

Let's Stop Arguing Over the Wedding Ring

by C. G. Tuland

The fact that the question of jewelry and wedding rings came up again in connection with the General Conference Session in Vienna shows that this is by no means a trivial concern of Adventist life.¹ Our church takes the position that her teachings are based on clear confirmation of Scripture. Can this be said of the traditional prohibition (in America, at least) of wedding rings? When an issue stirs emotions as this one does, it is worthwhile to ask such a question.

Years ago I discussed the wearing of wedding rings with a fellow minister who quoted two texts from the New Testament in support of the traditional position: "Whose [the wives'] adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and wearing of gold, or of putting on apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price" (I Peter 3:3, 4); and "In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold,

or pearls, or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works" (I Tim. 2:9, 10).

These admonitions of the apostles warned against excessive outward embellishment to illustrate the contrast between two types of adornment, a mere outward appearance versus an "unfading loveliness of an inner personality." (Phillips). This principle is as valid as ever also in modern times.

I asked my colleague whether these texts constituted a basis to prohibit church members to wear wedding rings. "Did the apostles intend to *prohibit* the braiding of hair as the words of Peter are said to state?" "That is correct," he answered. When I asked: "Did the apostles in these texts *prohibit* the use of ornaments of gold, rings and similar adornments?" he replied, "That is the way I understand it." Thus I continued: "To be logically consistent, did the apostles also *prohibit* women from wearing robes, garments and apparel?" He only said, "I have not looked at these texts from that angle."

My friend finally conceded that those texts do not *prohibit* the braiding of hair, the use of wedding rings or ornaments and the wearing of garments but merely stressed the necessary change from the former pagan outward adornment to the Christian ideal of a changed, spiritual character.

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While hairstyles, dresses and matters pertaining to fashions in today's Christian society are generally subject to only low-keyed and mild criticism, the use of wedding rings has been a matter of perpetual discussion among Seventh-day Adventists, way out of proportion to the relative importance of the subject. Strangely enough, the Bible does not present the use of rings as a specific problem. To the contrary, Joseph accepted Pharaoh's signet ring (privy seal) on his finger with a garment of fine linen and a gold chain around his neck (Gen. 41:42). Likewise, Mordecai the Jew received the ring of the Persian King Ahasuerus which entitled him to act on behalf of the king (Esther 8:2, 8, 10). In the New Testament, the father put a ring on the finger of the returning prodigal son as a token of renewed acceptance to his filial position (Luke 15:22). Monuments and documents from ancient history together with biblical records indicate that rings and other ornaments belonged to a man's attire almost to the extent that garments did, serving artistic and social as well as commercial purposes. They were used as seals on documents, denoting the position and authority. Beginning with the fourth century, Christians engraved their rings with invocations.

The position of the Seventh-day Adventist Church rests mainly on the understanding—or misinterpretation—of the two above-cited New Testamental passages as well as upon at least partly misapplied statements by Ellen White. Many believers also forget that a large number of her earlier statements are today entirely ignored, as they no longer refer to contemporary situations (length of garments, trimmings, playing tennis, acquiring bicycles, etc.).

Answering an inquiry from overseas regarding the use of wedding rings, Ellen White did make the following statement:

“Some have had a burden in regard to the wearing of a marriage ring, feeling that *the wives of our ministers* should conform to this custom. All this is unnecessary. . . . *Americans can make their position understood by plainly stating that the custom is not regarded as obligatory in our country.* Not one penny should be spent for a circlet of gold to testify that we are married. 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. . . .*²

This issue is quite clear. Mrs. White's universal outlook on some matters took into consideration not only the social concepts of the conservative religious movements of the nineteenth century in America, she also considered the customs of other nations and countries. This is the

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very reason for the above-mentioned statement: “. . . we have no burden to condemn those who have their marriage ring.” Central Europe, Sweden and many other countries around the world had already definitely established rules in this matter. Our American ministers appointed to leading positions in Europe in the mid-twenties had to accept these customs while serving in such countries. While Mrs. White lived in Australia, May Lacey White—the wife of her son, William Clarence White—wore a wedding ring with Mrs. White's consent, because it also was a custom there. But times and customs have also changed in our United States.

Throughout the years, articles and comments appeared in denominational publications as well as a plethora of official pronouncements often confusing the issue and complicating matters, without offering clear and valid guidance. Often the explanation of the permissibility of the wedding ring for church members overseas has been: “It is the custom there.” What seems confusing is that now the same custom prevails in America, and still many Adventists look askance at persons in this country who conform to the custom. One lady I knew about—and I imagine many share her feeling—wanted a united, worldwide opposition to the wedding ring, saying its use or nonuse was a matter of morals: “If it is a sin to wear a wedding band in the United States, then should it not be a sin in Great Britain, Where is our consistency?”

That is the crux of the matter, for wearing a wedding band is *not* a question of morals or sin; it is merely one of the customs, which vary with national and social concepts.

We are much vexed in our church by the fear that “standards are being lowered.” What I am saying is that the wedding ring is *not* one of them. The Old Testament does not legislate on it, neither does the New Testament, including our key texts, the exegesis of which has been— to put it mildly— unwarranted. Mrs. White’s counsel was primarily directed to the wives of ministers in other countries, in 1892, or 84 years ago; since then changes have taken place in America regarding the wedding ring custom. Thus, we need not fear that we are contradicting teachings of the Bible or the writings of Mrs. White in denying that the prohibition of the wedding ring is a standard of the universal Seventh-day Adventist Church. Yet, in spite of Mrs. White’s statement, “In countries where the custom is imperative, we have no burden to *condemn* (emphasis mine) those who have their marriage ring. . .”, many not only still condemn but are evidently not conscious that they condemn without cause.

Why do problems like the above still exist in the church? Is there no solution? We have:

—Quoted *Scripture* only to discover that our interpretation failed in hermeneutical principles

and that the Bible does not support our position.

—Quoted *Mrs. White* and found that her counsel (given in 1892) applied to a time 84 years ago and was intended for believers in America only. That counsel granted freedom to other nationalities with different social customs in regard to the use of the wedding ring. It indicates that the church has not correctly interpreted and followed the counsel by Mrs. White.

—Seen that what is merely a matter of national and social customs is still mistakenly regarded as a matter of morals.

—Seen that, according to all evidences, not wearing a wedding ring cannot be classified as a *church standard*.

—Seen that without justification this issue has caused dissention and meaningless controversy among church members.

What should the church do in this (or other similar) situations? Mrs. White stated in 1898: “And in comparing scripture with scripture, we might discover errors in our interpretation of Scripture.”³ She also said that the fact that certain doctrines have been held for many years by our people is no proof that our ideas are infallible.⁴ And if we add to her testimony that of the New Testament we find that Peter, Paul and the primitive church made serious mistakes. There was but one way to go: admitting them, they set things straight, even though they could not always remove some bitter consequences.⁵

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See *Review and Herald*, Oct. 2, Nov. 30, 1976
2. *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, No. 3, p. 6; 1892, quoted in *Outline Studies from the Testimonies*, by Clifton L. Taylor, 1918, Canadian Publishing Association Press, Oshawa, Ontario. *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 180, 181. (Emphasis mine)

3. *Review and Herald*, July 12, 1898.
4. See the *Review and Herald*, Dec. 20, 1892.
5. See E. G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 399, 418.