple/family in ministry, but also maintaining your individual identity and vocation? How did you learn those things?*
5. *What have you encountered that has frustrated you as a couple in ministry? What support have you found?*
6. *Please let us know how confidential you would like your story to remain: i.e. don't divulge anything, share anonymously, happy to have it shared in full etc.*