

# The Priscilla Challenge: When the Wife Is Called to Be the Pastor

As part of a tour group to Israel many years ago, I met a very sharp African-American man named Morris Bates. As we talked, he handed me his business card, and I saw that he was associated with The Blood Washed Church of Calvary located in Norristown, Pennsylvania. But what really caught my attention were the words: "Mary Bates, Pastor—Morris Bates, Assistant Pastor."

Because of an unhealthy preoccupation today with male authority, many in the church will not stomach such an arrangement in which the woman is the out-front teacher and pastor. The Bateses, however, were merely functioning according to their gifts. She obviously had teaching and pastoral gifts, while his gifts were administrative. Her gifts required her to be publicly out front, while his gifts were most effective behind the scenes.

## A Marriage and Ministry Partnership

In Romans 16:3-5, Paul greets such a couple named Priscilla and Aquilla. This couple is always mentioned together and always referred to with the plural pronouns "they" and "them." They obviously functioned in a close partnership for they are never mentioned separately. There is also evidence that Priscilla was the out-front one in ministry and the pastor of the church they hosted in their home.

Paul first met this couple when he went to Corinth to preach the gospel. They welcomed him into their home, and he worked with them in their tent-making business, the vocation in which Paul had also been trained. They were Jewish followers of Jesus, as was Paul. The three of them had much in common and

became very close friends during the 18 months they lived, worked and ministered together in Corinth (Acts 18:1-3).

When Paul departed Corinth, Priscilla and Aquilla departed with him, but they stopped off and remained in Ephesus, while Paul continued on to Jerusalem and Antioch. Paul later returned to Ephesus and reconnected with this couple.

While in Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquilla heard Apollos, a convert of John the Baptist, speaking in the synagogue in Ephesus. Realizing that he was deficient in his understanding, "they" took him aside, and "they" explained to him the way of God more accurately (Acts 18:24-26). Luke makes it very clear that both were involved in the instruction of Apollos.

### **Priscilla Mentioned First**

In Paul's greeting to Priscilla and Aquilla in Romans 16:3-5, he greets them and the church that is in their house. Interestingly, he puts Priscilla's name first in the greeting. This is telling for, in doing so, he violated the normal, conventional way of presenting a couple in the ancient world. The proper way would have been to mention Aquilla first, but Paul goes against accepted convention and mentions Priscilla first (Hyatt, *Paul, Women and Church*, 28-29).

That Paul would purposely mention Priscilla first is a powerful statement of her status and influence and of Paul's estimation of her. Many New Testament scholars see this as evidence that she was the out-front one in the relationship and the pastor of the church in their home. . Lenski, for example, said, "She by nature was more gifted and able than her husband, also spiritually fully developed, due to having Paul in her home for 18 months in Corinth."

That Priscilla was the more gifted one and the pastor of the church in their house was obviously not a problem for them or for Paul. It never affected their love for one another nor their ability to work together. Aquilla graciously accepted

his supportive role and was, no doubt, blessed to see Priscilla flourish in her gifts and calling.

I can think of other couples in history who functioned in a similar way and made a great impact on their generation. Phoebe Palmer had the support of her husband, Walter, and saw great revival in the northeastern United States, Canada and England. Marie Brown had the support of her husband, Robert, and built Glad Tidings Tabernacle in New York City into one of the largest and most successful churches in the Assemblies of God. There are numerous other examples wherein husbands played supportive roles for their wives who were the out-front preachers and pastors.

### **Function According to Gifts**

So, Mary and Morris Bates were not so unusual after all. Like Priscilla and Aquilla, they functioned according to their God-given gifts rather than culturally-defined roles based on their sex. They could do this because, unlike much of the church today, they saw ministry as characterized by service and responsibility rather than authority and control.

Because of an ungodly association of leadership with maleness and authority, many modern churches will not accept a Mary Bates or a Phoebe Palmer. Even if a Deborah were to arise in their midst, they would confine her to the kitchen and quench her God-given gifts. Deborah had a husband, who is mentioned in passing, but she was the one gifted and called to lead and judge Israel (Judg. 4:4).

### **Concluding Thought**

This is the time when God is pouring out His Spirit around the world, and sons and daughters are being moved by the Spirit to speak and to act (Acts 2:17). Modern day Deborahs, Priscillas and Phobes are experiencing the call of God to speak and act in His name. Will the church quench these gifts, or will she encourage these gifts and thereby help facilitate the greatest

revival the modern church has yet known? {eoa}

*This article is derived from Dr. Eddie Hyatt's latest book, Paul, Women and Church, available from Amazon and his website at .*

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