

Session 12 - Priscilla (Prisca) and the Role of Women as Teachers of Men

(Acts 18:1-3, 18-22, 26-28; Romans 16:3, 4; I Corinthians 16:19; II Timothy 4:19, Acts 21:8, 9)

“He [Apollos] 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

- I. Women as teachers of men in the New Testament.
 - A. Few deny that women taught other women in the New Testament church (and taught young men who had not reached maturity – see II Timothy 1:5 for an indirect reference of Christian women teaching young men). Whether and in what situations Christian women taught Christian men is more debated.
 - B. Paul instructs Timothy that the women in the church in Ephesus “should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” (I Timothy 2:11, 12 – we will return to study this passage in more detail during a later session)
 - C. Nevertheless we appear to have evidence that Christian women did prophesy (and therefore perhaps teach Christian men) in the New Testament church.
 1. Just as there were female prophetesses during Old Testament times (Miriam in Exodus 15:21, Deborah in Judges 4:4 – 5, and Huldah in II Kings 22:14 – 20) Philip’s four daughters prophesied in Acts 21:9.
 2. Joel, quoted by Peter on the Day of Pentecost, states that “your sons and your daughters will prophesy.” (Acts 2:17) Remember that prophesy was perhaps more proclaiming the word of God than predicting the future.
 3. Paul appears to assume that women prophesy in I Corinthians 11:5.
 - D. Perhaps the most clear evidence of a Christian woman teaching a Christian man, however, is Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila, who taught Apollos (Acts 18:26). What was the role of Priscilla as a teacher of this man?
- II. Priscilla (Prisca) and Aquila – Co-workers in Christ
 - A. Acts 18:1 –3
 1. We are first introduced to this Jewish couple when Paul visits the Corinthian church on his third missionary journey. Though Aquila was originally from Pontus (an area along the coast of the Black sea and the site of a strong Jewish settlement), he and his wife had recently arrived from Rome.
 2. In this passage, unlike others, Aquila’s name is given before Priscilla’s.
 3. We are uncertain if this couple were Christians when Paul met them in Corinth. They may have already been converted and may have been asked

to leave Rome because of their faith (Claudius may have focused upon Christian Jews making a “disturbance” over Christ.)

4. From this text it appears that the couple works together as tentmakers.

B. Acts 18:18 – 22.

1. In this section, as Paul is preparing to return to Jerusalem he is accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila.
2. What are we to make of the fact that Priscilla is mentioned first, as she is mentioned first in this passage and passages thereafter? Some suggest that Priscilla is mentioned first because it was Aquila, not Paul, who took the Nazarite vow in Cenchrea – “With him Priscilla and Aquila, having shorn his head in Cenchrea”. Yet this appears to be a stretch of interpretation (for the center of the narrative is Paul).
3. That she was the more important partner in the marriage is another possibility, but perhaps too much should not be made of her being mentioned first.

C. Acts 18:24 – 26

1. Apollos possessed knowledge of Christian teachings, yet it is unclear whether he would have been considered a Christian before meeting Priscilla, Aquila and Paul.
 - a. He had a thorough knowledge of the scripture (18:24) and this would have been knowledge of the Old Testament.
 - b. In addition, he had been instructed in the “ways of the Lord”, so he was not simply preaching on the basis of the Old Testament. Given the later description, he must have been greatly influenced by the teachings of John the Baptist.
 - c. He knew Jesus and taught accurately about Him. (18:25)
 - d. He clearly had not received the Holy Spirit and only knew the baptism of John (18:25, 19:1 – 7). So in one sense he may have not been considered a Christian.
 - e. On the other hand he was called a disciple (19:1) and this clearly means Christian disciple.
 - f. Therefore Apollos’s status is unclear. If he was a Christian, he was not in the fullest sense a Christian.
 - g. Even so, he was “a learned man” and was probably trained in rhetoric and philosophy. If he had been influenced by his background in Alexandria, his method of philosophy would probably had been a type of Gnostic philosophy (somewhat similar to the famous Jewish philosopher of Alexandria, Philo). For our purposes, Apollos was not a person with no knowledge of scripture and ignorant of Jesus. He also was a “learned” man with considerable skill in rhetoric (or argument).
 - h. The emphasis of the passage is upon Apollos, a “scholar” who took instruction from probable “blue collar” Christians.

2. It appears clear that Priscilla (as well as Aquila) instructed this learned man who had considerable background in the Christian faith (but who was not fully a Christian).
 - a. The Greek word is *ektithemi* which means to expound, to declare. The root word *tithemi* is used in Mark 4:21 to mean putting a light on a stand. This is not a passive word.
 - b. We have no good explanation why Priscilla is listed first, but we may assume that she took an active part in the instruction of Aquila. That is, this Christian woman undertook the instruction of one of the most intelligent and skilled disciples of Jesus.
 - c. Priscilla and Aquila worked as a team, but that does not undermine the work of Priscilla as a team member. At the least, we must assume that she was as active in the instruction of Apollos as was Aquila (she did not sit listening on the side and asking if Apollos wanted another cup of coffee).
 - d. There is no mention, however of “spiritual authority”. Even if Priscilla is mentioned first, that does not necessarily mean that she took the lead in teaching Apollos.
- D. Romans 16:3, 4; I Corinthians 16:19; II Timothy 4:19; There are three other references to Priscilla and Aquila in the New Testament.
 1. In Romans 16:3, 4 Paul sends greetings to them and describes them as fellow workers who have risked their lives for him. They apparently host a house church in Rome. Priscilla is mentioned first.
 - a. House churches were key to Christian missions during the first century (as they are today in many countries).
 - b. Women played a major role in these house churches.
 - c. Paul also notes that they are co-workers, the only ones mentioned as co-workers in Romans 16 (suggesting they had a special relationship with Paul).
 2. In I Corinthians 16:19 Paul sends greetings from them and again mentions the church which meets in their house. Aquila is mentioned first. It is fairly clear that both had considerable status in the Ephesian Christian community
 3. In II Timothy 4:19 Paul sends greetings to them. Priscilla is mentioned first.
 4. None of these verses shed additional light on the role of Priscilla as teacher.

III. The daughters of Philip, an interlude. Acts 21:8, 9

- A. The context of this passage suggests that the evangelist Philip’s four unmarried (virgin) daughters prophesied under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They did not prophesy outside the New Testament church.
- B. The mention of these daughters by Luke in the way he mentions them suggests that he was an eye witness to their prophesy (in other words, he provides no other reason for inserting this passage).

- C. It is doubtful that their virginity was related to their prophesy (as perhaps in Greek religion). They probably did not belong to any order of virgins (as may have existed later in the church).
- D. Perhaps they were a source to Luke as historian.

IV. Priscilla's primacy

- A. The mention of the wife of a husband and wife team first would have been unusual during New Testament times, but not exceptionally so. She is not always mentioned first.
- B. Priscilla may have been the first converted.
- C. She may have come from a more upper class family than Aquila (this occasionally did happen with Latin epitaphs when the wife had a higher social status).
- D. Perhaps the important point is that both were most important members of the New Testament church, they traveled frequently, and they were joint missionaries (at times when a couple is sent to the mission field, we only mention the husband as the missionary).

V. Priscilla as teacher.

- A. It would be difficult to discount the role Priscilla took in teaching Apollos. We do not know the specifics of her teaching nor do we know in what way she and Aquila interacted. What we do know is that Priscilla and Aquila worked as a team. Remember, the focus of Acts 18:24 - 26 was not Priscilla nor Aquila, but rather Apollos.
- B. More traditional interpretations focus upon:
 1. The fact that Priscilla and Aquila taught Apollos privately in their home, not in the public assembly.
 2. The belief that the teaching by Priscilla of Apollos does not usurp the authority of Aquila nor Apollos as men.
 3. The fact that "bible study" is a relatively new phenomenon and not an act of worship per se (begun in 1788 by the Presbyterians in England). Bible study is therefore an optional matter and not addressed by I Corinthians 11:14 or I Timothy 2.
 4. The belief that women cannot teach nor hold authority over men in ecclesiastical (or church) settings. They may speak up in class (though some may disagree with even this act). They may teach children (Titus 2:3 - 5).
 5. The possibility of a distinction exists between the woman as "a teacher" and "the teacher". In other words, if a man is "in charge" of the teaching setting, a woman may teach.
- C. Those who support a more expanded view of women as teachers focus upon:

1. The belief that the I Timothy passage must have been specific to the situation in Ephesus (given the many other passages which not only permit but also command women to be teachers).
2. The fact that I Timothy 2:12 actually commands these women not to teach at all (the injunction is not limited to men but the second portion of the passage refers to having authority over men – we will return to I Timothy 2 later in this discussion).
3. The recognition that women have much to contribute to the spiritual growth of the church through their knowledge of scripture and therefore it makes no sense that they would be limited in their role as teachers. Priscilla clearly had the ability and used the ability.
4. The belief that the role of teacher is not the same as the authoritarian role of women over men which appears to be of concern to Paul. Women can teach men and yet not hold authority over them.

References

1. Smith FL: Male Spiritual Leadership. Nashville, Tennessee, 21st Century Christian, 1998.
2. Gender and Ministry: The Role of the Woman in the Work and Worship of the Church: Freed-Hardeman University Preachers' and Church Workers Forum 1990. Huntsville, Al., Publishing Design, Inc., 1990
3. Willis W: Priscilla and Aquila – Co-workers in Christ, in Osburn CD (ed.): Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity. Volume II. Joplin MO, College Press, 1995, pp. 261 - 276

Dan Blazer
Fall, 2000