A Tale of Two New Testament Couples

Ordinary people, extraordinary marriages.

Virgil A. Olson

In this opening devotional message, Prof. Virgil Olson set the tone for Christians for Biblical Equality’s recent marriage conference, held last fall, October 20–22, 2000, in Minneapolis.

I would like to look to the New Testament to see if I can find examples to support the theme for this conference, “Ordinary People, Extraordinary Marriages.”

We all, I am sure, know stories of married people described in the Old Testament, telling about a husband and a wife—and in several instances, two or more wives.

There are several New Testament passages dealing with the proper relationship between husband and wife. The words of Jesus and the writings of Paul and Peter are quite explicit about the roles and responsibilities of husband and wife. But there are only a few stories in the New Testament that give us any information about married couples who were related to the mission of Christ and to the forming and expanding of the church in the first century.

I want to tell you about two couples who followed Jesus. Whether or not these couples fulfill our conference theme, “Ordinary People, Extraordinary Marriages,” you will have to judge when you have considered this presentation. Of the two I have selected, both the husband and the wife of one couple are named. Of the other couple, only the man is mentioned. In one couple, the wife is quite dominant. Of the other couple, the husband is very dominant.

I have been intrigued studying these two couples, and I want to share some glimpses of them, then draw a few observations for our personal evaluation. In that these couples were active in the early mission of the church, we may get some practical, down-to-earth understanding of what it was like for married couples to be involved with Jesus and later to participate in the spread of the gospel throughout the Graeco-Roman world. These couples were pioneers in a new mission, a new lifestyle, a new social, religious direction. It was a revolutionary movement.

You no doubt can guess the identity of one couple, namely, Aquila and Priscilla. But you may wonder about the identity of the other couple. It is Peter and his wife.

Mr. and Mrs. Peter’s extraordinary marriage

Let us consider the marriage of the apostle Peter and his wife. She is unnamed, like many women who are married to dominant leaders in the church. We know a lot about Peter, but there is practically nothing in the New Testament record about Mrs. Peter.

In Mark, chapter 1, we are informed that Jesus, when he was in Capernaum, went to the synagogue on the Sabbath (1:21) where he healed a man with an unclean spirit. Immediately the news of this miracle traveled around town. So Jesus got out of the traffic of seekers by retiring to Simon Peter’s house (1:29). Then we are told that Peter’s mother-in-law was ill. Luke, being a physician, said she had a high fever (Luke 4:38). Jesus touched her, took her by the hand, and helped her up. And, like a good mother-in-law, she didn’t waste any time lying around, for we read she prepared a meal for those in the house. So Peter must have been married if he had a mother-in-law. It is believed that Jesus made Peter’s house his headquarters when he was in this vicinity. In fact, archaeologists believe they have identified the house of Peter in Capernaum.

In the Gospel of John, chapter 1, we read that Simon Peter’s home was in Bethsaida (1:44) on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee. However, in Mark 1:21, 29, we are informed that Peter had left Bethsaida and moved to Capernaum, on the northwest shore of Galilee. One writer believes that when Peter’s parents died, he moved to Capernaum to the house of his wife’s mother, bringing his brother Andrew with him.

There is another incident telling about Jesus at Capernaum. In Mark 2:1 we read that when Jesus “returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home.” Some add, “in Peter’s house.” This was the day when four men brought the paralytic to Jesus to be healed. Because of the crowd at the house, they lowered the man through the roof and set him before Jesus.

An earlier encounter Jesus had with Peter and Andrew happened when he met these fishermen at the Sea of Galilee. We read in Mark 1:16–18 that Jesus saw “Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you to become fishers of men.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

Have you ever wondered what happened when Peter and Andrew came back to the house in Capernaum and announced to Mrs. Peter and her mother that they were taking off immediately to follow Jesus? I can hear Mrs. Peter saying, “What? Jesus has asked you to follow him, to leave me and mother here? Who is going to take care of us? What about our fishing business? If you are going, when are you coming home?”

Maybe Peter replied the way many husbands do when they find themselves in a similar dilemma. I can hear Peter trying to make sense out of his desire to follow Jesus and his emotional guilt about leaving the nets and responsibilities for his wife and house. “Only believe, dear woman; all things are possible. Only have faith. Jesus is here and calling for me. Will you please wash up some of my clothes? I have to hurry to catch up to Jesus.”

I think Mrs. Peter must have been a remarkable woman, for Jesus came back again and again to this house. And she
and her mother must have received Jesus with gladness.

There is one small window in the gospel story that may give us some indication of how Peter felt about leaving his wife and home. In Matthew 19, the story is told of the rich man who failed to follow Jesus. Upon listening to Jesus' strong words about how difficult it is for people with possessions to enter the kingdom of heaven, the disciples asked in astonishment, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus replied, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

At this point, Peter must have been thinking about his decision to follow Jesus, leaving his wife and home responsibilities. He speaks up, "Lo, we have left everything and followed you. What then shall we have?" And Jesus replies, "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life" (Matt. 19:27, 29–30). There is no mention of leaving wives in this list, unless it is included in houses or households.

In Acts 12 Luke tells us about Peter being placed in prison and then delivered by an angel. After that experience, Peter vanishes from the scene until he shows up at the Jerusalem Council in A.D. 48, an absence, scholars believe, of about seven years. It is thought that during these years Peter visited Antioch, maybe going as far as Corinth. For in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, among the several parties and divisions that are mentioned, one group is called the Cephas (Peter) group (1 Cor. 1:12). Another reference to Peter and his wife is found in the same Corinthian letter (1 Cor. 9:5), where Paul writes, "Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and brothers of the Lord and Cephas?" It is thus very likely that Mrs. Peter was with her husband on this missionary journey.

After the council in Jerusalem, it is believed that Peter and his wife visited Antioch and Corinth again, and perhaps several cities in northern Asia Minor, in Galatia, a province Paul had never visited. In Peter’s first letter he addresses the "exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" (1 Pet. 1:1). It is believed that Peter and his wife finally arrived in Rome about A.D. 57. Some writers have estimated that these two walked more than 3,000 miles on their journey, visiting the believers in Christ.

So, what is the end of the story for Peter and Mrs. Peter? We learn that during the time of Nero a plague swept through Rome, claiming 30,000 victims. Then, too, a hurricane had devastated Campania. Something had to be done to appease the gods for these catastrophes. And what better scapegoat for the difficulties could be found than to put the blame on the detested Christians? Consequently Nero had hundreds of Christians put to death.

A century later, Clement of Alexandria writes about the final days of Peter and his wife. Clement states that the first Christian to be arrested was Peter's wife. She must have been prominent enough to be singled out, perhaps a leader in the church. Peter, when he saw his wife being led out to death, rejoiced that she was homeward bound. He called her by name, encouraging her with the words, "Remember the Lord." Next in line was Peter. He was brought forward to be crucified. This took place in A.D. 66.

In the year A.D. 90, another Clement, Pastor Clement of Rome, a survivor of the Rome massacre, wrote that Peter "contended unto death." So Peter and his wife were faithful unto death.

I would say that this was an extraordinary marriage.

The example of Priscilla and Aquila

Now we want to turn our attention to the second New Testament couple, Aquila and Priscilla. A. C. McGiffert, in his History of Christianity in the Apostolic Age, writes about this couple that "they furnish the most beautiful example known to us in the apostolic age of the power for good that could be exerted by a husband and wife working in unison for the advancement of the gospel."

It is at Corinth where we meet Aquila and Priscilla. In Acts 18:2–3 we read, "And he [Paul] found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, lately come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And [Paul] went to see them; and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them, and they worked, for by trade they were tentmakers."

Aquila was a Jew, yet he bore a Latin name, meaning "eagle." We are told that it was common for Jews of the dispersion to have non-Jewish names. How or why Aquila came to Rome from Pontus, his home city, we do not know. Perhaps he came to find job opportunities, or he could even have been taken to Rome as a slave, because his name appears among the list of slaves as well as among freedmen. William S. LaSor, the late professor of New Testament at Fuller Seminary, in his exposition of the Book of Romans (interpretation of Romans), proposes that Aquila had been a slave in a Roman household and had married one of the daughters of that family.

The name Priscilla is also Roman. LaSor asserts that Priscilla was not Jewish. He concludes this by the way Luke introduces the couple in Acts 18, stating that Aquila is a Jew, but remaining silent regarding Priscilla. LaSor believes that Priscilla, a woman with deep religious interests, must have come as a proselyte to Judaism before she married Aquila. In the text, Aquila and Priscilla’s names appear together; but of the six times their names appear, Priscilla’s name stands first in four of the references.

Paul stayed with Priscilla and Aquila at Corinth for at least a year and a half, making tents and also preaching and teaching. When Paul decided to go Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila went with him, moving their business to this Asian city (Acts 18:18). In the next verse (19) we read that Paul left them there and traveled to Jerusalem.

One day Apollos, an eloquent speaker and well versed in the Old Testament, was teaching in the synagogue. But
Priscilla and Aquila detected that something was lacking with Apollos’s preaching. We read, “When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26). Priscilla’s name is mentioned first, and this causes R. C. H. Lenski to write in Great Personalities of the New Testament: “She was by nature more gifted and able than her husband, also spiritually fully developed, due to her having had Paul in her home for 18 months in Corinth.”

This couple lived in Ephesus for nearly three years. Paul, in his third missionary journey, lived with them as he had done in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 16:19 we read “Aquila and Priscilla [some texts add, ‘with whom I lodge’], together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.” Some believe that besides being tentmakers, Priscilla and Aquila assisted Paul as teachers in the school of Tyranus (Acts 19:9–10).

There is a rather oblique reference to Aquila and Priscilla in Romans 16:4. Paul writes that they (Priscilla and Aquila) “risked their necks for my life.” In fact, he continues, “to whom not only I but also all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks.” Some believe that this “risking of neck” took place during the riot of the silversmiths in Ephesus (Acts 19).

When Paul writes the Roman letter, Aquila and Priscilla are in the capital city. However, when Paul arrives in Rome, as recorded in Acts 28, there is no mention of Priscilla and Aquila greeting him, nor is there any mention of these two strong Pauline supporters in Paul’s prison epistles during the two years he was under arrest in Rome.

The final reference to Aquila and Priscilla is in 2 Timothy 4:19: “Greet Priscilla and Aquila.” It is generally accepted that Timothy was the pastor of the church in Ephesus. Aquila and Priscilla had now returned to Ephesus, perhaps because of their tentmaking trade, but more likely to share with the Christian community their zeal for the faith.

Like Peter and his wife, I would say that Aquila and Priscilla had an extraordinary marriage.

Commitment to a kingdom lifestyle

Now, based on the study of these two New Testament couples, let me make a few observations that I feel are timeless for ordinary couples who desire to have extraordinary marriages.

First, the marriages of these two New Testament couples were extraordinary because their marriages were not focused on themselves and their well-being, but on a mission far greater than themselves. It was a cause that consumed their lives and their marriages with holy purpose. Today many married couples are caught up in short-sighted goals of materialism, building up their own small, temporal kingdoms of narcissistic self-preservation. There seems to be little passion for God’s kingdom, so many ordinary couples’ unions exist as ordinary marriages.

Second, the marriages of these two New Testament couples were extraordinary because they were privileged to be pioneers in a new, revolutionary movement, being obedient to the Great Commandment, to “make disciples of all nations.” They were blazing new trails.

All through history, when we read about extraordinary godly couples, many of them were pioneers in pressing the claims of God’s kingdom against the forces of principalities and powers. And the kingdom of darkness still needs to be invaded in the powerful name of Jesus. Extraordinary marriages and extraordinary families live with the challenge of Jesus, to go with him “outside the camp, bearing his disgrace. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (Heb. 13:13–14, NIV).

Third, to follow up this theme, I add that the marriages of these two New Testament couples were extraordinary because their love for Jesus and the Good News, the gospel, made them deny all things—days of separation, hardships, even willingness to pay the price of giving up their lives for the sake of the proclamation of the gospel.

Extraordinary Christian marriages become committed to a kingdom lifestyle. Which leads me to say: The marriages of these two New Testament couples were extraordinary because they lived out the gospel of love, of sharing, and of suffering.

I close with a summation from James Hasting, a great Bible scholar of a century ago. He writes with particular reference to Aquila and Priscilla:

Paul’s letters always seem to run into doxology when he is writing of men and women who have suffered on behalf of Christ. He never wrote to them in sympathy; it was always with congratulations. He did not look upon them as the bearers of burdens, but rather as the privileged children of the highest. He writes: “Unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake.”

Then Hasting continues:

And so Priscilla and Aquila [and I might add, Peter and his wife] were chivalrous disciples in the service. And what were the fruits of it? What the fruits always are. The disciple who bears much discovers much. If we risk personal loss, if we risk contumely, if we risk disaster and defeat, we shall find the Lord of glory on the road. And along these roads, at any rate, something ventured is something won.

I think there is something special about these two New Testament couples; I believe they had extraordinary marriages. Further, I believe these couples have given us an example of what it means for a Christian married couple to take up the cross and follow Jesus.

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