
“I Didn’t Recognize You With Your Ring On”

by Charles Scriven

A pastor’s wife in the rural Northwest recently told me she puts her wedding ring on while at work, then carefully slips it off again whenever she returns to a predominantly Adventist setting. A member of her congregation saw her on the job one day, and gave her a long, quizzical look, as though confused. Finally he blurted out: “I didn’t recognize you with your ring on.” The woman told this story with the mixture of disbelief and aggravation to which we’ve all become accustomed.

Curiously, though, some items of jewelry evoke positive feelings. That is true, for example, of brooches. The most widely held view puts brooches in the same category as cuff links, tie clasps, and watches. It is not offensive to wear these provided they are modest.

Bracelets are different. They may not be worn, according to the most widely held view. Nor may rings that are not wedding bands be worn, nor necklaces.

I learned as a child that it was a sin to wear a wedding ring, and a mark of virtue not to wear one. This was the majority view back then. Recently, a friend told me about an unhappy little drama that was just then unfolding in an Adventist church in New England. A young couple with three children had just joined the church. The mother offered to start a new Sabbath school

division, one for two- and three-year-olds. But the pastor and leaders of this church, though aware of the changed views of even our highest officers, said she could not hold any church office while wearing her wedding band. The mother was the only volunteer available. To those in authority it seemed better to go without the Sabbath school division than to put someone in charge who wore a wedding band.

However, since at least the early 1970s, it has been fairly common, even among ministers, to say that persons who in good conscience wear a wedding band may be considered faithful members of the church and may participate fully in its life.

Other items remain problems. I know someone who once owned a small shell attached to a leather string; she’d gotten it as a gift from a friend in eastern Europe. The shell could be worn around the neck as one might wear a necklace—or a necktie. Being, however, neither metallic nor plastic nor derived from oysters, it wasn’t exactly a (forbidden) necklace. Nor, however, was it exactly a (permissible) necktie. Then what was it? Could a good Adventist wear one of these?

Well, this person, wanting to be safe, took a felt-tipped pen and drew on the inside of the shell the face of. . . a clock! This was a little joke, understandable when you know that a clock is typically considered legitimate to wear—even if hung (as a necklace is) around the neck. Hence another little joke, namely, that when members of our church meet St. Peter at the gates of heaven,

they'll say, "We're Adventist." St. Peter will respond, "Oh, yes," and turning to his assistants, say, "Hey fellas, bring over the crowns with the clocks in them!"

What about a tiny earring? In official teaching this is a forbidden item of apparel. But if I attach it to my tie, then it's a tie clasp. Attaching it to a woman's suit, of course, makes it a brooch. Either way, it suddenly belongs to the category of what can be worn. It's a simple transformation, but also a puzzling one—as is this whole topic.

Not long ago I was surprised to get a telephone call from a lady out West I had never met or heard of before. She was distraught over what she understood to be our community's current position with respect to jewelry. She told me that she had recently rejoined the church and had brought her non-Adventist husband with her. It embarrassed her not long ago when a Methodist woman in her town had come to the Adventist church as a guest singer only to be confronted with someone who insisted that she remove her earrings before going onto the platform. And quite apart from this unhappy episode, the lady on the telephone was bothered because she couldn't figure out the sense of what we typically say about these things. Why, she wondered, is a pin okay and an earring not okay? A friend had tried this explanation: "I think it's wrong if it touches your skin." But of course this hadn't resolved my caller's questions.

I think a pastor is someone who has a duty to respond to people's questions. So I want now to turn to the Bible, to turn to the Bible and away from the bangles. We've got work to do. The questions occupy our leaders; they disturb us; they endanger our children. We've got to think them through, and we've got to do a better job of answering them than we've been doing up to now.

Let us begin with Genesis 1:31—"And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good" (KJV). Can a pearl be intrinsically evil? Can a vein of gold? Think, in connection with this, of the picture of the bejeweled New Jerusalem in Revelation 21. God made a good earth, and the beauty in it is something he embraces—and always will embrace.

1 Samuel 16:7—"But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance . . . ; man looks on

the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.'"¹ This is embedded in the story about Samuel looking over Jesse's sons in order to find a successor to King Saul. Samuel is impressed by the *looks* of the first son he meets, but God reminds him that what matters in heaven is what's on the inside, not what's on the outside.

Isaiah 3:14-19—"The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: . . . What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?" says the Lord God of hosts. The Lord said: 'Because the daughters

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of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes . . . the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents; the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarfs.' " Everything in these verses suggests the spectacle of elitist wealth parading itself haughtily and ostentatiously before the poor. It is this disregard for the poor, this proud extravagance, this ravaging greed, that God especially condemns.

Micah 6:8—"He showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" The same point: God expects compassion and justice from us, and humility in our walk with him. That is what's fundamental.

Matthew 5:20—"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." This is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and one major theme of the sermon is *heart religion*, not a merely external, legal religion. The scribes and Pharisees upheld 248 com-

mandments and 365 prohibitions about behavior. Jesus said that it is what's inside that matters most. And Ellen White, from our own heritage, agrees: performance of "outward requirements" is not enough. "A legal religion," she goes on, "is insufficient . . ." (*Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 53).

Mark 14:6—The background here is that a woman has poured an expensive flask of ointment over Jesus' head. Knowing Jesus' concern for the poor, some object that the ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor. They even rebuke the woman. Now verse 6: "But Jesus

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said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.' " The story does not concern jewelry, but it does concern an act of expensive extravagance. And against those who interpret his concern for the poor in a rigidly legalistic way, Jesus affirms the woman's gesture; he refuses to condemn her for it.

Luke 12:15—"Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." It is more important to *be* the right kind of person than to *have* material wealth. That's the simple, unmistakable message.

Luke 15:22—"But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.'" The father is the symbol of God in the story of the prodigal son; the ring—everyone agrees it was probably a signet ring—shows membership in the family, and the father does not hesitate to give it to his son. It was Jesus, of course, who told the story, and the fact that he could speak so comfortably of the "best robe" and the "ring" suggests that these were not items he prohibited absolutely.

1 Peter 3:3, 4—"Let not yours be the outward adorning with braiding of hair, decoration of gold, and wearing of robes, but let it be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious."

These words require more detailed attention. They are addressed to wives who had done something against all the ancient wisdom, namely, defied the authority of their husbands by taking a new, namely, Christian, religion. The author of 1 Peter is trying to say how these wives can win their husbands over to their own point of view. This would have been a shocking thought to pagans who considered wives mere property and expected them, among other things, to live in absolute religious harmony with their husbands. But the author says it anyway, and one key element of the strategy he recommends concerns outward adornment.

You may think, the biblical writer says, that hairdos or expensive jewelry or extravagant clothing will accomplish your objective, but they won't. The way to bear your witness is by an adornment that proceeds from within. It is not a showy, ostentatious outside that wins people over; it is the kind of person you are on the inside. And it's the inside, moreover, that God himself values most.

What are all these verses telling us, anyway? First of all, these verses tell us unmistakably that *simplicity in life-style* is one of God's requirements. *Simplicity* is an honored word that sums up the authentic Christian attitude toward money, possessions, and adornments. Simplicity is the attempt to master greed, to overcome extravagance, to live without that proud showiness that can only deepen the pain of the poor who cannot afford what we display. Simplicity is a focus on the inner person, not the outer person; it is concern for others, not preoccupation with one's self.

God looks on the heart, right? God rebukes those who parade themselves haughtily before the poor; he requires us to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with him; he says the best adornment of all is the adornment of the heart. All this means—how can we escape it?—that *God requires simplicity*. The leaders of North

American Adventism have recently called for new attention to “simplicity in lifestyle,” and this is something we surely ought to take seriously.

But now a story. Jan Daffern has told me about her experience some years back of taking classes at a Mennonite seminary in northern Indiana, near Andrews University. The Mennonites are very committed to simplicity, and Jan remembers that the seminary women typically wore their hair either in a short blow-dry style or pinned up in a bun. When an acquaintance of hers among these Mennonite women decided that she should pin up her own long hair rather than let it hang conspicuously down her back, Jan made her a gift of some fancy barrettes and combs. But the gift missed the mark completely; to the Mennonite woman the barrettes and combs were adornment when the whole point of the change in hairstyle was greater modesty.

Jan tells me that the women at the seminary took considerable offense at her own permed hair, not to mention her high-heeled shoes. To them, these things seemed far removed from the ethos of the Scripture. But they, on the other hand, were entirely comfortable wearing wedding bands on their fingers and tiny studs in their ears. It all seemed rather bizarre, this conflict between traditions, Adventist and Mennonite, which, after all, shared a common belief in simplicity.

The story shows the difficulty of *codifying* simplicity, of reducing it down to clear-cut commandments and prohibitions. Does the statement in 1 Peter about braiding of hair mean no permanents? Does it, for that matter, entail no braids at all, even on little girls? And what about “decoration of gold”? Why not require watches to have no gold on them at all? Why not allow any sort of, say, plastic decoration? Why rule out what is harvested from oysters?

Or consider again Isaiah 3. In his disdain for haughty ostentation, the prophet not only condemned pendants and bracelets, but also scarves. And he went on to condemn “signet rings”—which Jesus mentions favorably in the story of the prodigal son—and perfume boxes and handbags and linen garments and veils! You can look it up! Why not declare all these things off-limits for Christians today?

Well, the reason is this: simplicity can’t be permanently codified. We have to *discern* its meaning in a constantly changing world. If braided hair was once a sign of haughty ostentation, it is (typically) no longer so today. If scarves and handbags were once signs of haughty ostentation, they are (typically) no longer so today.

What all this suggest is that *we* must learn how to uphold simplicity without falling into legalism; we must disconnect the ideal of simplicity from the albatross of legalism.

And in any case, the attempt to make comprehensive codes inevitably entails loopholes and inconsistencies; these loopholes and inconsistencies in turn lead to anguish, then to doubt, and even to loss of faith. Every one of us knows some son or daughter of Adventism, who has gone down the road of anguish and doubt until it has led out the back door of the church, and left us who remain behind filled with sorrow.

This is why we must gain new maturity in our thinking about jewelry and adornment, and gain new respect for the whole teaching of Scripture and the special witness of Jesus. Jesus upheld simplicity, but he did so without being rigidly legalistic. What all this suggest is that *we* must learn how to uphold simplicity without falling into legalism; we must disconnect the ideal of simplicity from the albatross of legalism.

Jesus wants us to master greed; he wants us to overcome extravagance; he wants us to live without that proud showiness that can only deepen the pain of the poor who cannot afford what we display. At the same time he wants us to see the limits of a codified morality; he wants us to be discerning and flexible in the midst of change; he wants us to be sensitive to human needs and feelings, not rigidly severe and legalistic. He wants us to love simplicity and hate legalism.

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Bible texts in this article are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

Freedom Now, Peggy Sue!

by Alma Louise Potter

So, Peggy Sue, you're an Adventist woman, 38, and you've just had your ears pierced. Congratulations! Doesn't it make you feel great? It makes you look great! It is so liberating! You secretly craved earrings all of your life, didn't you? And you've just recently been freed by the realization that you won't go to hell, after all, if you wear them.

Tell me what it was like. Right—I understand—half gleefully, half resentfully, you understand what for most women “of the world” was a giggly teenage ritual. You were gleeful because now you could wear “real” earrings; you were resentful because you were closer to menopause than to menarche when you finally got to have this privilege. But the wait wasn't so bad because now you are free—this experience symbolizes so many more misplaced legalisms that warped your upbringing and your relationship to God.

Now that you feel better about yourself, Peggy Sue, you'll probably want to explore your career options more creatively. Perhaps you would like to start by meeting some successful women who have learned to feel good about themselves.

Peggy Sue, let me introduce you to your worldly colleague, Barbara. She's a brainy MBA who, at 28, is on a fast track to a vice-presidency. Barbara doesn't even blink when her boss tells her to get a makeover that will make her more salable as a professional. Suspecting in her inmost soul that her taste in clothes has always been dowdy,

she follows her high-priced consultant around the best stores, restocking her wardrobe at \$300 per outfit. Then she undergoes an expensive haircut, learns how to apply the right shade of metallic coloring to her eyelids, selects jewelry that makes her look rich but tasteful, and, if she is attuned to the hoity-toityest of the cultural doyennes, she polishes the soles of her shoes.

If Barbara completes these rituals successfully, she will be judged worthy of her potential \$80,000 annual salary. She can now compete on an “equal” basis with her male colleagues, who, with modestly talented hair stylists and a decent array of business suits, are advancing their careers with an extra hour or two of work a day, while Barbara is making herself look right. In order to overcome this automatic disadvantage, Barbara will have to get by with one or two hours less of sleep per night, which will make her look older and more haggard than she otherwise would. Fortunately, this can be easily remedied by cosmetic surgery.

Barbara has bought into one of the oldest myths in the book—the belief that women are objects. But perhaps an intuition gnaws at her. Maybe, just maybe, Barbara starts asking herself how, after 25-plus years of feminine mystiques, and second sexes, and unprecedented professional opportunities for women, this myth is practically as healthy as it was millenia ago, when a woman's decorations symbolized her very real bondage to the patriarchal system.

What a revelation, what a liberation it would be to Barbara if someone she trusted would walk up to her and say, “You know, you don't have to do

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this.” Imagine Barbara’s relief upon hearing that her intelligence, training, personality, and professional, but not obviously decorated, appearance are the criteria upon which her job performance is evaluated . . . and upon which her friends relate to her. At work, she would be treated on the same basis as her male colleagues. In both her profes-

sional and her personal lives, she would retain her freedom to be a happy, fulfilled woman without jeopardizing her femininity. Then she would be liberated.

Barbara would love to enter that world.

And that, Peggy Sue, is a world you could have had all along.