

MARRIAGE AND MINISTRY

ACTS 18:1-4

A report comes out of Porto Alegre, Brazil about a couple who recently filed for divorce. The husband and farmer is named *Romeo Bittencourt*. He's 90 years-old.

He and his wife had been married 65 years. Together they have 12 kids, 50 grandkids, and 36 great-grandkids - *YET, they're calling their marriage quits.*

It seems strange a couple in their 90s, with such a rich history, wouldn't want to work through their problems and stick out their marriage. But what sounds even stranger is the reason they've given for their decision - the divorce papers read, **"Incompatibility!"**

"Incompatibility..." you've got to be kidding!

After over half-a-century of shared experience, and 100-plus offspring - you'd think a couple could find a few commonalities... *That over the years they would've developed a few unifying interests to hold them together.* You'd think the last complaint the Bittencourts would every voice would be a lack of compatibility.

Yet *compatibility, cohesiveness, and closeness* in a marriage doesn't happen automatically. *Just years together - kids together - the day in day out together* doesn't always cement a bond between two people.

Sadly, the Bittencourts prove that two people can be married for 65 years, and yet still be strangers.

I'm a basketball fan, and one of the first lessons you learn in basketball is the team with the best players doesn't always win. A roster full of super stars doesn't insure victory. To be successful in basketball those star players have to be unselfish, and be willing to mesh their talents, and learn to play together as a team.

In basketball you can dress five super stars in the same uniform - place them on the court at the same time - but it won't necessarily make a good team.

And likewise you can take a man and a woman... walk them through the wedding ceremony - give them the same last name - put them in the same home - and set them up in a new life together... *and that couple won't automatically become a winning team.*

It reminds me of a wedding reception... As the newlyweds left in the limo, one lady remarked, "*There they go - the two have become one.*" Her husband added, "*Yea, now the only question is which one.*"

A good marriage is not an *annihilation*, or an *assimilation* - it's an *amalgamation*...

It's not one person losing his identity to the other - or two people getting swallowed up by each other - it's two people finding a new identity as husband and wife.

To be a marital team a couple has to embrace a common purpose. They have to sense their marriage is bigger than themselves - more is at stake in their relationship than personal interests. They have to push aside individual agendas, and develop similar goals.

And they have to learn to work together. *Respect, cooperation, humility, understanding, communication, and most importantly trust* - are all needed for two people to work in tandem. They both have to believe that *their joint effort* is critical to *their overall success*.

And for the Christian couple nothing *merges and meshes* a marriage as thoroughly as does *ministry*.

A common ministry is a marriage's best friend!

Years ago Discipleship Journal published an article entitled, "*Making Ministry a Family Affair.*"

Here's an excerpt, "*Busy schedules and the stresses of modern life tend to pull family members apart. Serving Christ together in a ministry produces a strong bond that holds members together.*" In other words, **the couple who serves together, stays together.**

When you see your marriage as more than a means to *personal happiness*, but as a path to *committed service*, **it adds a wow to our vow!** Suddenly, you have an *eternal reason* to ride out *temporary troubles*.

Ministry strengthens a marriage.

A common ministry enrolls a couple in a purpose bigger than themselves. Now they see their marriage as only one small part of God's greater plan - and as a result, they don't have time to focus on the petty, picky, trivial, selfish concerns that sidetrack most marriages.

Ministry provides a marriage with a mission. It keeps it focused. Ministry together, serving the Lord together, should be the driving force in all Christian marriages.

I believe the ultimate reason you're married to your spouse is that God knows **the two of you can be more effective for Him together than you can apart.** You find a *new glue* when you realize God wants to use *your relationship* to bring others *into relationship with Him.*

Here's an area where I can give personal testimony!

One month after Kathy and I got married we started a church. We got married August 23, 1980. CCSM's first Sunday was the last week of September.

Just about 38 years ago from today...

We married with the conviction that we'd been called to serve God together, and we got going immediately.

I suppose, there've been times when the demands of ministry have placed a certain degree of stress on our marriage - but I have no doubt, the good it's done for us has far overshadowed any harm it may've caused.

When you're fighting the devil, you don't have as much energy left to fight each other... When you're focused on helping others and meeting their needs, there's not a lot of opportunity to get selfish... When you're busy serving the Lord, you don't have time left to serve yourself... **There's unusual harmony in a foxhole.**

Ministry keeps our eyes off ourselves and on the bigger world around us. Ministry keeps a couple from turning inward, and cannibalizing, and feeding on itself.

Sadly, too many marriages become introverted.

They're like an ingrown toenail. Rather than grow out in healthy ways, they get infected with selfishness. A couple needs the fresh air of a higher purpose. Room to grow in grace. Couples need *a spiritual manicure*.

I suppose it's true, you can win the world and lose your own family - *and what have you accomplished?*

But it's just as true, you can be so focused on your own family that you forget about a whole world that's dying and going to hell. Jesus' Great Commission calls me to go beyond the four walls of my *house...* And I'm suggesting, the best way to go is with my *spouse!*

Kathy and I can also say with certainty that ministry keeps marriage exciting. It turns life into an adventure.

The thrills and challenges and rewards of serving the Lord together have produced far more fulfillment than if we'd spent the last 38 years serving only ourselves.

We've seen God use our lives and our marriage to populate eternity. God has given us a thrilling life. We hold a tremendous joy and sense of fulfillment in our hearts - because we've *blended marriage and ministry*.

And I'm convinced God wants to build up your marriage - not so you can sit on God's mantle just to be *admired by others*. He wants to use your marriage to *impact other people...* God wants to place your marriage in His *tool box*, not just on His *trophy case*.

He wants your *marriage to matter* for His Kingdom.

In God's plan for His people - even for husbands and wives - *marriage and ministry* go hand in hand.

And nowhere is this better illustrated than in the marriage of two NT characters - **Aquila and Priscilla**.

Quilly and Priscilly were two of *Paul's pals*.

They're mentioned in five different NT passages. In each case they're commended by the Holy Spirit for their devoted service to the Lord... and to His church.

Their marriage wasn't a *deserted island*, but a *busy harbor*. They opened their lives, and their home - and became a refuge for many people. The marriage between these two provided folks a place of peace, serenity, safety, protection. Their marriage sheltered people from the rough seas of a storm-tossed world.

And realize Aquila wasn't a pastor. He and Priscilla weren't professionals. They were never financially compensated for their service. *They just loved people!*

Here's the key to their effectiveness, when Aquila and Priscilla married **their goal was not necessarily to live happily ever after, but to live actively ever after.**

They devoted their marriage to a lifetime of ministry for Jesus sake - *and God used them greatly!*

It's interesting, whenever their names appear in the Scripture they're always paired together. They were a tag-team. *They say that Priscilla had a nickname for her husband. She would called him, "Aquila my hun."*

And not only did this couple minister together in their free time, they also worked together during the day.

They were tentmakers... To spend so much time together they must've had patience and sensitivity toward each other. They valued each other's advice.

It's also interesting that in the six times their names appear in tandem, half of those times the female name "*Priscilla*" comes first. This is more than incidental.

In ancient times the man's name always preceded the woman's. That Paul deliberately penned "*Priscilla and Aquila*," rather than "*Aquila and Priscilla*," was making a statement. It must've meant that Priscilla was the more gifted, or perhaps the more vocal of the two.

This is probably true of most of the marriages here today - *the wife is more skilled*. Everyone knows women in general are more gifted than men. A man once laughed, "*While equality of the sexes sounds like a fine idea, I doubt if women would ever agree to it.*"

Here's my point, Priscilla was *a gifted girl*, and Aquila appreciated her gifts. Rather than be jealous and hold her down, he loved her and encouraged her in ministry.

And I'm sure Priscilla adhered to the biblical roles for marriage. She respected her husband's leadership. Though she had a more public ministry, and more dynamic gifts, she supported Aquila as the head of her home. She trusted God to *guide her... through him*.

In their marriage, *Aquila wasn't jealous of Priscilla's gifts, and Priscilla didn't resent Aquila's leadership.*

The first place we find Aquila and Priscilla in the Scriptures is in Acts 18:1-4. We read, “After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth.

And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome); and he came to them.

So, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers. And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks.

Here we learn that Aquila and Priscilla were Jews from Pontus, on the Black Sea. They’d migrated to Rome, and were living there in 52 AD when the Emperor Claudius issued an edict expelling all the Jews from the capitol city. They packed up and moved to Greece. There they went to the market in Corinth, rented space, and set up shop. They were tentmakers,

Paul was also a tentmaker by trade, so when he arrived in Corinth he met Aquila and Priscilla, and they took Paul on as a partner. The three of them became *coworkers in Christ* - and *coworkers in business*.

We’re told in Acts Paul stayed in Corinth for 18 months persuading people to follow Jesus. At first he taught in the synagogue, then he moved next-door to the house of Justus. And for the duration of his stay in Corinth, he was Aquila and Priscilla's *house guest*.

I'll never forget our first house guest. I was on my way to church one Sunday and picked up a hitchhiker.

He'd come from Michigan for a job interview, and wanted a lift to Martin Robbins Fence Company, which just happened to be up the street from where I lived. I told him I would take him, if he first came to church.

He agreed - and that morning he heard the Gospel, and came to know Jesus. We took him home that afternoon, and before we knew it, we'd invited him to spend the night on our couch - *and what a night it was!*

Kathy and I were newlyweds, and I was scared for her. *What if he was a psycho? What if he had a gun?*

When we closed the bedroom door that night I pushed the dresser over to block the door. We even slept with the window open, and had our bathrobes nearby, just in case we had to make a quick escape.

It turned out the fellow wasn't a psycho. He actually was a very nice guy. He stayed with us for two weeks before moving in with another brother in the fellowship.

But that first night was a little spooky!

Hey, it's not easy to take in a house guest, even if it's the Apostle Paul. To take care of him for 18 months... *we're talking a major invasion of a couple's privacy.*

We know too that Aquila and Priscilla had a small house. This is why the Church in Corinth met for Bible Study at the home of Justus. Apparently, they were renting an efficiency apartment, and yet they were still willing to share the place with their new friend, Paul.

I'm not saying you should start picking up hitchhikers and bringing them home. Although, if the Lord *leads you*, I'm sure He'll *protect you*. Yet I know couples who won't even invite someone over for dinner because they don't want to clean the house, and wash a few extra dishes. To them, hospitality is an inconvenience.

Letting someone sleep in the spare bedroom, or on the couch - even a friend - is totally out of the question.

It's too much of a disruption to the daily routine.

If you're taking notes, I want you to write down three words, **take people in**. This was Aquila and Priscilla!

They were willing to *take people in*. They opened their lives to other people. Their marriage and home were not their exclusive property, it belonged to God.

In Romans 12:13, *actually several times in the NT*, Paul tells us Christians should be given to hospitality.

The word "**hospitality**" is related to the word "**hospital**." So often our homes are like mini-fortresses. We put up protective walls around ourselves and kids.

Our main objective is to keep the world out. But God wants us to be including - to invite folks in... especially hurting people... *Is your home a place of healing?*

The Greek word translated "**hospitality**" implies "**a pursuit or chase**." We're to be aggressively seeking the wounded. Folks we can take in - if just for a meal, or an encouraging evening - and help heal their wounds.

It's been said, "Love seeks not limits, but outlets."

When my son, Nick, was 6 years-old he walked into the room and said, "Dad, Mack (*who was three at the time*) just joined my new club. We want you to join too."

I asked him the name of his club. He told me, "It's the Power Place Club." Well, I was happy to join in, but I asked him, "Nick, *what does your club do?*"

He said, "Dad, we go around looking for things to fix, things that are broken, then we fix them!"

Simple enough! **Look for broken stuff and fix it!** And I can't think of a better definition for the mission of the Church - or even for a Christian marriage.

Don't just focus on yourself! Turn inward - and you'll choke on each other. Rather look around you, and see if you can find some broken people - *then fix them.*

If we had this kind of mentality, then maybe God would have a reason to pour out the love and joy and power of His Holy Spirit on our marriages and homes.

Our kids could see the dynamic of God right within the four walls of their house. They would grow up with firsthand experiences of God at work in real life. *And parents, this is one factor that will make your kids far more likely to invite the Lord into their home one day.*

Here's the challenge for couples... Rather than focus *inward*, the key is to look *outward*. And when we do, God turns our *humble home* into a *Power Place Club*.

But Aquila and Priscilla not only *took in* Paul, they also *took on* Paul. The dynamic duo **took people on**.

They took Paul on not just as a coworker in the tent-making business, but as a commitment they'd support for the rest of their lives. The three of them became devoted, faithful friends. In fact, when Paul moved to Ephesus, Aquila and Priscilla went with him. They left behind a prosperous business to follow their friend.

I'm often alarmed and disturbed over many Christian's nonchalant attitudes toward their friends.

Quite frankly, there doesn't seem to be a great deal of difference between the attitudes of Christians and non-Christians when it comes to friendships.

Folks today are so noncommittal to relationships!

They'll swap churches at the drop of a hat.

Men will uproot their wives and kids, and leave a committed circle of friends to become strangers in another town... and all for a measly few dollars...

No one seems to take seriously commitments to church and friends. Parents, where are your children going to learn *the value of friendship*?... Or *the importance of church*? If their parents never **take on** a serious commitment to be part of other people's lives, how will they learn *the value of Christian community*?

Aquila and Priscilla not only left their business to journey to Ephesus with Paul, but they were willing to make an even greater sacrifice for their friend!...

In Romans 16:3-4, Paul will later write, "Greet Aquila and Priscilla, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles."

One translation of the verse puts it, "*For my life's sake (they) submitted their own throats to the knife.*"

We're not told the exact circumstances of their sacrifice. But they were willing to put their own personal safety on the line for the sake of their friend.

They were devoted even when it wasn't convenient.

Obviously, the preoccupations in Aquila and Priscilla's married life weren't houses, furniture, IRAs, vacations... This marriage wasn't *mired in materialism*.

Which reminds me of the husband who suggested that his wife run for Congress. She took it as compliment, until she asked why. He replied, "Well, you really have a knack for bringing bills to the house."

That certainly wasn't Priscilla's problem.

The Gospel - and the family of God - their brothers and sisters in Christ - mattered most to Aquila and Priscilla. Even to the point of laying down their lives.

Tradition says Aquila and Priscilla were eventually martyred for Jesus sake. Even in death they stood side-by-side as they were beheaded with the sword.

They *lived together and died together* for Jesus!

It's interesting, the Orthodox Church commemorates both Aquila and Priscilla as saints, and makes February 13 the day of their remembrance.

This Valentine's Day when you think of love, don't just think of flowers, candies, and candlelight, but of a couple joining arm-in-arm to be a bright light for Jesus!

Aquila and Priscilla *took in* people, they *took on* people, but then they also **took people aside**.

When Paul left Ephesus to return to Antioch, Aquila and Priscilla stayed behind - and it was a good thing they did. For shortly after Paul's departure another preacher came to Ephesus - a man named *Apollos*.

Apollos had a sharp intellect, and was a brilliant orator. Aquila and Priscilla listened closely as he taught. We're told in Acts 18:25, "This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John."

There was nothing erroneous about Apollos' message - *it was just incomplete*. He knew only of John's baptism - the baptism of repentance.

Apollos knew how to *turn from sin* and *turn to Christ*, but he knew nothing of how to *turn on the Holy Spirit's influence*. He was ignorant of the baptism of the Spirit.

Apollos needed to know of the supernatural infusion of power and joy that God makes available to His kids.

We're told in Acts 18:26, "When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately." *I love how they did this...* they didn't go home and roast the preacher over lunch - putting him down for what he didn't know.

Nor did they chastise him behind his back at the next home group. Rather, they humbly approached him, took him aside, bought him a steak at Longhorn's... and explained, "*the way of God more accurately.*"

And apparently, Aquila and Priscilla were convincing.

To persuade a man as bright and as educated as Apollos they must've had a good grasp on the Scripture, and the ability to articulate their knowledge effectively. They were *students* as well as *spokesmen*.

We've noted that Aquila and Priscilla were always together - and this brings up another point - they were certainly in the Word of God together. During their 18 months in Corinth they attended Paul's Bible Study; *then brought the teacher home*. I'm sure there were many late night conversations discussing the Scripture.

If you want to wed marriage and ministry the place to start is reading and studying the Bible together.

Read a chapter of your Bible; then discuss it over dinner... Find a devotional you and your spouse can work through... Listen to a teaching CD; then discuss it with your spouse... Whatever it takes, *just do it!*

A few minutes a day in the Word together is the greatest investment you can make in your marriage.

Some of Kathy and Sandy's best times together are on the weekends when I discuss my Sunday sermon with her - or Monday when she shares with me what she's teaching at her Bible Study on Tuesday.

We share ideas together and try to help each other get a better grasp of what we've been reading. God uses these times to remind us of how valuable we are to each other and how we need each other's insights.

Aquila and Priscilla took the time, and made the effort to *take aside* a young man with promise - and share with Apollos their knowledge of the Scriptures. As it turns out Apollos became a mighty man of God.

Apparently, Aquila and Priscilla were not great speakers with large, public ministries - but they were grounded in the Word, and willingly opened their home to teach others. *Who knows the young Apolloses you could effect if you were willing to take people aside, and share with them your knowledge of God's Word?*

Yes, you'll have to sacrifice a quiet evening alone.

Yes, your routine will be disrupted... Yes, it may take redefining the phrase "*family time*" - *from time spent on each other, to time ministering with each other.*

But whatever adjustments it takes are worth it! The blessings that come when you focus your marriage *outward rather than inward*, are enormous and eternal.

And finally, Aquila and Priscilla **took people out.**

No, they weren't hit-men or assassins. Rather, they provided believers a safe place from the world's influences - a place to learn, and grow, and fellowship.

Everywhere Aquila and Priscilla lived they started a church - a fellowship of believers - in their home.

Did you know that for the first 350 years of the church's existence Christians met in private homes?

There were no single-use church buildings.

People gathered in living rooms to worship God, and to study His Word, and to break bread together.

One of the early church leaders, Justin Martyr, was asked by an unbeliever, "*Where do you Christians assemble?*" He replied, "*Where each one can and will.*"

You believe, no doubt, we all meet together in one place; but not so, for the God of the Christians is not shut up in a room, but, being invisible, He fills heaven and earth and is honored everywhere by the faithful."

Aquila and Priscilla were a couple who understood this truth. Wherever they went *they opened their heart **and their home** to the believers in the area.*

While in Corinth the church met in Justus' house. Aquila and Priscilla's place must've been too small.

But when the couple moved with Paul to the city of Ephesus, God blessed their tent business so they could purchase a larger dwelling - and their *new house* became the *new home* for the church in Ephesus.

In 1 Corinthians 16:19 Paul is writing from Ephesus, "The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house." Their *home* was a *hub* for the church.

Later, Paul visits Corinth - while Aquila and Priscilla move back to Rome. When Paul writes to the Romans he greets Aquila and Priscilla - then he adds, "Greet the church that is in their house." *They're at it again!*

Everywhere this couple located it didn't take long before they made their home available to the believers.

To invite a few people over for fellowship... *It'll mean you have to clean the house... It'll mean you'll have to worry about what to do with the kids... And it'll mean you'll have to make an effort to invite people...*

But the blessings you'll gain by opening your heart and your home for the Lord to use will be incalculable.

Again, I can speak authoritatively on this subject. Not only did Kathy and I start a church in our home 38 years ago, but in the years since our living room has always been a place for fellowship and Bible Study.

We've always been involved in taking people out of the world, and giving them a new place to call home. It can be done in church - but the best venue is a home.

Far too many folks in our world today are *home alone*. They're isolated, and vulnerable, and lonely, and they're prone to get into trouble. They lack a refuge.

There are people at CalvaryCSM who've never had a family life, and they desperately need to be exposed to a family that's healthy, and whole, and holy.

Perhaps you could make them part of your family.

We need to give other believers - *especially new believers* - an **“out”** when it comes to the pressures of temptation and worldliness. They need a safe space to formulate convictions that'll last and reshape their lives.

Let me close with a interesting story about a wedding that took place in Connecticut. A groom and bride tied the knot. *And all went well until after the ceremony...*

At the reception the bride thought the groom was stuffing wedding cake into her mouth with too much force. She retaliated, and the newlywed couple came to blows. Their honeymoon began with a giant brawl.

And this is what happens all too often in marriage...

We get upset at our spouse over *petty crimes, picky stuff* - like stuffing wedding cake with too much muscle.

Whereas, if we would just look outside the window, and see the homeless person on the street with nothing to eat at all - I doubt if we'd worry so much about how we're feeding each other wedding cake.

A couple's problems look a lot less significant when they get their eyes off themselves, and focus on caring for the spiritually *hungry and homeless* around them.

Truly, the words that Jesus spoke to individuals, also applies to marriages. In Matthew 10:39 He told us, **"he who finds his**

life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it." As I said earlier, the key to a truly happy and fulfilling marriage is not in trying to live *happily ever after* - but in living *actively ever after*.

What's true in life is true in marriage. Open your heart and home and let God *use* your marriage - or close off to God, and you could *lose* your marriage.

In God's plan *ministry and marriage* go hand in hand.

Let me summarize what we've learned - **take in people, take on people, take aside people, take out people** - and watch **God take care** of your marriage!