

Choosing Third Class

When the Roll is Called Up Yonder – Part II

Romans 16:3-5

Introduction

This week I was shown an article by one of our church staff members who was preparing for her women's class. It was a fascinating article about the early days of the stagecoach during the early 1800's. I conducted some further research and came upon a fascinating era of travel.

One company had the stagecoach market tied up – the Abbot Downing Company. They built a nine-passenger stagecoach, named the Concord, which would be the number one stagecoach used throughout the country. It was managed by one driver in control of a team of four to six horses.

The Concord offered three different seating options. The best seats were on the first bench, closest to the driver, where the least amount of jostling and bumping was felt. The worst seats were on the middle bench, which was called a jump-seat. In this seat, the back support was usually the knees of other passengers in the back seat. This made the back seat crowded and unwanted as well. No matter where the passengers sat, it was a dusty, cramped, difficult way to travel.

Every ten or fifteen miles, there were stations where people could get out of the stagecoach and stretch. At many of the stations, simple meals would even be provided.

The greatest danger was getting killed by Indians or being held up by robbers. The stagecoach doubled as a mail carrier and also carried money between banks. Three hundred stagecoaches were robbed every year.

Because of this problem, the stagecoach companies began sending along another driver called a "shotgun". Famous shotgun riders were men like Wyatt Earp, James Hickok, and Bill Cody. To this day we talk about "riding shotgun," or riding up front with the driver.

I came across a list of original rules for riding in a stagecoach. These included the following:

- Never ride in cold weather with tight boots or shoes or gloves.
- Wash your feet before starting on a journey (I imagine this was for the benefit of the other passengers!).
- Don't smoke a strong pipe, especially early in the morning.
- Don't swear, nor lop over on your neighbor when sleeping.
- Don't grease your hair before starting the journey or dust will stick there in sufficient quantities.
- Don't complain at food stations, the company is providing the best they can get.
- Tie a silk handkerchief around your neck to keep out dust and prevent sunburn.
- If the team of horses runs away, don't jump out; nine times out of ten you will be hurt. Sit still and take your chances.
- Don't ask how far it is to the next station until you get there (some things never change!).

- Expect annoyance, discomfort, and hardship. If you are disappointed; that is, if you don't experience annoyance, discomfort, and hardship, thank heaven.ⁱ

After all of this, would any of us ever want to travel?! Can you imagine an airline flight attendant telling us the food is not good? Okay, some things we already know! However, imagine her telling us that we have a 25% chance of being robbed during the flight or that we should expect discomfort and hardship! Who among us would ever buy a ticket?

There is one more thing I want to mention about traveling by stagecoach. If you did decide to risk your life and health by traveling on a stagecoach, for whatever reason – and thousands of Americans did every year – you needed to know something about the tickets. There were three options of stagecoach tickets: first-class, second-class, or third-class ticket. The ticket did not determine as much where you sat as what was expected of you if the stagecoach got bogged down on a muddy road.

If you had a first-class ticket, you could stay seated when the stagecoach got stuck. If you had a second-class ticket, you were expected to get out and walk alongside the stagecoach until it made it past the muddy area. But if you were a third-class passenger, you were expected to get out of the stagecoach and push it through the mud.ⁱⁱ

We can imagine that third-class tickets were only for the poorest and most unfortunate travelers. These would be the people who would pray for drought, while all the other passengers prayed for rain to keep the dust down and cool off the coach.

This is analogous to life in general.

Success means remaining seated while others get out and push. It means being served, rather than serving others. It means getting to avoid dirtying your hands and your shoes. You are first class, so let others get splinters in their hands.

No one chooses to travel third class. Who would choose to make their journey more difficult by volunteering to push the others through the mud? Who would willingly allow their journey even more annoyance, additional discomfort, and even more hardship?

I am convinced that the church today, more than ever, needs Christians who are willing to travel third class; who do more than sing, "Make me a servant, humble and meek"; who are willing to get a little mud on their shoes.

I want to introduce today, a husband and wife who appear in the roll call of divine commendation. Of the thirty or so people the apostle Paul will mention, they appear first in the list. I invite you back to Romans chapter 16, where their names appear. Look at Romans 16:3.

Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,

The word Paul used for "fellow workers" is "sunergos," which gives us our English word "synergy". This word refers to different components that are unable to accomplish as much separately as they are able to accomplish by working together.

Paul is saying, "This couple and I were able to accomplish so much for the Lord, only because we worked together."

Let us answer two questions about Prisca and Aquila:

- First, just who were they?
- Secondly, where and how did they work with the great apostle Paul?

Who Were Prisca and Aquila?

Let us answer the first question of who were Prisca and Aquila. They were a husband and wife who, in a very real sense of the word, were a volunteer ministry team.

Whenever this couple shows up in scripture – and they show up six different times – they are both named. Luke mentions them three times in the book of Acts and Paul mentions them three times as well.

Prisca and Aquila present a wonderful picture of what it means to be a Christian couple – two people who not only allowed one another to serve God, but encouraged it. From the clues we have been given in scripture, this couple served God together through their involvement as volunteers in the church.

There is no record that they ever had children. In fact, from the way they seemed to so quickly pack up and move from place to place, it seems very likely that they never had any.

The woman's name was Prisca – mentioned first in Romans 16:3. This is the formal Latin name of a woman who could also be called by the more personal form, Priscilla.

It is interesting that even though Paul stayed in the home of Priscilla and Aquila, he always referred to her as Prisca – the more formal name. Luke always called her by her more personal and conversational name, Priscilla. There seems little

doubt that Paul, a single man, was careful in all his references to his hostess, so that he would remain respectful, if not somewhat distant from her in his letters to the church.

Aquila, also a Latin name, meant “eagle”. He was a generous and successful businessman who, along with his wife, had built a prosperous business.

The homes Prisca and Aquila lived in were large; built around a spacious courtyard, which was customary for that century. Their courtyard was large enough to later accommodate the meetings of the church in Ephesus and later still, in Rome.

Though we are not told how Paul first met Aquila, we do know that it was customary in the synagogues, not only for men and women to sit on separate sides, but for the men to sit in groups according to profession or trade.ⁱⁱⁱ

Since Paul was a tentmaker by trade and Aquila had a tent making business, they may have met in the synagogue as they sat next to one another. Whenever it was, their chance encounter was not by chance!

Where and How Did Prisca and Aquila Work With Paul?

There are four scenes where Priscilla and Aquila are seen either working with Paul or for the sake of the gospel they loved.

1. The first scene is in Corinth.

Luke provides the details of this in the book of Acts chapter 18. Turn there and notice the circumstances that originally brought this couple and Paul to the same city.

Luke writes in Acts 18:1-2,

After these things he [Paul] left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. . . .

Claudius, the Roman emperor, had finally tired of the disruption and conflict of Christian Jews and non-Christian Jews.

The first century Roman historian Suetonius mentioned this decree by Claudius and wrote, “Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus (Christos), he expelled them from Rome.”^{iv}

In other words, to rid himself of the religious controversy that was continuing to boil over because of Chrestus or Christos (Christ), he issued what came to be known as the Nazareth Decree and expelled all the Jews from Rome.

It must have been terribly upsetting to Priscilla and Aquila to be banished from their home and business. However, God meant it for their good and ultimately, for the good of the church.

One author wrote, “When Claudius threw them out of Rome, he threw them into intimate fellowship with the apostle Paul.”^v

This was nothing less than Divine Providence.

You might notice in the text that nothing is said about Priscilla and Aquila being Christians. It simply says that Paul met them in the synagogue where, according to Acts 18:4,

. . . he was reasoning . . . every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

They may have been unbelieving Jews upon arriving, but they happened to meet the ambassador of grace.

Acts 18:3 says that,

. . . because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers.

Paul did not have anywhere to live. Evidently Priscilla and Aquila had been exiled sometime earlier and had already established their tent-making business. They were apparently only too happy to find a man who had been a tent-maker and needed work, so they boarded him and gave him a job.

They became associated first by common trade and later, by common faith.

Can you imagine how long it took for Paul to lead them to faith? This is like inviting Billy Graham to stay in your guest room. Imagine every night at the supper table or all afternoon in the shop with the apostle Paul.

One thing is for certain, Priscilla and Aquila will become so skilled in the word of God and in the gospel of grace over the year and a half that Paul stays with them, that this couple will later, single-handedly straighten out a brilliant Old Testament scholar named Apollos, who did not have his facts right.

When Paul eventually received money from Timothy and Silas, he stopped making tents and

began full time evangelistic work throughout Corinth. Acts 18:5 tells us that he was,

. . . solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.

In other words, Paul was telling them that Jesus was the Messiah; the anointed one; God incarnate.

It is fascinating that while we are not told whether Paul ever moved out of Priscilla and Aquila's home, now that he had the money to stop making tents for a living, we do know that when Paul left Corinth for Ephesus, he did not travel alone! When Paul put out to sea, guess who came along? Priscilla and Aquila.

2. The second scene opens in Ephesus.

In Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila are once again involved in the ministry as volunteers. We discover later that Paul left them in Ephesus to help begin a new work.

Once again, while Priscilla and Aquila were in the synagogue, someone special showed up on the Sabbath day. This time, it was not Paul who would deliver to them the gospel, it was a man by the name of Apollos – and they would deliver the gospel to him.

Notice Acts 18:24-25.

Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John;

In other words, Apollos knew about Jesus as Messiah, might have even known that Jesus had been baptized by the prophet John, and perhaps knew that Christ's claim as the Lamb of God was validated by the prophet John. However, he did not know about the descent of the Holy Spirit and the creation of this new living organism called the church; he did not really understand the finished work of the cross; he did not understand the ministry of the Spirit and had not heard about the exercising of spiritual gifts for the formation and edification of the fabric of the church – and a whole lot more. In many ways, Apollos was still living in the Old Testament.

Acts 18:26 tells us,

and he [Apollos] began to speak boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and

explained to him the way of God more accurately.

In other words, Priscilla and Aquila explained to Apollos more adequately; they told him the rest of the story.

They took him aside – they did not embarrass him publicly; they did not holler out in the assembly; they did not yell at him in the vestibule after the service. Evidently Priscilla and Aquila invited Apollos to their home.

Perhaps Aquila grilled pork chops and hotdogs to illustrate the end of the old covenant and the beginning of the new covenant.

This kind couple, who were tentmakers, invited to their home the visiting rabbi – who had every reason not to listen to them.

Apollos knew the scriptures – he was mighty in them, the text says. Furthermore, he had been educated in Alexandria. The greatest library in the world was in Alexandria – containing nearly a million books and parchments. This was the city of Euclid and Philo. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, was translated in Alexandria. It was a translation quoted by Paul and even by our Lord.

Apollos was an eloquent man, Luke wrote. There is no doubt that he had read Aristotle's famous work entitled *Rhetoric*. He could hold a crowd in the palm of his hand. Luke said, in Acts 18:25, that Apollos was speaking with fervency of spirit.

The word "fervent" means, "burning or boiling hot". Apollos exemplified Lloyd-Jones' definition of preaching as "logic on fire".

After his sermon everyone was slapping him on the back. However, waiting for him in the lobby of the synagogue that Saturday morning was a rather persistent couple who would not let him refuse their invitation to dinner.

Apollos accepted their invitation and came, more than likely, to their home. Even more, he listened. Priscilla and Aquila had been discipled well by the apostle Paul, and they together, discipled Apollos.

By the way, this says a lot about Apollos. He was gifted, educated, eloquent, impressive, persuasive, but in this instance, he exhibited the most important quality of his life, which literally changed his life – he was humble.

His host and hostess were tentmakers. Apollos could have, without a doubt, spent the afternoon at the table of the chief rabbi or in some dignitary's

home. Instead, we can picture him at the table of a man and his wife who give him the next chapter in the gospel of grace.

I am certain that Apollos was forever grateful that he was willing to listen to this couple who radically changed his life.

Apollos listened and learned well! He would go on to Achaia and later, to Corinth where his ministry would become legendary. He would be greatly used in the church.

Paul would later write to the Corinthians that he had sowed the seed of the gospel in Corinth, but Apollos had watered it and God had brought forth great fruit (I Corinthians 3:6).

Priscilla and Aquila were not finished in Ephesus. A while later, we know that Paul returned to Ephesus and played a significant role in the life of the church there. While at Ephesus, Paul wrote these words to the Corinthian believers,

. . . Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. (I Corinthians 16:19)

Several second century documents add that Paul was also lodging in their home once again. So this couple is again, hosting a church in their home, as well as the itinerate preacher named Paul.

It is obvious from scripture that their home belonged to God and their lives belonged to God. Their occupation was only a means to an end for advancing the glory and the cause of God.

For Paul, his friendship with Priscilla and Aquila was so critical in the support of his ministry and work, that after learning what we have learned about this couple, it is hard to imagine Paul without them. It is hard to imagine the possibility of Paul serving the way that he did without their financial assistance, physical assistance, and no doubt, spiritual encouragement and prayer support as well.

One author suggested that there are at least several different kinds of people in the church.

- There are people who *sap vision* – they drain any possibility of vision from ever getting a foothold.
- There are people who *appreciate vision* – they cheer from the sidelines, but do not want to be asked to get involved; they like what is being done with the children, or a ministry, or an outreach, but do not want to be included or to financially support it – but

they want it known that they appreciate what is being done.

- Then there are people who *share vision* – they speak the same ministry language; they have the same heartbeat for God’s work; they are willing to make the same sacrifices.

The people who share vision would never think of remaining in the stagecoach while others got out and pushed. They would get just as dirty as the others – grateful to come alongside and push. Nothing would make them happier than joining others who are ankle deep in the mud.

This was Priscilla and Aquila.

3. The third scene in which we find this godly couple mentioned, is in Romans 16:3.

Look again at Romans 16:3.

Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,

Paul is saying, “We’ve got the same third class ticket.”

Notice Romans 16:4.

who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles;

In other words, all the believers are grateful for what this couple did to evidently, save the life of Paul.

I wish Paul had given us a clue, but he did not. We do not know when they risked their neck for Paul.

The word used by Paul, “*hupotithemi*,” can be understood in this context to literally mean that they, “placed (their necks) under the axe of the executioner”.^{vi}

We do not know when this occurred. Perhaps it was connected to the riots in Ephesus when the mob was filled with rage. They may have come looking for Paul at their home and Priscilla and Aquila covered for him as he made his retreat to safety. Perhaps it was during one of the difficult times Paul referred to as a trial because of the plotting of unbelievers to harm him (Acts 20:19).

We do not know the details, but whatever happened, Paul never forgot their act of heroism for his own life. He remained grateful to them for the rest of his life.

We do know that when Paul left Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila left for Rome – perhaps for their own safety. Paul had probably talked with them

about his plans to travel to Rome and help the church there.

There is no doubt in my mind that Priscilla and Aquila went ahead of Paul to Rome to set up their tent-making business and prepare a home for Paul. We know that Priscilla and Aquila did make it to Rome and did impact the church as usual.

Notice, embedded in his greeting to Priscilla and Aquila, Paul writes, in Romans 16:5,

also greet the church that is in their house....

Greet the church that is in their house! What a couple! What humble, available, sacrificial servants for the cause of Christ!

4. The final scene where we discover Priscilla and Aquila, is back in Ephesus.

In this final scene, we discover Priscilla and Aquila back in Ephesus working with a young pastor and former disciple of Paul, named Timothy. Timothy is now pastoring the Ephesian church.

This fits, does it not?! It does not surprise me to learn that since Paul can no longer use Priscilla and Aquila in ministry, because he is under house arrest and only a short time from his martyrdom, Timothy, his son-in-the-faith and leading pastor, has with him, helping him, like they helped Paul years earlier, this remarkable, faithful couple.

Paul writes to Timothy, his final letter. At the end of the letter, the first people Paul says “Hello” to are, of course, these two dear friends, Priscilla and Aquila (II Timothy 4:19).

Conclusion – Characteristics of Christians Who Choose Third Class

Is this all there is from Priscilla and Aquila? Oh no – their sons and daughters of life, heart, and faith have been moving the church forward for the last two thousand years.

They advanced the church in Corinth, and today, they advance the church wherever they live.

They never make the spotlight; they are behind the scenes – humble servants who have opened their hearts and their homes.

They are willing to travel through life third class.

They are willing to get out of the pew and push.

There are three characteristics of Priscilla and Aquila that have traveled down through the centuries – from Corinth to Cary; from their church to ours.

These are the characteristics of Christians who willingly choose to travel third class.

1. First, they are willing to sacrifice personal safety.

Let us start with the most dramatic thing first – they are willing to die. Like Priscilla and Aquila, these Christians are willing to lay their lives on the line.

Around the world today, are Christians who are dying by the thousands because they will not deny that Jesus Christ alone is the way, the truth, and the life. They place their neck under the axe.

Most of us here today, do not experience or even understand this characteristic.

Let us move from the dramatic to the realistic.

2. Secondly, Christians who choose third class are willing to sacrifice personal profit.

They view their occupation as a means to an end – a means to support and advance the cause of Christ. They are more interested in their standard of giving than they are in their standard of living.

To put this in crass terms, these are people who are willing to give away their stuff. They are willing to have their carpet permanently stained by a middle school Bible study, to have their food eaten by guests, to give their advice for free, to offer their skills for use at little or no charge at all.

These are Christians who seem to give away more than they ever receive and we wonder why they always seem to be smiling.

These are the sons and daughters of Priscilla and Aquila.

Last Sunday, a couple from out of town visited our church. I talked with them and they mentioned that they had been told that the new construction on our church building was being altered due to an overage in cost. I explained that due to unexpected costs and the inflation in pricing, changes were going to be needed to the upper floor of one of the buildings. They asked how much was needed and I told them \$300,000. They then asked if they could come to my office the next morning and give me a check for that amount. The next morning, they indeed, came and wrote a check for the full amount.

These are the Christians who could travel first class, but choose instead, to travel with a third class ticket. They are willing to get out and push! They sacrifice personal safety and personal profit.

Let us look at one more that is even more practical.

3. Thirdly, Christians who travel third class are willing to sacrifice personal convenience.

Imagine – about the time Aquila established his business in Corinth, he and Priscilla had a decision to make. They could start over again in Ephesus or stay in Corinth. They decided to get out of their coach and slog through the mud with Paul.

Then, about the time they got established in Ephesus, this couple had another decision to make. They could stay in Ephesus or get muddy again in Rome.

When they finally got settled in Rome, they had a decision to make. Would Priscilla and Aquila put their boots back on, travel back to Ephesus, and help Timothy, or would they say, “Enough is enough! We’ve done enough; we’ve given enough; we’ve moved enough . . . it’s time to settle down and enjoy the scenery.”

Not Priscilla and Aquila – they were willing to sacrifice their personal convenience for the sake of Christ.

As one author worded it, “The future of the church is in the hands of ordinary Christians who aren’t afraid of mud puddles.”^{vii}

I agree. May God give us men like Paul and Apollos and Timothy. But may He give us Priscillas and Aquilas who make the ministries of Paul and Apollos and Timothy possible by opening their hearts and their homes.

People who are willing to mess up their shoes and alter their plans and withdraw from their savings and clutter up their calendars with the needs of others for the sake of Jesus Christ – these are the people who move the church forward.

These are Christians who willingly choose third class.

Ladies and gentlemen, wherever you find effective, productive ministry, look behind the scenes, away from the spotlight and you will discover the children of Aquila and Priscilla. They are the ones with mud on their shoes, aprons around their waists, activity in their hands, and people on their hearts. They are the servants of Jesus Christ. They gladly serve Him, by gladly serving you and me.

May the sons and daughters of Priscilla and Aquila multiply here and around the world for the sake of the gospel and the glory of God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/24/2006 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ <http://www.forttumbleweed.com/wellsfargo.html>.

ⁱⁱ Dwight Robertson, “Mud Puddles,” *The Laborer’s Journal*, vol. 6, p. 24.

ⁱⁱⁱ John MacArthur, *Romans: Volume 2* (Moody Press, 2000), p. 363.

^{iv} D. Edmond Hiebert, *Personalities Around Paul* (Moody Press, 1973), p. 37.

^v *Ibid.*, p. 37.

^{vi} Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Regency, 1976), p. 384.

^{vii} Robertson, *The Laborer’s Journal*, p. 26.