



The Big Deal About Pork and Jewelry

Does it *really* matter what we eat and wear? Yes, says Ernest Bursey, it's a matter of "boundary-marking." No, says Greg Schneider, convictions should override standards.

Standards Hold a Symbolic Function in a Community

by Ernest J. Bursey

"WHY CAN'T THE ADVENTIST CHURCH BE CONSISTENT? Eating lots of sugar and not getting exercise is worse than a ham sandwich now and then!" What Adventist pastor or teacher has not heard these words? This essay¹ attempts to suggest that consistency is not the only consideration in church standards. In fact, apparent inconsistency ought to be defended on both sociological and theological grounds.

For the sake of illustration, let's begin with the matter of pork. Typically, an Adventist Christian doesn't eat pork. Both inside and

outside the community, this singular behavior has become an identifying mark of Adventists. Evangelists in North America have not considered candidates ready for baptism if they continued to eat pork and lard products. Not surprisingly, many non-Adventists identify Adventists as those Christians who don't eat pork.

Adventists aren't the only ones who engage in behavior that identifies them. Americans salute a distinctive flag; theology teachers traditionally wear sport coats and ties to class; high school sophomores adopt a particular hair style that is "in." Universally, subgroups select and/or maintain certain behaviors to signify allegiance to their group and to serve as indicators of the boundary that distinguishes those inside from those outside the subgroup.²

As a church we have not been immune to this process. To deal adequately with specific church standards we must recognize their symbolic function.

Looking at church standards from the view-

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point of their symbolic value can help us understand their apparent inconsistencies. For instance, is it consistent to make abstinence from pork a prerequisite for baptism when we know excess sugar consumption, overeating, and lack of proper exercise can be even more unhealthful? Yes, it is, if church members understand the matter pragmatically and sociologically.

Not only abstinence from pork, but also a whole series of specific behaviors required of one joining the Adventist Church function symbolically. Perhaps we can speak of them as “entry-level” symbols. To practice these behaviors has the effect of moving a person across the boundary that marks off the Adventist from the larger population.³ Other behaviors that appear to have greater consequences are not requirements for membership. However, we can understand and support the importance of these practices as “entry-level” behaviors.

These “entry-level” or “boundary-marking” behaviors are important because they symbolize the commitment(s) of an emerging Christian to a series of corresponding principles or values that lead far beyond the simple, obvious behavior. To illustrate, let us look again at abstinence from pork products.

The “entry-level” commitment to avoid pork as an unclean food should be seen as an implicit commitment to the view that our bodies are the temples of God. Diet is understood by Adventists as a matter of profound spiritual importance because of this understanding of the interplay between healthful

living and Christian experience. It is not enough to point to the prohibitions in Leviticus and Deuteronomy as the reason for the church standard on pork products. Our position on this subject is directly related to an obligation to show, by what we eat, due respect for “the temple of God.”

As Adventists continue in their “Christian growth” they are confronted with a host of suggestions, even directives, about diet and healthful living. For instance, Adventism has traditionally stressed vegetarianism. But as

strongly as some (including Ellen G. White) feel about vegetarianism as God’s ideal and the goal to be reached, it has never been a litmus test of fellowship.⁴ That is, one may become—and remain—an Adventist while still a “pork-abstaining carnivore.” But the

original commitment should provide an impetus to move that individual “carnivore” toward a life-style that increasingly respects and protects the “temple of God.”⁵ One might say that the work of the pastor is to remind us of the implications of our “entry-level behaviors,” and the direction of our symbolized commitments.

Such an approach appears to meet the objection of inconsistency that is often raised over “church standards.” We should not be surprised that an organization singles out certain behaviors to serve as “entry-level” requisites.

But not all behaviors are equally useful as “entry-level” or boundary-maintenance symbols. For instance, abstinence from pork is superior to adequate exercise as an “entry-

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level" behavior on at least two counts. First, the elimination of a specific item of food is easier to practice or witness than would be the incorporation of a general behavior, such as getting exercise. Second, a definition of "adequate" in "adequate exercise" is difficult to standardize. Total abstinence of a single item is much easier to adhere to for every person regardless of individual differences.

Such simplicity is necessary in the case of entry-level behaviors that are designed as symbols that can be readily observed. It is important to note that only certain behaviors are demanded from every member as an expression of personal commitment to the Adventist diet. Other desirable behaviors based on the same commitment to the care of the body as the temple of God ought to follow. But the church does not police in these matters. The individual is encouraged to extend the commitments to include additional behaviors, including daily exercise and adequate rest. But adjustments are made for personal preference and needs even fairly close to the requisite minimum.⁶

Much of the apparent inconsistency in Adventist standards grows out of this strong bias toward preserving the believer's freedom. Given the comprehensive view of Christian living taught among Adventists and developed in the voluminous writings of Ellen White, one might say that the Adventist Church maintains quite minimal standards. Only a relatively few "entry-level" behaviors are required to be maintained.

We can illustrate this process in virtually every area of Adventist behavior. Commitment to tithe as a principle is basic to the vows of baptism. Yet a failure to pay a full tithe, or to pay one's tithe to the local conference that pays the pastor, or to give regular offerings to the budget of the local church in which one worships, does not directly bring one's membership into jeopardy.⁷

Likewise, true Sabbathkeeping includes more than not working on the Sabbath. Many Adventists can tell moving personal stories of the loss of employment for refusing to work on the Sabbath.⁸ If one insists or persists in working on the Sabbath, then one's membership is indeed in jeopardy.⁹ But a member will not be disfellowshipped for failing to regularly attend church or for sleeping every Sabbath afternoon or by engaging in touch football at Rooks Park.

The removal of jewelry has traditionally been an "entry-level" standard in American Adventism. If we listen to the reasons for not wearing jewelry, we hear arguments about commitments to Christian modesty, simplicity, and stewardship. On a strictly dollars-and-cents basis, the purchase of a luxury vehicle or even sporty hubcaps can far outweigh the actual cost of an inexpensive set of earrings. Yet who has been denied membership for a set of hubcaps or censured for the purchase of an expensive car with a high depreciation schedule? Does this mean that our focus on personal adornment is misguided?

Not necessarily. The practice of removing the wedding ring before baptism has functioned in American Adventism as a powerful symbol of commitment to the church. I make this assertion even though I am aware that the usual explanations by evangelists and pastors for the ring's removal have not recognized the symbolic function of this act. This is yet another instance where our rationale has failed to deal with the real function of a required behavior. Perhaps for the wrong reasons, the symbolic meaning of removing the wedding ring prior to the baptismal service has, in at least some instances of which I am aware, paralleled or even surpassed the symbolic meaning of putting the ring on at the wedding service.¹⁰

Simply eliminating the practice of removing jewelry prior to baptism is hardly the way

to deal with apparent inconsistencies in Christian adornment and fashion. Even though a Christian can make a mockery of that visible, entry-level behavior by refusing to carry out its implications in the purchase of watches, entertainment centers, cars, homes, et cetera,¹¹ it is inconceivable for the church to lay down "standards" for baptism that limit how much can be spent for the necessities of transportation and shelter. Instead, the responsible pastor or teacher will encourage Christians to carry out basic commitments to simplicity and stewardship when buying a car or house.

The approach I have suggested views church standards and expected behaviors from both a sociological and a theological vantage point. The minimal Christian standards required for baptism, whatever form they take, should be seen as symbolic entry level gestures that serve to publicly express spiritual commitments. These behaviors should be specific, concrete, and simple to observe. In these ways, church standards balance an emphasis on personal freedom with a strong sense of commitment to God's will.

Notes and References

1. Professor Robert Gardner of Walla Walla College read an earlier draft and made a number of helpful suggestions.

2. The selection of certain behaviors as a symbol of identity is rarely the result of legislation. Furthermore, the parties involved in the selection of specific behaviors may include those outside as well as inside the group.

3. As Robert Gardner points out, sectarian membership has typically required a dramatic symbol of commitment to show that the individual has turned from the "world" and joined the sect. This may include leaving spouse, parents, children, and breaking other significant social bonds. Note the words of Jesus in Luke 12:51-53 and Matthew 10:34-38. As noted later in this

paper, the removal of the wedding ring in earlier Adventism appeared to function as a powerful symbol of commitment to the church.

4. Ellen White firmly rejected vegetarianism as a test of fellowship. For a survey of Ellen White's own use of meat, see Roger W. Coon, "Ellen G. White and Vegetarianism," *Ministry*, 59:4 (April 1986), pp. 4-7, 29.

5. Again Gardner observes that this raises the issue of individual choice. He believes that a Seventh-day Adventist should choose the life-style because, based on data, it is in fact more healthy. For even the entry-level behavior, a health rationale must be given.

6. So Ellen White writes to a domineering husband that "even a small amount of the least hurtful meat would do less injury than to suffer strong cravings for it" (*Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 2, p. 384).

7. A failure to pay tithe may disqualify one to accept leadership as an "elder" or a church employee. Again, this is not a matter of inconsistency but a recognition that those in positions of leadership ought to exemplify Christian behavior beyond that of the novice.

8. This appears to us to be another instance of the importance of a dramatic symbol of personal commitment that shows the individual has turned from the "world." These experiences often mark the place in time where one really becomes an Adventist.

9. Unless, of course, the work is required as a specialist in meeting human need/suffering. I suspect that current Adventist struggles over work on the Sabbath are an outgrowth of the growing complexity and dependency of modern life: roads need to be kept clean, weekends are times of business and travel, municipal services are expected by all persons, including Adventists, seven days a week. So the "no work" standard seems less clear than in previous times, though not less important.

10. Certainly, there seems to be a gender bias when the entry-level behaviors in the area of personal adornment have been largely directed toward jewelry worn by women.

11. It is tragic when church leaders encourage the removal of jewelry as a symbol of stewardship while celebrating the acquisition of wealthy professionals. This writer still smarts over the memory of a supervising pastor of the largest church in a Midwest conference who showed no response to the request for Bible studies from a couple from a circus background who regularly attended the church. The same pastor made much of the physician he had recently baptized after a series of evangelistic meetings.

If Pork and Rings Are a Big Deal, We Have To Give Fundamental Reasons

by Greg Schneider

I AGREE WITH ERNEST BURSEY'S OBSERVATION THAT standards are symbolic of group belonging and identity. I further agree with his implied recommendation that we treat them as such: that we tell new members, young people, and, thereby, ourselves that our standards symbolize who we are and who is a part of us.

However, Bursey's views, as they stand, are vulnerable to a summarizing caricature that might read, "Well, we have to stand for *something*." Some behavioral standards—e.g., no pork—are attempts to act out our convictions in particular times and circumstances. There are also *defining* convictions—e.g., Christ is Lord—that are essential to our identity. One can imagine a group dispensing with prohibitions on pork and still being the Adventist Church; it is impossible to imagine them dispensing with the confession of Christ's Lordship and still being the church.

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We must legitimate our symbolic hedge markers in both functional *and* substantive terms. Abstaining from pork is a convenient, functional way to signal membership; but what, in the light of all that Paul said about Christ and the law, has it to do with the Lordship of Christ?

Another way to make my point is to make use of Kenneth Burke's dictum that symbols are strategies for encompassing situations. As such, they have three elements: A charting or mapping element that describes the situation; a persuading or praying element designed to move persons to feel and act toward the situation in particular ways; and a dreaming or wishing element that expresses the personal needs and imaginings of the person(s) who confront the situations and make use of the symbols.

A symbol that charts a situation inaccurately may lose its usefulness and legitimacy in people's minds when its deficiencies are revealed. Thus the relativizing of the health claims for abstaining from pork may make this standard less legitimate in people's minds and thus a less-effective symbol. Paul's theological chartings, which undermine the law and elevate Christ as symbol of God's acceptance and promises, may also lessen the symbolic effectiveness of law.

The persuasive element of symbols is the

Good Reading on the Social Importance of Symbols

Two lucid theoretical treatises on the social importance of symbols are by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann: *The Social Construction of Reality*, and *The Sacred Canopy*. They are available from Doubleday in inexpensive paperback editions. A seminal, anthropological treatise on certain kinds of boundary symbols is *Purity and Danger*, by Mary Douglas, a study of the abominations of Leviticus. A very interesting histori-

cal investigation of the meaning of early evangelical proscriptions of dancing, gambling, etc., is found in the work of Rhys Isaac. His *magnum opus* is *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*. An article that gives the flavor of what he's about is "Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists' Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765 to 1775," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd. series, 31 (July 1974), pp. 345-368

functional/sociological element par excellence. Persuasion among humans typically proceeds by a process of identifications; we are moved by symbols that identify us in relation to others. These symbols imply particular sorts of feelings/actions as a "natural" consequence. Again, the letters of Paul are excellent examples. Paul says, in effect, "You are sons of God, heirs to His promises because of Christ. Therefore act like it, and don't act like you belong to the world."

Here it is important to ask again what identifications our symbols make. I suspect that today's Adventists are especially asking what sorts of *dis*-identifications our symbols are requiring of us. Once upon a time, it might be argued, taking off the wedding ring served to establish a meaningful separation between us and some other groups who rejected the Lordship of Christ. At that time, taking off the wedding ring might very well have symbolized an emphatic rejection of the rejectors and a deep loyalty to Christ above all other loyalties. However, in this day and age, when loyalties such as marriage are treated so casually by "the world," a wedding ring might be the most appropriate symbol of loyalty to Christ and his church.

While we are considering issues of identification and loyalty, we ought to look at our criteria of convenience and concreteness for appropriate "entry-level" symbols. Observing these criteria will not absolve us of a dilemma, however. The expensive car with the high depreciation schedule is not simply an ex-

pression of personal greed or pride (the dream element). It is also a symbol of identification with a particular socio-economic and occupational status, a symbol of loyalty to some of the dominant principalities and powers of our age. If we strive to maintain entry-level symbols that lead us deeper into the living truth of the kingdom, it seems that doffing the wedding ring as a symbol of stewardship, while celebrating our status as wealthy professionals, strains a gnat while swallowing a camel.

What Burke calls the element of symbols

suggests that our communal symbolizing must recognize the multiplicity of human needs. Because such needs *are* multi-form, any symbolizing is better done on a rather general level that is susceptible to many different personal interpretations. Sabbath observance is a good example. Specifying at high

levels of church administration (church board or conference committee) or at high levels of community influence (church papers) precisely *how* the day must be observed is a bad policy. To the extent that we can determine what personal needs are generally experienced by large numbers of people, our symbolizing should be open to such needs.

Religious people who follow the musing of Rdevelopmental psychologists to note the way the seven sacraments of the medieval church seemed tuned to the needs of the life cycle in that time and culture. We have the burden of constructing in our day rituals and symbols that will engage the widest range of

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what we understand to be universal human needs.

The reference to the medieval church points to another issue implicit in the struggle over standards. The medieval church engaged the emerging needs of the human life cycle because it was a church-type rather than a sect-type of institution. It understood that its parishioners were part of a "family" moving through natural stages from birth to death. The medieval church elaborated rituals and symbols that seemed less chosen than simply given in nature.

Adventists are heirs of a sectarian vision that understands the church to be a voluntary association. The form of belonging here is not really family; it is more a contract. "In return for being counted a member of this club and for receiving the various privileges of membership, I pledge to keep the club rules and thus symbolize my belonging." When one disregards or disdains the symbols, by implication he or she has chosen to no longer be a member. The problem is that Adventists have been around long enough to be more of a church-type of association. However, we still struggle to conceive of our life together on the sect-type model. This often results in the worst of the two models: a corporate-bureaucratic model that affirms the permanence and power of the institution while treating the members as recalcitrant employees, constantly reminding them of their "contract" with God and with his church. No wonder the members wanting to be a part of the family of God disengage from the rest of the church and identify with

a local congregation.

Another way to express the reservations I feel about Bursey's paper is to suggest a thought experiment I might conduct in my classes. I tell young ladies that I want them to take off their jewelry because doffing such stuff serves the sociological function of identifying them with the community. They are always polite, but I imagine them thinking, "Ha! We thought so. It's just a rule for the sake of keeping up the family appearances. So who needs to belong to such a screwed-up outfit, anyway?"

This sort of response is motivated by a variety of factors, all of which rise from our deep need for being and belonging, for finding reasons for the fundamental patterns of our common life together. In a way, our medieval forebears were more fortunate. For them rituals and symbols were hallowed habits that seemed like the eternal will of God and the pattern of Nature. We know that our reasons for our common life are human constructs. We are condemned to freedom.

Telling our young people and ourselves about the social and functional importance of boundary and entry-level symbols is an important step in taking up the responsibilities of our freedom. It is, however, only one step in a very complex minuet. We are used to limiting ourselves to a determined marching step. Before we recognize our dull, disciplined folly, many more may fall out of our columns. Hopefully, Adventists are recognizing that, in the dance of life, they must learn some new steps.