

THE REST OF THE STORY

Studies in the Book of Acts

***“We will move the world not by criticism of it, nor conformity to it –
but by combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God”***

Vance Havner

Text

Acts 18:18-23

Topic

On the return trip to Antioch the apostle Paul completes a controversial vow by cutting his hair

Title

Hair Do's & Don'ts

Acts 18:18 So Paul still remained a good while. Then he took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila *were* with him. He had *his* hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow.

Acts 18:19 And he came to Ephesus, and left them there; but he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.

Acts 18:20 When they asked *him* to stay a longer time with them, he did not consent,

Acts 18:21 but took leave of them, saying, "I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem; but I will return again to you, God willing." And he sailed from Ephesus.

Acts 18:22 And when he had landed at Caesarea, and gone up and greeted the church, he went down to Antioch.

Acts 18:23 After he had spent some time *there*, he departed and went over the region of Galatia and Phrygia in order, strengthening all the disciples.

Introduction

Juan Domingo is a Calvary Chapel pastor currently ministering in Ensenada. He's a Southern California native who in 1978 answered God's call to plant churches throughout Mexico, starting in Mexico City.

I remember him sharing at a pastor's conference in the early 1980's that he was planning to forfeit his American citizenship and become a

Mexican citizen. He felt it would demonstrate his sincerity to reach out to the Mexican people.

It sounds strange and extreme to us... But it's the kind of thinking that motivated the apostle Paul on the mission field. Writing to the church at Corinth Paul explained his philosophy of outreach. He said the following:

1 Corinthians 9:19 For though I am free from all *men*, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more;

1 Corinthians 9:20 and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those *who are* under the law, as under the law, that I might win those *who are* under the law;

1 Corinthians 9:21 to those *who are* without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those *who are* without law;

1 Corinthians 9:22 to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some.

1 Corinthians 9:23 Now this I do for the gospel's sake...

Paul's hairdo in **Cenchrea** is an example of this philosophy of outreach. To the Jews he became a Jew by taking a vow according to the Old Testament Law.

God will probably never call upon us to forfeit our citizenship. But if we are serious about reaching people there will be times we need to become **all things to all men**. It could involve something as simple as a hairdo (or a hair don't!). We should remain open to the Lord's leading. Among believers we should be willing to subordinate some of our rights and liberties in order to strengthen and encourage them.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Your Outreach Is Extended When You Become "All Things" To Nonbelievers, and #2 Your In-Reach Is Extended When You Become "All Things" Among Believers.

#1 Your Outreach Is Extended
When You Become "All Things" To Nonbelievers
(v18-21)

Our approach to these verses is suggested by the brief but significant information in verse eighteen that the apostle Paul had taken a **vow**

and gotten a haircut. There is no further explanation because none is necessary. Anyone familiar with the Bible knows that Paul must have taken a Nazirite vow.

The Nazirite vow is presented in the sixth chapter of the Old Testament book Numbers. The English word Nazirite transliterates the Hebrew *nazir*, meaning *set apart*. You made a voluntary vow to God to express your special desire to draw close to God and to set yourself apart from the comforts and pleasures of this world. During the time of your vow you observed the following prohibitions:

1. You were forbidden to eat or drink anything associated with the grapevine.
2. You could not go near a dead body, not even if a close relative died.
3. You let your hair grow throughout the period of the vow. At the end of the period of time you set for the vow your hair was cut and the clippings were burned along with an offering at the Temple in Jerusalem.

A Nazirite vow must last a minimum of thirty days but could last longer. Samson and Samuel were dedicated as Nazirites from birth. In the New Testament, John the Baptist was a lifelong Nazirite.

The term is not to be confused with Nazarene, a name of Jesus because He grew-up in the city of Nazareth.

Acts 18:18 So Paul still remained a good while. Then he took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila *were* with him. He had *his* hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow.

Paul spent a year and a half in Corinth before moving on. **Priscilla and Aquila** were a married couple who had employed Paul in their tentmaking business in Corinth. They traveled with Paul as far as Ephesus then stayed behind to sow seeds of the Gospel that Paul would water and harvest on his return visit there.

Acts 18:19 And he came to Ephesus, and left them there; but he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.

Left them there indicates that Aquila and Priscilla were moving to Ephesus as part of a plan to reach that city for Jesus. They would establish another branch of A&P Tentmaking but their real passion was for souls.

Just about every week we point out that Paul's strategy was to go to the local [synagogue\(s\)](#) and show the Jews gathered there how that Jesus was the promised and prophesied Messiah of Israel and Savior of the world.

[Acts 18:20](#) When they asked *him* to stay a longer time with them, he did not consent,
[Acts 18:21](#) but took leave of them, saying, "I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem; but I will return again to you, God willing." And he sailed from Ephesus.

Paul's plan was to attend one of the annual [feasts](#) in Jerusalem – probably Passover or Pentecost. Jerusalem would be packed with Jews from all over the Roman empire. It was an evangelist's dream!

The folks in Ephesus had a perceived need for Paul to stay but he had a leading to leave. Need doesn't always determine God's leading. As we'll see later in chapter eighteen, God had Ephesus covered for the time being.

This vow of the apostle Paul's has caused quite a stir among Bible scholars and commentators. Some don't want to admit Paul was taking a full-fledged Nazirite vow. To them it seems a step backward into legalism. They suggest that it was some other kind of vow; or that it was a modified Nazirite vow; or even that it was Aquila who made the vow and not Paul.

The confusion is resolved by Paul's own comments – the verses we read from First Corinthians about becoming all things to all men in order to reach them for Jesus. Without compromising his morals or his message, Paul was willing to change his methods in order to reach Jews or Gentiles:

1. Earlier in Acts we saw that when Paul invited Timothy to accompany him on a mission to predominantly Jewish territory he had Timothy circumcised so as to not offend the Jews.

2. In Acts twenty-one we will see Paul participate in a Jewish purification ceremony with four other Jewish Christians.

Paul was willing to act himself as if he were under the law of God when he worked among nonbelieving Jews. Among Gentiles he did not observe Jewish rites and rituals. He ate whatever foods were offered to him and dressed the way they dressed. When asked to explain himself he'd say, "All things to all men in order to win some."

Most of us will probably not be called upon to take such radical steps. We are already among the people God wants us to reach and, for the most part, share their customs and habits. Still there are many sub-cultures in our society and in our church. Instead of thinking we should all be just like one another let's encourage diversity for the sake of reaching out to everyone who needs to hear about Jesus. And let's pray – both individually and corporately – asking the Lord to show us if there are areas in our lives where we need to adapt in order to be relevant in order to reach out to nonbelievers.

Paul said in the Corinthian passage that he had made himself a **servant** to all in order to win some of them to saving faith in Jesus. The word he used for **servant** was *enslave*. Paul voluntarily enslaved himself to the nonbelievers he was among in order to reach out to them. We can do no less.

The basic "all things to all men" idea is at work when we are among believers.

#2 Your In-Reach Is Extended When You Become "All Things" Among Believers (v22-23)

The two verses closing-out this small section track Paul's movements. There isn't a lot in them other than that – except that they focus our attention back on Paul's activities among believers. His passion in the church was to build-up believers in their faith and equip them for reaching-out.

Acts 18:22 And when he had landed at Caesarea, and gone up and greeted the church, he went down to Antioch.

Acts 18:23 After he had spent some time *there*, he departed and went over the region of Galatia and Phrygia in order, strengthening all the disciples.

Gone up and **went down** are travel milestones that tell us that Paul visited Jerusalem. Since Jerusalem is at an elevation, that was how it was described – you ascended to it and descended from it.

Finished with the feast he wanted to attend Paul returned to **Antioch** – his home church. Then he systematically visited churches in the **region of Galatia and Phrygia**.

Strengthening all the disciples is a summary of the many things Paul did among them – teach, preach, pray, disciple, etc. It also neatly ties-up our suggestion that this entire section corresponds to his comments in First Corinthians.

When Paul described himself as becoming all things to all men he mentioned three groups: Jews, Gentiles, and those who are **weak**. The **weak** referred to believers who were less mature than he. It was Paul's practice to give-up his liberties in Jesus Christ as a mature believer in order to not stumble weaker (less mature) Christians. Thus he could reach in to them without offending them and thereby strengthen them.

We might not be called upon to adopt different lifestyles in order to reach-out to nonbelievers. But we will be among lots of believers in the church. As we grow in the Lord and discover the freedoms we have in certain gray areas we should subordinate ourselves to those who are weaker rather than stumble them.

It's what Paul did and I know I am not as 'mature' as the apostle Paul! Love trumps liberty. If I love my brothers and sisters I will become weak among them in order to strengthen (rather than stumble) them.

To some greater or lesser extent each of us wants to honestly say, **For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more... I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.**