

Operating in the Marketplace - Case Study 3 – Aquila and Priscilla

Where does “work” stop and “ministry” begin? Is there a Biblical distinction? Do we have to go “out of the world” to begin serving God? Where did this idea come from anyway? Certainly not the Bible. One version of the New Testament says that, wherever the early Christians went, they “gossiped the Gospel”. Church planting in the Book of Acts was almost always undertaken by people who had full-time jobs and spent the best hours of their weeks in the real world, amid noise, industry, people, commerce, pain, debate and dysfunction. That was the norm.

While it is true that “tentmaking” (serving God while studying, parenting or working in a profession) divides peoples’ time, it is possibly more effective in the long-run than many models of full-time ministry. To illustrate the point, let’s look at some examples from the life and time of Paul, starting with a married couple called Aquila and Priscilla. (Read Acts 18 for a partial account of their lives.)

Background – a brief synopsis of Aquila’s and Priscilla’s life

Aquila and Priscilla were Jews. By profession, they were makers of tents. They lived in the first century and came to be close companions of the Apostle Paul.

Originally from Rome (which had a large Jewish quarter on the banks of the Tiber River), they were driven out of the city following a decree by Claudius Caesar. Suetonius tells us that Claudius banished all Jews from Rome because of alleged disturbances by Jews who followed one “Chrestus”.

Some background will be helpful at this point. Christianity was probably introduced into Rome by Jews who were converted at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). These believers, and those won to faith in Christ through their teachings, were persecuted by their fellow Jews, sometimes occasioning civil disturbances. During the early decades of Christianity, the Roman authorities regarded Christianity as a sect of Judaism. From Claudius’ perspective, it made eminent sense to solve the problem once and for all by expelling all Jewish residents of the city

As a result of this decree, Aquila and Priscilla would have lost most of their business contacts, their home, savings and security. Expelled from their comfort zones they became refugees.

Instead of becoming bitter, they got on with the task of re-establishing their tentmaking business and attracting new customers in another place. They chose Corinth, a Greek city with a large Jewish population. After all, they needed money to live. Everyone used tents and other leather products and they had portable skills.

However, Corinth was a city with a reputation for sexual immorality. In classical Greek, to “act like a Corinthian” was to practice fornication, and a “Corinthian companion” was a prostitute. Immorality was practiced as part of the worship of Aphrodite (the goddess of fertility). One ancient writer described Corinth as a town where “none but the tough could survive.” It lay on a major crossroad of the Roman Empire and was a key place to plant a church; for those who had the strength of character and determination to endure.

It was in this context that Aquila and Priscilla met the Apostle Paul and ended up in the Bible as two of Christianity’s first marketplace church planters.

Paul had just set out on his third missionary journey. Up to this point, he had gone about teaching and preaching the Gospel around the Eastern end of the Mediterranean, establishing churches, training leaders and combating false teaching. He had faced death, opposition on the part of the Roman authorities and vilification by the Jewish leadership. He had even been targeted and maligned by jealous Christians. In spite of all this, he had kept going from city to city. When he arrived in Corinth, he struck up a long-term friendship with Aquila and his wife.

There is no evidence this couple were full-time or professional “ministers”. On the contrary, they worked for a living, as did Paul (at least in Corinth, cf Acts 20:34-35; 1 Corinthians 4:12; 9:15, 18; 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:8). The notion of “laity” did not occur during the days of the New Testament. The early Christians were non- professionally mission-minded. They usually had a global Christian perspective that integrated work and ministry, and did not practice a secular-sacred divide. After all, why should our faith be separated from our work life?

Like Aquilla and Priscilla, Paul made tents and other leather goods to earn a living during his travels. Apart from his training as a Pharisee, he was also brought up with a trade skill (most Rabbis were bi-vocational and Paul probably learned tentmaking in his youth). Philippians 4:15 indicates that there were times when few or no churches supported him financially in his apostolic work. There were no pay structures, superannuation funds or medical benefit schemes. So, he made tents and sold them to support himself.

The term “tentmaker” has since entered the evangelical patois and applies to Christians who are equipped with secular skills and use them to earn a living while undertaking Christian work, often in so-called closed countries. In reality, all Christian can be “tent-makers” in their marketplaces. We can be good at what we do and seize opportunities to serve God where we are. For some, however, that requires a brand new paradigm, a reformed way of thinking.

At the end of a year and a half the Jews in Corinth fomented a wave of resentment and persecution against Paul and his two friends and they were expelled. They relocated to Ephesus, leaving a functioning infant church in their wake.

So effective was the relationship between Paul, Aquila and Priscilla that they moved to Ephesus together. Paul called them his “fellow-workers”. They also became close friends with Timothy, a ministry companion of Paul (2 Timothy 4:19). After his subsequent departure for Syria they built up the church in Ephesus, winning people to Christ, encouraging the downcast, teaching those unlearned in the things of God and providing leadership for waverers. They functioned within their callings, making tents, while using their home for church meetings (1 Corinthians 16:19). They were true role models in the marketplace.

Some time after Paul’s departure, a learned Jewish man from Alexandria (North Africa), named Apollos, came to Ephesus. Apollos had already accepted the Christian faith and regularly preached in Jewish synagogues. (It was common practice for synagogue leaders to open their pulpits to Jewish men visiting from other places.) He was persuasive, he was bold and zealous for Christ, he was cultured, well educated and a great orator. However, he only had half the story. For example, his idea of water baptism was that it should be done in the name of John the Baptist. Maybe there were other inconsistencies in the way he understood the mission and work of Christ. It is not clear how or where he became a Christian, but there were gaps in his teaching that needed correction.

When Aquila and Priscilla heard Apollos preach in Ephesus they liked his message, but realized that he was not fully conversant with Christian teaching. They got alongside him, invited him into their home, shared their lives with him (in private), taught him more fully about Christianity and encouraged him in his ministry. They became his teachers and mentors. Because Apollos was willing to learn (an important rider), he developed a very effective ministry.

A few years later the couple returned to Rome. We are not told why. In his letter to the Roman believers Paul sends the couple personal greetings. When it was not viable for Christians in Rome to have a special place for worship, they met in Aquila and Priscilla’s home (Romans 16:5).

The characteristics of Aquila and Priscilla

Aquila and Priscilla set an example by the way they lived. Two thousand years later we are still talking about them. They were heroes of church planting to Paul and the New Testament church. Having said that, few Christians know their names. Why is this so? We know all about Peter, James and John, but very little about these two wonderful Christians who possibly witnessed to more people about Christ, in more places, than most of the disciples put together.

There is something about the portrayal of the inner group of Jesus’ Disciples, and the Apostle Paul, that makes us think they were too “exalted” for us to copy. I distinctly recall a conversation between my parents and the leaders of their denomination in Brisbane (Australia). When disagreement occurred over some matters of doctrine (the church was experiencing a short-lived wave of theological liberalism at the time), the head of the delegation dismissively asked my mother, “Who do you think you are, the Apostle Paul?”

In elevating pillars of the early church this way we create an artificial grading of real Christianity, in which the “A” grade consists of people mentioned in the Bible and some modern leaders, while the “B” or “C” grades consist of the rest of us. Such hierarchy is not Biblical. Nevertheless, churches make icons and stained glass windows featuring just a few key figures. We name our children after them.

Aquila and Priscilla were champions of the early church. They got involved where they were. They continually looked for ways to serve God and others. They didn’t complain when they were abused. Nothing was too hard. Their friendship and encouragement probably helped Paul cope with his low times in Corinth (cf 1 Corinthians 2:1-5). He was to write about their collaboration:

“Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.” (Romans 16:3-4)

Obviously what is recorded is only part of the story

On the other hand, there is something compelling about Aquila and Priscilla, and it resides in the commonplace. They were ordinary Christians, sitting in their workshop each day, sewing canvases, haggling with merchants and selling the finished products (low paid jobs), while sharing the Gospel with their friends. The locus of their ministry was the “agora”, literally the marketplace.

I have met many refugees, mainly from Africa and the Middle East. Aquila and Priscilla would satisfy the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention definition of “refugees”. Thankfully, few of us will ever become refugees, in the legal sense of the word. But there is often more to it than events suggest. Sometimes we find God behind changes we experience. We crowd our diaries with so many things we fail to see the world passing by. Then God pushes us out of our nests. We find change hard. We don’t like letting go of familiar things. But we need to. Sometimes true freedom comes when we are disencumbered, when what is close to us dissolves, loses its sheen or importance, or is ripped away. We wouldn’t normally ask for radical change, but shouldn’t be shocked if it happens.

Aquila and Priscilla took it on themselves to look after new Christians and turn them into active followers of Christ. They risked their lives serving God. All of the Gentile churches from east to west were indebted to them in some way. When they managed to return to Rome they established a church in that city. Remember, they were what some people today would call “lay Christians” (ie non-professionals). They show by their lives that we can all be effective as examples, making disciples, helping others to grow, laying foundations and bringing about lasting change in other peoples’ lives, just by being there.

So, what does all this mean for us?

In the workplace today we hear a lot today about mentoring (coming alongside someone and inviting him or her to learn from your example). One of Singapore’s three Prime Ministers is known as the Minister Mentor.

Parents are aware of the propensity of children to imitate what they see and hear, in terms of language, attitudes, values and character. We hope (and sometimes dread) that they will end up just like us. Like mother ducks, when we turn around, we find them following in our footsteps. We act as role models, for good or for bad. Someone has said that, "Young people today are looking for a hero to follow, a cause to believe in and a flag to fly. Without that they move aimlessly in a world of boredom that has only one dark exit".

That is why tragedy strikes when a pop star or sporting hero falls through drug addiction or relationship scandals, when dominating leaders prove corrupt, when parents discover they have been poor models as their kids copy them and go astray. Without the right examples, the next generation will grow up without wisdom, vision, integrity or the ability to discern what is right and do it. With the right kinds of examples, however, they will break through confusion and despair and learn to make the right decisions and build their futures with hope. Allow God to use you to mentor others.

As Christians we need (and often need to *be*) role models whom others can trust, whose judgment they can safely follow. Not mere managers, telling people how to think and what to do (lamentably, there are far too many in this category), but real leaders whom others will follow. Jesus is in heaven and we are on the earth. We are living out the realities of the Kingdom of God among our peers. The Holy Spirit has come to empower us to be the People of God. If Jesus called His generation "evil and adulterous" (Matthew 12:39) I wonder what He would call this one. The sins of Corinth are common in our day. Society needs examples of practical Christian living, men and women whose personal victories inspire others to resist compromise and to live wholly for Christ. You can be such a role model.

When life's circumstances throw you together with others, learn to ask, "What is God's plan in all this". It is easy to sink into despondency when reverses occur. But there is a plan, a purpose. Start to approach issues with, "Speak Lord" (1 Samuel 3:10). If our purpose comes from God, we will be prepared to be vulnerable, by human standards.

Be willing to serve others. The Bible says that everyone looks out for their own interests (Philippians 2:21). We need to be people like Aquila and Priscilla, willing to serve those around us and conscious of their needs, prepared to serve God in practical ways, flesh and blood examples "living in the house next door" of the love and message of Christ. Every one of us is in a situation where we can influence others, where we can be role models, inviting people to follow us as we follow Christ.

Pray for an anointing to be effective where you are. Some churches pray and anoint their members for Christian work in the marketplace. Why not? Working full-time in a non-Christian environment can be as much a "calling" as being clad with denominationally badged clerical garb.

Maybe you have never thought of it like that, but it is a Biblical model that we all need to take seriously. It works, first, by drawing closer to Christ so that we can become disciples worth following, then reaching out and investing our lives in others, ministering to them and making our interests and priorities intersect with God's purposes, for His glory.

Like Aquila and Priscilla, we also need a right understanding of ministry, in terms of serving God and working with unbelievers, which Jesus usually did. You can be used by God to equip, train and encourage others for ministry at their places of work. That will involve a Biblical appreciation of vocation, the nature and purpose of work and spiritual values and when and how to mix faith and work sensitively and effectively. As Christians we derive our purpose and value in work from God, not from the teachings of Weber (1864-1920; Weber encapsulated his ideas in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, published in 1904-05, Emile Durkheim (the Father of Sociology, 1858-1917) or other philosophers who have studied the subject. We are more than wage slaves (Marx) serving the interests of capital. We are slaves of Christ, serving others (Ephesians 4:28) as though we are serving Him.

Like Aquila and Priscilla we can also maintain integrity despite the prevailing (usually immoral) climate. Serving God in Corinth, where illicit sex and shady business practices were common elements of accepted, but degrading, religious and economic practices, would have been much harder than in more conservative societies like ours. Sometimes we feel we are the only Christians where we work, study or bring up our children. The lesson from Aquilla's and Priscilla's experience is that the pressures of where we live, work and play should never stop us "being" Christians where we are.

Heroes in action

Communicating the Gospel is our bottom line. It starts with communicating with the Holy Spirit at home, at school or university and on the job. Being the People of God involves being much more than mouthpieces of Christian clichés and parrots of doctrinal statements we don't necessarily understand. It means knowing what we believe (and why), developing relational skills that work, managing conflict the right way, handling change and recovering from setbacks on the basis of faith in God.

You may not be a preacher, church worker or home group leader, but you can serve God where you are. You may not feel particularly strong when the pressure is on, but the Holy Spirit living inside of you can give you the strength and wisdom to be effective. Ask God to show you how your life can speak into the lives of others, even when you don't open your mouth.

Be a hero of the Christian faith, like Aquila and Priscilla. You don't have to be a charismatic leader in mission or a Western church to make a difference in someone else's life. You can make connections no one else can, in your marketplace. All it takes is the first step. The rest is up to God.