

# That Wedding Ring

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The wearing or nonwearing of wedding rings has been a source of endless contention in the Adventist church. It is one of those issues that is never put to rest — largely because it relies more on the advice of Ellen White than on the teachings of Scripture. Many Seventh-day Adventists, deeply troubled by the fact that more and more young Adventist women *are* wearing wedding rings, conclude that the standards of the church are slipping and that the love of many waxeth cold. To them, ring-wearing proves that the influences of the world are creeping in and undermining the purity and clarity of the message of the church.

Since this not-so-great controversy is not going to go away, perhaps a new approach is in order. The issue could be largely resolved if it were addressed in a manner somewhat different from that employed in the past. This new approach would not challenge the authority of Ellen White but would question the interpretations many church leaders have placed on her counsel. That is, the problem could be translated from the question of fidelity toward the teaching of Mrs. White to the question of *finding of fact* applicable to her interpretation.

As most Adventists know, Mrs. White did not categorically forbid the wearing of wedding rings. She wrote, "In countries where the custom is imperative, we have no burden to condemn those who have their marriage ring; let them wear it if they can do so conscientiously."\*

Although she found prohibition appropriate for the America of her day, it does not necessarily follow that the same prohibition is applicable to the America of 1975. Whatever the practice may have been in the past, there is little doubt that the practice of wearing a wedding ring in America today is just as socially imperative as it is in many countries where wearing was permitted by Mrs. White — and is condoned by the church today. If the church wished, it could make a simple *finding of fact* that the wearing of the wedding ring in contemporary America is supported by the same firmly rooted social conventions as those that led Mrs. White to tolerate its use abroad.

This finding would not then involve a repudiation of the teachings of Mrs.

White. It would require only a reassessment of the conditions that prevail in our country. Such a finding by the church would result in impressive advantages.

1. It would go a long way toward terminating an issue that has proved vexing and wearisome over the years without “producing the peaceable fruits of righteousness.” The issue has led, rather, to a great deal of petty gossip, of being judgmental, and of preoccupation with a most peripheral matter at the expense of major Christian concerns. It is a bit difficult to believe that Christians should not have weightier matters on their minds than whether so-and-so wears a wedding ring.

2. It would spare church members much unnecessary discomfort when explaining the church position to friends of other faiths. Most members are eager to discuss their faith with others. But there is a distinct reluctance to discuss this particular belief — largely because the church position does not have the solid biblical support that the major doctrines have.

3. It would spare Adventist women frequent unnecessary embarrassments, including occasional misunderstandings of a somewhat serious nature — as when a couple occupies a motel or hotel room and the employees notice with interest that the woman wears no wedding ring. And what about pregnant Adventist women without wedding rings? Is it really necessary for these women to be regarded as of loose and promiscuous character? Doesn't the Bible say we should avoid even the appearance of evil?

4. Most importantly, by all odds, it would lead to more effective evangelistic campaigns. How every evangelist must dread the moment when he has to ask the potential woman convert to give up her wedding ring! How he must wince at the effect this will have on her possibly interested but as yet unbelieving husband! The evangelist knows from his own experience, or that of others, how many women have accepted the full array of church doctrines, including the Sabbath, only to draw back when asked to discard their wedding rings. That the church should lose significant numbers of converts by insisting on a requirement of this nature can only be termed a tragedy.

The answer normally given to the foregoing statement is that persons should be willing to make a full surrender to God — that they are not making that surrender as long as they insist on holding to any “sin” whatever. If they will not make the commitment to God and the church because of a wedding ring, it is said, they are not truly and fully converted; the church has a right to ask that total surrender to Christ.

But it happens that many who turn away because of the wedding ring requirement *are* willing to make a full surrender — on every point that can be shown to have substantial biblical support. They *are* eager to do God's will in all respects — as long as that will can be clearly established. But they are not convinced that

God's will has been so established in the Scriptures. If they knew that Mrs. White permitted wearing of wedding rings in some countries because of the customs of those countries, they would be even less persuaded.

At least some potential church members know that Abraham's servant, acting in a mission directed by the Lord, gave jewelry to Rebekah when she was approached concerning marriage to Isaac (Genesis 24:22, 53). They know that in Christ's parable of the prodigal son the father, welcoming his long-lost son, told the servants to "put a ring on his hand" (Luke 15:22).

As for Paul's exhortation on modest attire (1 Timothy 2:9), potential church members reason that Paul was not making a flat prohibition but was only reminding women that, in the eyes of God, what counts is one's inner character, not the outer adornment. This is the meat of the message, they believe. Although Paul observed that neither jewelry nor "broided hair" is a substitute for character and good works, questioners are aware that Adventist women do indeed try to make their hair attractive — without feeling guilty.

Since the church insists that all relevant verses pertaining to a given question be studied before a final judgment is rendered, many women are quite honestly unconvinced that a wedding ring is evil. Are they to be condemned for this? They know, moreover, that they are not wearing that ring in order to make a display before others. For a married woman *not* to wear a wedding ring attracts far more attention than to wear it.

Finally, the emphasis against wedding rings doubtless strikes many sincere and intelligent women as petty and trivial, diverting attention from the major and solid truths of the church. They do not understand how the church can make such an issue out of something so far removed from the great truths of Scripture and of the church.

In my opinion, the church rightly interprets the New Testament as calling on men and women alike to dress with simplicity and economy. In a world where hundreds of millions lack bread, shelter, and medical care — to say nothing of the great lack of the gospel — it is impossible to justify either lavish or liberal expenditures on one's person and in one's home. Christians should be the first to recognize that the needs of others should be met before their own needless satisfactions are provided for. And by that I mean a more modest standard of living than most Adventists, especially the more well-to-do, are willing to accept.

Paul, in order to get on with the main business of the church, was eager to avoid unnecessary and divisive church rules. In the America of today, his attitude toward wedding rings would surely be: "If there be contention, we have no such rule."

1/ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1923), p. 181.