

Adventists in Plain Dress

by Gary Land

While many church members today are questioning the Seventh-day Adventist stand against the wearing of jewelry, a preliminary examination of the historical evidence suggests that early Adventist precept and practice was considerably more complex than might be expected. It appears that Seventh-day Adventists have inherited, particularly through Ellen G. White, a “plain tradition” rooted in earlier Christian movements. Although this “plain tradition” became the dominant position, particularly among the church leaders, many members who came from other Christian traditions had difficulty in accepting the ban on jewelry. In short, the “plain tradition” seems never to have completely won over the church membership.

The sources of the “plain tradition” lie in the radical wing of the Protestant Reformation. Sixteenth-century Anabaptists, for instance, opposed jewelry, hair ribbons, and other accessories, although this position seems to have weakened in some quarters by the end of the century.¹ In colonial America both the Puritans and the Quakers established the “plain tradition” in their opposition to gold ornaments, silver shoe buckles, feathers, ribbons, and lace, though the Quakers appear to have been the most successful in maintaining their prohibition of finery.²

For Seventh-day Adventists, however, the

most important source of the “plain tradition” was Methodism. The Doctrine and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal church of 1808 stated that the Christian must avoid “doing what we know is not for the glory of God: As the putting on of gold and costly apparel.”³ One scholar notes that while this general rule continued “essentially unchanged” until 1939, between 1876 and 1919 attempts to enforce the prohibition of jewelry were “greatly relaxed.” One minister addressing the Northern General Conference in 1900 lamented that “the plainness of the early Methodist congregations has disappeared.”⁴ This relaxation of standards in later 19th-century Methodism helped spark the Holiness movement, which took a strong stand against the wearing of jewelry. Some Holiness evangelists in the 1890s, for instance, condemned jewelry, including the wedding ring, as well as ruffles, feathers, and corsets. Early 20th century Holiness churches prohibited both jewelry and fashionable clothing. It was not until the mid-20th century that wedding rings became acceptable within the Church of the Nazarene.⁵

Despite the protests of the “plain tradition,” fashionable women in America always used jewelry as an important element in their wardrobe. While the popularity of specific types of jewelry changed over time, the desire for adornment seems not to have changed,⁶ affecting even followers of the “plain tradition.”

The importance of the Methodist influence on Adventism and the inability of Methodists to completely enforce their rule appears in Ellen White’s recollection that when she was 12, a

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woman came to her Methodist church wearing earrings and rings. Ellen was greatly troubled when she saw this woman greeted by the pastor and, after reflecting on 1 Timothy 2:9, 10, Ellen concluded that she must herself be plain in dress. She believed that it was wicked to think about one's appearance; instead, we must humble ourselves because of our sins and transgressions.⁷

This early rejection of jewelry because of the base nature of human beings pervaded Ellen White's comments on the subject through the early 1870s. In 1860 she remembered telling a woman in 1848 that Scripture forbade the wearing of gold and that "instead of decorating these bodies because Solomon's temple was gloriously adorned, we should remember our fallen condition, and that it cost the sufferings and death of the Son of God to redeem us."⁸ Elsewhere she warned parents against encouraging vanity by putting ornaments on children, criticized the "vain pride" exhibited in wearing jewelry, and spoke of the contrast between the ornaments and feathers of the fashionable and Christ's crown of thorns.⁹ Ellen White also urged economy in both use of time and money, saying that much was being wasted on jewelry and needless ornaments.¹⁰ Her advocacy of plain dress included not only jewelry but bonnets, collars, ribbons, laces and bows, although a note in the second edition of an 1856 *Testimony* said that she was referring only to expensive items rather than condemning entirely the wearing of such things as lace and collars.¹¹ In 1875 she pulled together a number of these concerns when she stated that "self-denial in dress is a part of our Christian duty. To dress plainly, abstaining from display of jewelry and ornaments of every kind, is in keeping with our faith."¹²

Beginning in the 1870s, however, Ellen White placed increasing emphasis upon the need to spend money otherwise used for "needless ornaments" for the poor or for God's cause. In 1878 she told *Review and Herald* readers that enough money was being spent by Christians for jewels and ornaments to supply the urban poor. Calling upon the young in 1880 to deny themselves, Ellen White counseled against buying needless "ornaments and articles of dress, even if they cost but a few dimes, and place the amount in the charity

box." Over 20 years later she similarly stated that "professed Christians adorn themselves with jewelry, laces, costly apparel, while the Lord's poor suffer for the necessities of life."¹³ In addition to using the money for the poor, she also advocated giving it to the church.¹⁴

However, this broadening of the rationale for opposing the wearing of jewelry did not displace Ellen White's earlier concern for self-abasement. In 1905, for instance, she quoted 1 Timothy 2:9, commenting, "This forbids display in dress,

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gaudy colors, profuse ornamentation. Any device designed to attract attention to the wearer or to excite admiration is excluded from the modest apparel which God's word enjoins."¹⁵ It should be emphasized that Ellen White seldom spoke of jewelry alone, almost always including it with ruffles, feathers, bows, ribbons, embroidery, lace, costly apparel, and expensive furniture and houses.¹⁶ In other words, Ellen White applied the "plain tradition" broadly to all aspects of the Christian's material life rather than limiting it to a particular type of personal adornment.

Other denominational writers, likewise devoted little time to the issue of jewelry (theological issues and even the use of tobacco and pork attracted much greater attention) but their comments consistently advocated the "plain tradition." In 1859 the *Review and Herald* reprinted an 1831 letter from Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson appealing to Christian women in America to eschew jewelry. A short time later the *Review and Herald* published the letter in tract form and then again reprinted it in the weekly magazine.¹⁷ A few years later, D.T. Bourdeau referred to Baptists and Methodists, among other unnamed denominations, as condemning the wearing of jewelry. Referring to Isaiah 3:15-26, 1 Peter 3:3,4, and 1

Timothy 2:9, Bourdeau said that the prohibition of gold was as clear as the prohibition of killing. He went on to outline four reasons for not wearing jewelry: biblical command, unnecessary expense, suppression of pride and self, and example.¹⁸

In 1871, another well-known minister, J. N. Loughborough, reconstructed a conversation with a woman who had begun keeping the Sabbath but “did not see fit to give up the world.” He argued against jewelry, particularly brooches and “gold cuff buttons,” because of their expense and their contrast with “the plain vesture of Christ.” When the woman apparently said that the biblical texts were only against extremes, Loughborough responded: “Won’t you be so kind as to tell me where to lay down a line of distinction, so that, in

instructing the people, they may know what is excess in jewels.”¹⁹

While these comments from the 1850s through the early 1870s reveal no single dominant argument, the statements throughout the remainder of the century tend to revolve around concerns for inner spirituality. Perhaps significantly, most of the writers pursuing this theme were women. As early as 1872, Mary E. Guilford described outward adornment as inconsistent with God’s requirements for inner spirituality. Concern with fashion, in her view, led to heathenism. God, she argued, wants us to withdraw our attention from the vanities of this world. A selection taken from a non-Adventist periodical stated that “a meek and quiet spirit is a brighter adornment than diamonds.” By the 1890s Mrs. J. W. Rumbo was



The White family, about 1905, at Elmshaven, California. Left to right: standing, Ella White-Robinson, Does Robinson, Wilfred Workman, Mabel White-Workman; seated, Ethel May Lacey-White, Ellen G. White, William C. White; seated on rug, J. Henry White, Evelyn Grace White, Herbert C. White. The shell necklace, worn by Ella, Ellen White’s granddaughter, was purchased by Ellen White while she was in Australia. Does Robinson, the husband of Ella White-Robinson, was a long-time assistant to Ellen White. Photo courtesy of the Art Library, Review and Herald Publishing Association.

calling for “plain dress” and “true inward adorning.” If humans could only see themselves as God sees them, Mrs. Rumbo urged, “there would be no spirit of adornment left in us. Laces and ruffles and feathers and flowers, and such like adornments, would sink to their true level in our estimation.”²⁰ This emphasis upon inner spirituality rather than strictly legal precepts, suggests that Victorian female sensibility may have played a role in the expansion of theological understanding. This period—the late 19th century—was when Adventists struggled over law and grace.

Both Ellen G. White and the *Review and Herald* writers took an essentially Calvinistic view of human nature and therefore saw no reason for humans to adorn themselves. But, as noted previously, jewelry was only one of several means of

adornment, all of which were condemned. “The church has not been commissioned to prepare a list of articles of apparel,” wrote Clarence Santee in 1912. “But God has promised to remove the desire for unnecessary adornment when the heart has been willingly submitted to him and he comes in and reigns.”²¹

Despite the unanimity of published opinion against the wearing of jewelry, the issue does not appear to have been a matter of church discipline in the 19th century. The Battle Creek Seventh-day Adventist Church adopted a series of resolutions regarding dress on April 30, 1866. Point three stated: “We believe that every species of gold, silver, coral, pearl, rubber, and hair jewelry are not only entirely superfluous, but strictly forbidden by the plain teachings of the Scriptures.”



The White family at Elmhaven, California, in 1913. Left to right: standing, Mabel White-Workman, Wilfred Workman, Henry White, Herbert White; seated: Does Robinson, Ella White-Robinson, Ellen G. White, May White, William White; on ground: Virgil Robinson, Mabel Robinson, Arthur White, Grace White. This picture appears in Arthur White's biography of Ellen White. Although Ella's necklace was originally airbrushed out, the Review and Herald has determined that in future editions the photo will be reprinted unretouched. Photo courtesy of the Art Library, Review and Herald Publishing Assoc.

As with most other comments on jewelry, though, this one was surrounded by condemnation of such things as feathers and flowers in point two, and ribbons, braid, and embroidery in point four. Also, unlike most comments, which said nothing about men, point seven objected to mustaches or goatees in favor of full beards. A few weeks later the General Conference adopted these resolutions with some minor revisions and additions, “recommending” them to the people.²²

Interestingly, although its significance is unclear, Battle Creek College said nothing about

jewelry until its 14th school year. Although five years earlier it had counseled its students against “extravagance in dress,” not until 1889 did the school calendar state that “the wearing of jewelry and any unnecessary ornamentation in dress are not in good taste here, and will not be in harmony with the wishes of the managers.”²³ It seems unlikely that jewelry was allowed prior to 1889, but why the institution waited until that year explicitly to prohibit the wearing of jewelry is unclear. Possibly Adventist practice, particularly in the Battle Creek area, was undergoing change.

The evidence discovered, to this point, regarding actual Adventist practice, is sketchy, but it does suggest that a number of Adventist women continued to wear jewelry despite the arguments put forward in church publications. Writing in 1857, Joseph Clarke described a New York merchant as saying that “the money paid by our people for these baubles (jewelry, rings, necklaces), is absolutely past belief; and that it might better be cast into the ocean.”²⁴ Three years later James White advised Adventist ministers against accepting donations to the church in the form of jewelry because it usually did not have as much value as the giver thought. He closed his 1860 warning by referring to those who “from a sense of duty wish to wear it (jewelry) no more.”²⁵ Two decades later, Ellen G. White indicated that Adventists, presumably at the Battle Creek Sanitarium, were wearing rings, gold watches, and chains, although she also said that Adventists were known for not wearing such items.²⁶ Another indication of what Adventists in Battle Creek were wearing is the offering taken in 1893 after A.T. Jones read Anna Rice’s testimony advocating that church members “tear off” their gold. The resulting offering at Adventism’s flagship congregation appears to have been spontaneous and suggests that people were wearing these items to church, including “gold watches, gold chains, gold rings, gold



Four generations of Seventh-day Adventists: Seated right, with necklace, Marietta Walker Aldrich. At the age of 15, Marietta was hired by James White as one of the first three typesetters at the Review and Herald Publishing Association. Later, she was a kindergarten superintendent in the Battle Creek Church. Her husband, Homer Aldrich, served as press foreman at the Review and Herald for 33 years, and her father, Eli S. Walker, was the first treasurer of the General Conference. Her father-in-law, Jotham M. Aldrich, chaired the meeting that organized the first General Conference session. Photo courtesy of Madeline Johnston.

bracelets, gold sleeve-buttons, diamond studs and pins.”²⁷

Gerald Wheeler has recently described the ambiguity of Ellen White’s own practice. At the 1888 General Conference Mrs. White wore a “heavy metallic chain which hung suspended near her waist.”²⁸ Wheeler goes on to state that “an examination of photographs of Ellen White reveals that she enjoyed wearing pins and brooches.”²⁹ Photographs of other Adventist women from the turn of the century show them wearing jewelry. Ella White-Robinson, Mrs. White’s granddaughter, appears in a 1905 family photograph—which includes Ellen White—wearing a long necklace.³⁰ Wheeler describes a second photograph of Ella White-Robinson, again taken with Ellen White, in which she is wearing a shell necklace apparently purchased as gift by Ellen White for her granddaughter.³¹ In a photograph of the founders of Madison School, taken in 1909, it appears that Minnie Hawkins is wearing a small necklace.³² And photographs of Seventh-day Adventist family ancestors in the collection of Madeline Johnston of Berrien Springs, Michigan, show several women wearing necklaces. Whether this phenomenon of Adventist women wearing jewelry, particularly necklaces, was widespread, or largely limited to the “worldly” Battle Creek area, can only be determined as more people search their family heirlooms.

Photographs of early Adventist women, together with such evidence as the Battle Creek Church offering of 1893, indicate that despite church teachings, jewelry was never fully eradicated from the membership. The discussions of ministers like J. N. Loughborough show that new Sabbathkeepers from churches that did not follow the “plain tradition” sought to bring their jewelry with them. Between the pressures of a society in which jewelry was fashionable and new church members who may not have accepted the entire scope of Adventist teachings, 19th century Seventh-day Adventism apparently had difficulty enforcing the “plain tradition,” although obviously it never relaxed its standards in the manner of Methodism.

Although this essay focuses on Adventist prac-

tice in the 19th century, some evidence indicates that some Seventh-day Adventists continued to wear jewelry in the 20th century. In 1918, Stemple White quoted John Wesley and the 1855 Methodist Discipline in an apparent protest against increasing acceptance of the wedding ring in Adventist circles. A 1931 writer described

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“God’s professed people wearing rings, bracelets, chains, and almost everything in the line of jewelry,” including the wedding ring. And in 1956, R. R. Bietz stated that “today we see more and more fingers, heads, necks, and ears of God’s people decorated with ornaments of gold and silver.”³³

The challenge to the prohibition against jewelry clearly has historical precedent, although such precedent says nothing about the rightness or wrongness of the present challenge. What does appear to be most interesting, however, and remains to be unravelled, is how the 19th-century prohibition of jewelry, which was always part of a larger complex of prohibitions, came to be isolated so that today we are still concerned about bracelets, necklaces, and earrings, but say nothing about furniture or houses or the 20th-century equivalents of bows, feathers, and lace—perhaps expensive sports cars and yachts. A feminist perspective will also ask if the rules governing the female dress are yet another example of male oppression of women, especially since the restrictions regarding mustaches and goatees have been long since forgotten. But any analysis in this feminist direction must take into account the central role of Ellen White in establishing the dominance of the “plain tradition” in Seventh-day Adventist thinking.

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