

February 21
Lesson 12 (NIV)

CALLED TO EXPLAIN

DEVOTIONAL READING: Colossians 4:7–15

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Acts 18:1–26; Romans 16:3–4; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19

ACTS 18:1–3, 18–21, 24–26

¹ After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² 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, ³ and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.

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¹⁸ Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchreae because of a vow he had taken. ¹⁹ They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. ²⁰ When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. ²¹ But as he left, he promised, “I will come back if it is God’s will.” Then he set sail from Ephesus.

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²⁴ Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. ²⁵ He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶ 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.

ROMANS 16:3–4

³ Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. ⁴ They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.

KEY VERSES

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-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

CALL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Unit 3: The Call of Women

LESSONS 9–13

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List several facts about Priscilla and Aquila.
2. Explain the importance of the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila in relation to Paul's.
3. Write a note of appreciation to a ministry partner.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Power Couples
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Partners with Paul (Acts 18:1–3, 18–21, 24–26)
 - A. Making Tents (vv. 1–3)
 - B. Making Disciples (vv. 18–21)
 - C. Making a Preacher (vv. 24–26)
Chaos or Cooperation
- II. Leaders with Legacy (Romans 16:3–4)
 - A. Assisting an Apostle (v. 3)
 - B. Rewarding Risk (v. 4)
Personal Correspondence

Conclusion

- A. By Ones and Twos
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Aquila *Ack-wih-luh*.

Cenchreae *Sen-kree-uh*.

Claudius *Claw-dee-us*.

Ephesus *Ef-uh-sus*.

Gamaliel *Guh-may-lih-ul* or *Guh-may-lee-al*.

Hellenistic *Heh-leh-nihs-tic*.

Peloponnesian *Peh-luh-puh-**nee**-shun*.

Prisca *Pris-kuh*.

Septuagint *Sep-too-ih-jent*.

Thessalonica *Thess-uh-lo-**nye**-kuh*.

Introduction

A. Power Couples

When you hear the phrase *power couple*, who comes to mind? Some might think of historical matches, like Cleopatra and Marc Antony. Others may consider more recent examples, such as Beyoncé and Jay-Z.

It's not hard to understand that the phrase refers to those who wield great influence. It's almost too basic to point out that the phrase requires exactly *two* people, usually who are married or otherwise romantically involved. Although conflict can arise in such unions, part of their power is found in common purpose. They often work together toward artistic growth, social change, or economic gain, etc. Their shared goal is not a compromise; they both believe wholeheartedly in the worthiness of their prize and work cooperatively to attain it. When that shared vision is lost, the power of the couple falters, and often the bond between the two dissolves.

Lasting and happy power couples complement each other. The strengths of one fill in the weakness of the other, and vice versa. Although they may have differing roles, neither partner is considered superior or more valuable than the other. The sum of their parts is greater than what each would be individually. And so it is with the power couple we meet in today's lesson.

B. Lesson Context

The book of Acts begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome. The military and political center of the first century, Rome had a significant Jewish population. Christianity came to Rome early, likely within a few months after the resurrection of Christ. On the Day of Pentecost, visitors from Rome heard the gospel preached, and undoubtedly some of them were baptized (Acts 2:10, 41). Then they returned home to spread Christianity in the imperial city.

That spread seems to have been confined to Jews for many years. As a result, Christians of Jewish background coexisted with unbelieving Jews in tight urban spaces, jockeying for control of various synagogues. Tensions grew; violence resulted.

Rather than sort out the instigators, Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from the city, whether Christian or non-Christian, in AD 49. Jews were not readmitted to the city until the death of Claudius in AD 54. These events form the backdrop of Paul's meeting two Jews from Rome, Priscilla and Aquila, in Corinth in about AD 51. In the meantime, Christians of Gentile background

in Rome established house churches (Romans 16:5, 10–11, 14–15), a development that caused some tension when Jewish Christians returned to the city.

I. Partners with Paul (Acts 18:1–3, 18–21, 24–26)

A. Making Tents (vv. 1–3)

1a. After this, Paul left Athens

Paul had left his primary companions, Silas and Timothy, behind in Berea (Acts 17:13–14) while he himself traveled south. His time in *Athens*, while dramatic, did not result in planting a church. He was ridiculed by the philosophers for his belief in the resurrection (17:32); even so, he left behind a few new believers (17:34).

1b. and went to Corinth.

Paul proceeded about 50 miles west to *Corinth*. This city was the seat of Roman government for the area, the residence of the deputy Gallio (Acts 18:12). Corinth, Greece, was a commercial hub, a crossroads for trade because of the business of transporting ships across the Isthmus of Corinth (less than four miles wide) using an ancient kind of railway. This saved ships hundreds of miles of perilous sea journey around the Peloponnesian Peninsula, making it worth the expense. This positioned Corinth as a primary way station for goods and people coming to and from Rome and the eastern parts of the empire.

Corinth was also a religious city, with people of pagan beliefs and Jewish faith living there. Unsurprisingly, then, it had a synagogue (Acts 18:4). Paul's habit on visiting a city was to find the synagogue in order to teach fellow Jews the gospel of Jesus Christ (example: 17:1–4).

2a. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla,

Despite *Aquila* being a Latin name ("eagle"), the man was Jewish. He hailed from the Greek region on the south shores of the Black Sea known as *Pontus*, an area where many Jewish merchants lived (see Acts 2:9). *Aquila* had made his way to *Italy* at some point.

Priscilla is an affectionate nickname for a woman named *Prisca* (see NIV footnote to 2 Timothy 4:19). We do not know if she came from a Jewish family, although that is likely. Nor do we know if she was from Rome or moved there at another time.

2b. because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them,

See the Lesson Context.

3. and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.

Paul joined this couple in a way we have not seen of him to this point in Acts: working at a trade for a living. (1 Thessalonians 2:9 and 2 Thessalonians 3:7–10, portions of two letters Paul wrote while in Corinth, indicate that he had worked to support himself previously while in Thessalonica.) All three were tentmakers, a new piece of personal information about Paul. He was trained to be a rabbi by the famous Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), and all rabbis of this period had a professional skill—carpentry, baking, etc.

A *tentmaker* of this era worked with heavy material such as leather or woven goat hair. The tents being sold in Corinth were durable products used in semi-permanent situations. Construction of such tents required arduous handwork, using palm guards and hefty needles as

pieces were stitched together with leather straps. It was a skilled profession with a ready market, thus allowing Paul to earn a living.

The importance of Paul's willingness to support himself in this manner is seen when he wrote to the church in Corinth several years later (see 1 Corinthians 4:12; 9:1–18; compare Acts 20:34). The accommodations that Paul shared with Aquila and Priscilla may have served as personal lodging, tent factory, and sales shop concurrently. Skilled craftsmen were in demand in a commercial center like Corinth, and Paul probably was able to make these arrangements quickly.

In the language of the church, this verse is the origin of the tradition of "tentmaking"—bivocational ministry in which church workers receive all or part of their income from employment outside the ministry. In the case of Priscilla, Aquila, and Paul, having an income-producing skill allowed them to be self-supporting as necessary. This gave them the freedom to relocate quickly as circumstances required. In the case of the tentmaking couple, they followed Paul to Ephesus (see Acts 18:19, below) and eventually returned to Rome (see Romans 16:3, below), doing ministry at both places in addition to Corinth.

B. Making Disciples (vv. 18–21)

18a. Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila.

Paul stayed in Corinth for about 18 months (Acts 18:11), but eventually decided to return to *Syria*. Initially, *Priscilla and Aquila* accompanied him, leaving their business in Corinth. No other married couple in the New Testament is like Priscilla and Aquila. They worked together as a team par excellence. It is hard for us to think of one without the other, as it must have been in the first-century church. Luke presents this couple as companions in business and in ministry. Although Luke does not say they were already Christians when Paul met them, this seems to have been the case.

What Do You Think?

What action can you take to identify and better support ministries that are especially suited to a teamwork of married couples?

Digging Deeper

What do the further mentions of this husband and wife team in Romans 16:3 (below); 1 Corinthians 16:19; and 2 Timothy 4:19 indicate to you in this regard?

18b. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchreae because of a vow he had taken.

Cenchreae, as Corinth's port town on the eastern side of the Isthmus of Corinth, was the natural place for the trio's departure. The *vow* Paul made was likely some form of the Nazirite vow, outlined in Numbers 6:1–21. The vow would have included letting his hair grow. Cutting his hair now suggests that the vow was at an end, though it is possible he would shave *his head* to initiate a vow too.

Taking this sort of vow was not compulsory but was a physical sign of a time of spiritual reflection and renewal. Though he was willing to accommodate his lifestyle to relate to people he encountered in ministry (1 Corinthians 9:19–23), Paul continued his Jewish practices (Acts 21:26; etc.).

What Do You Think?

What things are important enough for you to take a vow for? Why?

Digging Deeper

Should texts such as Numbers 30:2; Matthew 5:33–37; 23:16–22; and James 5:12 apply?

Why, or why not?

19. They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.

Ephesus (which means “desirable”) was located on the southwest coast of present-day Turkey. This city served as the capital of the Roman province Asia Minor and was the third-largest city in the Roman Empire. At the time of Paul’s arrival, Ephesus had a large Jewish population with a well-established *synagogue*.

Paul set off a riot in Ephesus in the process of establishing one of the most noteworthy churches in biblical times (Acts 19). On his third missionary journey, Paul would spend the better part of three years in the city (20:31). The church in Ephesus was one of seven to receive a special message from Christ (Revelation 2:1–7).

20–21. When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. But as he left, he promised, “I will come back if it is God’s will.” Then he set sail from Ephesus.

Although Paul received a favorable reception in *Ephesus*, he was in a hurry to get to *Jerusalem* and fulfill his vow. Some manuscripts suggest this would put Paul in Jerusalem for the Passover, the most important annual observance for Jewish people. This would put Paul on a specific timeline, adding urgency in returning to Jerusalem on time. Passover took on new significance for Christian Jews because of its association with the death and resurrection of Jesus (Mark 14:1–16:8). Apparently *God* did *will* Paul to return to Ephesus (see Acts 19:1).

What Do You Think?

How will you respond when you hear others refer to “God’s will” in improper ways?

Digging Deeper

What are examples of passages that refer to the will of God as (1) his desire and his decision, (2) his desire and human decision, and (3) human decision and His permission?

C. Making a Preacher (vv. 24–26)

24. Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures.

While *Ephesus* had a large Jewish population, *Alexandria*, Egypt, was arguably the world center of Greek-thinking (Hellenistic) Judaism. The Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, was translated in Alexandria—appropriate, given the city’s reputation as a center of knowledge.

Apollos was probably educated in systematic interpretation of Scriptures, using methods drawn from Greek philosophers. Apollos’s being *learned* is evidence of this education, which would include learning to speak clearly and reasonably. He had far more than a casual acquaintance with *the Scriptures*.

25. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John.

Apollos's knowledge of *the way of the Lord* indicates that the Christian message had spread to the great city of Alexandria. It had made inroads into its famous Jewish schools, producing students like Apollos. The result was to be passionate and fervent when he *taught about Jesus*. This reminds us of Paul's synagogue discussions and foreshadows what Apollos did after relocating to Corinth (Acts 18:28).

Though Apollos's teaching was done *accurately*, he did not yet know the full gospel. *The baptism of John* was a ritual cleansing on the basis of repentance (Acts 13:24). It did not include the gift or baptism of the Holy Spirit, something that began at Pentecost (1:5; 2:38; compare 19:1–7). It is one thing to argue academically and know that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Scriptures' prophesying a coming Messiah. It is a much deeper, transformative experience to receive his gift of the Holy Spirit and live in his power.

26. 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.

The Ephesian *synagogue* had not yet divided on the basis of belief or nonbelief in Jesus (see Acts 19:9). *Aquila and Priscilla* likely were active in that synagogue when they *heard* Apollos's teaching. Realizing that his understanding of the Christian message was missing an important component, they met with Apollos privately to bring him to a better understanding of the whole gospel message.

We should note the gravity of this misunderstanding. A message that does not include the Holy Spirit is hardly a full measure of the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ. The first-century church recognized important connections among preaching about Jesus, baptizing, and the Holy Spirit (see Matthew 28:19; Ephesians 4:4–6; etc.).

To his credit, Apollos accepted this instruction readily and became one of the most influential preachers of the first century. The prominence of Apollos in the writings of Luke and Paul (examples: 1 Corinthians 1:12; 3:5–6; 4:6) speaks also of the importance of Apollos's instruction by Aquila and Priscilla.

What Do You Think?

Under what circumstances would you correct someone's inadequate knowledge of Scripture versus "just letting it go"? Why?

Digging Deeper

What texts in addition to Romans 14:5–6 and 1 Corinthians 8 help you decide?

CHAOS OR COOPERATION

A couple lived quietly on their farm. Day in, day out they repeated the same chores. He fed pigs and cows, raked hay, cut wood, repaired worn-out tools, and spruced up weathered farm buildings. She cooked, cleaned, fed chickens and collected eggs, washed clothes, and weeded the garden.

One evening the husband became convinced that his wife's work was preferable to his. So he persuaded her to switch chores. When they did, one mishap followed another—wandering cows

and pigs, burned bread, broken eggs, an over turned washtub, etc. Without knowing how to do the other's job, the day became chaos.

Luke never mentioned how Priscilla and Aquila divvied up their work, either with regard to tentmaking or to ministry. We can confidently say, though, that Priscilla and Aquila, unlike the farm couple, valued their own tasks and how each partner helped the other meet their shared goals. God used their cooperation in great ways, not just to keep their own house running but to expand the Lord's kingdom throughout the Roman Empire! How does cooperation in your partnerships expand his kingdom today? How *should* it?

—C. M. W.

II. Leaders with Legacy

(ROMANS 16:3–4)

A. Assisting an Apostle (v. 3)

3. Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus.

We finish this lesson with the “greetings section” of Romans 16. Paul returned to Corinth during his third missionary journey and wrote to the church in Rome about AD 57 (see Acts 20:2–3). Although he had never been to Rome (Romans 1:11–13), he knew many people there (see 16:5–15, not in our printed text). To refer to *Priscilla and Aquila* as *co-workers* accorded them both a high level of respect among Paul's associates (compare Romans 16:21; 2 Corinthians 8:23; Philemon 24). The Greek word underneath the translation “co-workers” is the source of our word *synergy*.

What Do You Think?

When should you acknowledge others by name for their help, knowing that you run the risk of irritating those whom you do not mention?

Digging Deeper

What insights do you gain here as you consider the entirety of the list in Romans 16 as well as Philippians 2:25; 4:2–3, and 21–22?

B. Rewarding Risk (v. 4)

4a. They risked their lives for me.

In both Corinth and Ephesus, Paul had been in danger. In Corinth, his Jewish opponents hauled him before the proconsul's judgment seat. While Paul himself avoided punishment, the synagogue leader was beaten by the crowd (Acts 18:17).

In Ephesus, Paul encountered a deadly threat in the form of a riot instigated by the silversmiths who made idols. Paul was prevented from trying to calm the Ephesian crowd by his “disciples” (Acts 19:23–30). Perhaps these included Priscilla and Aquila. They might have been involved in Paul's escape from Corinth, at risk to themselves as well.

Also possible is some other dangerous situation that occurred during Paul's three years in Ephesus about which no record remains.

4b. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.

From Paul's letters, we know that *the churches* in both Corinth and Ephesus had Gentile members (1 Corinthians 12:12–14; Ephesians 2:1–14). These churches had reason to be thankful for Priscilla and Aquila not only because they protected Paul but also because they continued to minister to *Gentiles*. As Paul's life was preserved by the couple, so were Gentiles whose eternal lives were secured through their unbiased ministry.

PERSONAL CORRESPONDENCE

My mother loved to encourage friends and family. She handwrote letters, cards, and notes. She talked about things she was puzzled about in the Bible, or something she heard in a sermon, or a funny thing about her pets.

At my mother's funeral, the preacher of our home congregation read two letters from the many he had received from her. He told us those letters had a knack for arriving just when he needed encouragement the most. In times of need, he could reread a letter and be encouraged by my mother's love.

My mother would have shrugged it off as nothing extraordinary. She considered the preacher like one of us children. Writing to him was just a way to show she cared.

Just as my mother's preacher would reread the notes she sent, so we can reread Paul's letters. How do his greetings to his co-workers encourage you? And how can you encourage a coworker of yours today?

—C. M. W.

Conclusion

A. By Ones and Twos

We learn many things from studying the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila. We see a married couple who worked and ministered as a team. There was no competition between them, whether they were building tents or building up the people of God. We see a family willing to relocate whenever God called them, supporting themselves in the original bivocational ministry. Their obedience to God's will made them cherished companions to Paul. We see a woman and her husband whom Paul considered to be his "co-workers," a designation of high praise.

And we have an example of a sincere and talented preacher receiving private corrective teaching from wiser believers. Apollos's teaching had omitted a crucial Christian doctrine. The discreet yet powerful witness of this godly and faithful married couple was the right remedy at the right time. Their investment in Apollos yielded benefits when he moved to Corinth to minister among their friends in that church (see 1 Corinthians 3:6).

Whether single like Paul or part of a couple like Priscilla and Aquila, *all* God's people have responsibilities to one another. We must "hold unswervingly to the hope we profess ... [and] consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:23–24).

B. Prayer

Father, our churches need believers who are committed to ministries of upreach, outreach, and inreach! Grant that we may be wise and knowledgeable to encourage and correct—and to be encouraged and corrected. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Women and men, singles and couples—all are called to minister.¹

¹ Wood, C. M., Mehrle, D., Nickelson, R. L., & Krause, M. S. (2021). [Called to Explain](#). In R. L. Nickelson, J. A. Kenney, & M. K. Williams (Eds.), *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2020–2021* (Vol. 27, pp. 209–215). Colorado Springs, CO: Standard Publishing.