

ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE

THE
WEDDING BAND,
ELLEN G. WHITE,
AND THE
SEVENTH-DAY
ADVENTIST
CHURCH



ROGER W. COON

**The Wedding Band,
Ellen G. White, and the
Seventh-day Adventist
Church**

Ellen G. White

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About the Author

Ellen G. White (1827-1915) is considered the most widely translated American author, her works having been published in more than 160 languages. She wrote more than 100,000 pages on a wide variety of spiritual and practical topics. Guided by the Holy Spirit, she exalted Jesus and pointed to the Scriptures as the basis of one's faith.

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A Few Personal Observations by Roger W. Coon

Associate Secretary Ellen G. White Estate

General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

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Introduction

Immediately upon the adjournment of the 1986 Annual Council Session of the General Conference at world headquarters in Washington, D.C., at 12 noon on Nov. 11, the “year-end meeting” of the North American Division Committee was convened (at 1:30 p.m.) to transact the business of this Division of the world field. The first substantive issue to be discussed was the question of Division policy concerning jewelry/adornment in general, and the wedding band in particular. The “lively” debate of three hours’ duration focused largely upon whether candidates for baptism and church membership should be permitted to continue wearing a “simple” [non-jeweled] wedding band if such had been their practice before.¹ [See Appendix A]

Some 14 years earlier the General Conference Officers and North American Union Conference Presidents had met (on Oct. 2) prior to the opening of the 1972 Annual Council, to consider how the church in North America should relate to the growing practice of members wearing the wedding band. They reaffirmed their opposition to the wearing of ornamental jewelry (and an action to that effect was taken subsequently by the 1972 Annual Council). They voted a non-binding Statement of “Counsel Regarding the Wedding Band in North America” which:

- a. Recognized that some conscientious SDA Christians felt that cultural conditions in North America were substantially different from those obtaining on this continent in 1892 when EGW counseled Americans not to wear the wedding band, but added that she would not condemn those living in countries where the custom was culturally obligatory from so doing.²

¹End Notes “North America Adopts Adornment Action,” *Adventist Review*, Dec. 4, 1986, pp. 9, 10.

²See *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, 180, 181.

b. Recognized that there existed no prohibition to the wearing of a simple wedding band in the Bible, the writings of the Spirit of Prophecy, or the S.D.A. Church Manual.

c. Recognized an “apparent” consensus still existing in North America which made little or no distinction between the wedding band and ornamental jewelry.

d. Urged SDA ministers to continue discouraging the wearing of the wedding band among their church members in North America.

e. Instructed SDA ministers not to perform ring ceremonies at weddings of members in North America.

f. Yet, finally, took “the position that a person who on the basis of conscience feels obligated to wear a plain wedding band should not be denied baptism.”³

After more than “two dozen speeches, remarks, and declarations,” many still opposing any liberalization from the previous *de facto* total ban against SDA church members wearing a wedding band in North America, a resolution reaffirming the 1972 counsel statement was adopted as church policy in North America, along with continuing explicit opposition to the wearing of ornamental jewelry and an “appeal for a commitment to simplicity in lifestyle ... to halt the rising tide of worldly attitudes and practices” of recent years.⁴ [See Appendix B]

[2] Publication of this policy, known to be controversial when it was adopted, resulted in an expected flue and cry of opposition by ultra conservative elements within the church, whose statements were generally characterized as strident (if not bellicose and belligerent), highly emotional, and not well supported factually. Much of the

³A subsequently edited version of this statement of “Counsel Regarding the Wedding Band in North America,” adopted by the GC Officers and North American Union Conference Presidents, Oct. 2, 1972, was communicated to Union and Local Conference Presidents by GC Vice President Lowell Bode on Nov. 8, 1972, with a circular letter advising that since this action had not been officially adopted by the Annual Council [or North American Division, which then existed virtually only on paper], “this statement does not enjoy the force of policy.”

⁴The text was published in *Adventist Review*, Feb. 12, 1987, pp. 28, 29, and in *Ministry*, April, 1987, p. 25.

argumentation of the opposition was based upon four assumptions none of which is true:

1. That Ellen White, during her lifetime (1827-1915) consistently forbade the wearing of any wedding band at any time and in any place within the SDA Church, that she classed the simple non-jeweled wedding band in the category of ornamental jewelry, and that she wrote extensively and repeatedly against the practice of the wearing of the wedding band.

2. That the General Conference, from its earliest days, adopted an official policy against the wearing of any wedding band, and that this policy continued until the 1986 action in Washington which overturned more than a century of precedent to the contrary.

3. That the *SDA Church Manual* historically always reflected the GC policy against wearing wedding bands, until it was forced to reverse itself by the more recent liberalization policy.

4. That the wearing of a simple, non-jeweled wedding band in North America is now no longer to be discouraged by pastors in that Division of the world field.

What are the demonstrable facts? Ellen White:

1. Recognized that in her day the custom of wearing a wedding band was considered *de rigueur* throughout the British Empire, Europe, and in many other parts of the world—a cultural imperative—and she accepted the *status quo* as applicable to SDAs in such places. In *this particular context* EGW did not equate the wedding band with articles of ornamental jewelry proscribed by Scripture. She reproved a Swiss SDA minister as being an extremist for publicly urging SDA married women in his country to remove their wedding bands because he viewed them as jewelry. She voiced no objection to the wearing of a wedding band by her future daughter-in-law, when asked counsel by the young woman (an

SDA) prior to her marriage to widower Elder William C. White in Australia, in 1895; and the couple were subsequently married in a ring ceremony in the State of Tasmania.

2. Wrote once (and only once) on the subject, in 1892, in a testimony addressed jointly to SDA church members and SDA missionaries from North America resident in Australia, in which she: (a) Told the Americans they did not need to wear it in Australia because it was not then a custom of imperative obligation *in America*, and that Australians would understand that distinction and (b) Told Australians she had no disposition to condemn them (or others living in a country where the custom was “imperative”) if—in such places—the SDA Christian could wear it in good conscience.

The General Conference has *never* explicitly addressed the question of the rightness or wrongness of SDA Christian church members *wearing* a wedding band, as such; in countries where it is considered a matter of imperative social, cultural obligation, it “had no disposition to condemn.” From 1925 through 1986 it has asked SDA ministers not to perform ring ceremonies.

The *SDA Church Manual*, reflecting the position of the General Conference (for which it serves as the official “constitution”), has referred to the wedding band in only two ways in its entire history:

1. From 1932 to 1951 it reiterated the 1925 Annual Council action which looked “with disfavor upon the ring ceremony” at SDA weddings, and

2. From 1951 to 1986—the most recent edition—it recognized that in places where the wearing of a wedding band was deemed a matter of imperative social, cultural obligation the church “had no disposition to condemn this practice.” [See Appendix C]

[3] The *Church Manual* will not necessarily be affected by the 1986 NAD policy action because the CM speaks for the *world* church, whereas the NAD policy seeks to apply an unchanged GC policy to the North American field.

The 1986 NAD policy reaffirmed the recommendation (“counsel”) voted by the GC Officers and North American Union Conference Presidents in 1972, that *in North America* “we discourage the use of the wedding band” in SDA churches; and that “discouragement” is still the official policy of the church *in North America*. The only thing that changed in 1986 was that the wearing of a simple wedding band would now no longer be a bar to baptism and/or church membership.

For the past two decades, especially, the question of “to-wear-or-not-to-wear” has increasingly polarized congregations (especially in North America, where the issue is most acute). It has threatened the life and vitality of the local church in many places. Churches have been sundered, with “a great gulf fixed” between two opposing camps. Members often tend to defend their personal position to the death. Such tend not to listen to fellow members with opposing views, and to dismiss out of hand evidence and arguments offered by such. The result is two sides not talking to—but, rather, past—each other, a virtual “dialogue of the deaf,” and they tend to consign opponents to hopeless oblivion. As a result, the topic has been artificially (and unnecessarily) inflated to an importance vis-a-vis the subject of salvation, all out of proportion to that which it properly deserves; and other important issues, of greater significance, which *should* be discussed, are either relegated to the background, or are not considered at all.

This presentation, therefore, does not purport to be either the “General Conference position,” nor the “White Estate position.” Rather, it represents the *present* thinking of *one minister*, as he reflects upon experiences and problems with which he has had to deal in the past 40 years of service to his church. I here speak only for myself. My own personal policy—and practice—in *North America*, for the past four decades has been consistently to discourage the wearing of the wedding band by members and candidates for baptism and membership, for reasons which I think are still rational, valid, and compelling. And, after having made the approach which I share later in this paper, I have yet to be turned down for the first time!

I have, however, increasingly resisted efforts of those who share my conviction that compelling arguments may still be offered for the

non-wearing in *North America*, where such have gone about their task:

1. In what (for me) is the “wrong” way, rather than the “right,” and
2. Using what (for me) are “bad” reasons/arguments, rather than the good

Neither I nor my wife have ever owned or worn a wedding band, though we lived in another culture on another continent for 12 years, and though we have both traveled and worked since on all six continents of the world. In this paper, therefore, we will examine, successively,

1. The historical background of the issue among Adventism.
2. The contribution of Adventism’s prophet, Ellen G. White, on the subject, from the perspective of both her teaching and practice.
3. Suggestions for those who join me in continuing to seek to discourage the wearing of a wedding band by SDA Christians, *in North America*, with regard to what I view as: (1) The “right” way, rather than the “wrong,” and for (2) “Good” reasons, rather than “bad.”

Chapter 1—Historical Background of the Question

Seventh-day Adventism arose in the middle 19th century in New England as a result of the “Advent Movement” generated by William Miller, a Baptist farmer- turned-preacher who heralded the return of Jesus Christ to earth, first, “about 1843,” and later on October 22, 1844. [4]

The Millerites were almost universally ultra-conservative in their individual life-style. Most (including Ellen G. White herself) came out of a very strict Methodist background which frowned on jewelry, card-playing, gambling, dancing, cosmetics, etc., as being “worldly.” As such, many still heeded the admonitions of Methodism’s founder, John Wesley. *Review and Herald* editor James White published a long statement “On Dress, From Mr. Wesley’s Advice to the People Called Methodists,” and in it Elder White encouraged SDAs to plainness in all aspects of their unique life-style. ¹

The wearing of the wedding band seems not to have been practiced by the earliest SDA founders and pioneers who for many years lived and labored exclusively in North America. In the last half of the 19th century, however, the USA became a “melting pot,” as wave after wave of immigrants arrived on our shores, first from Europe, then from other continents. Such immigrants, quite understandably, brought with them their former national customs, including that of the wearing of the wedding band. Some of these were converted to the SDA Church. Often, out of deference to local customs and traditions, they would remove the wedding band, lest anything be allowed to come in to mar the precious unity of believers in Jesus.

SDAs, responding to a growing awareness of their obligation to take the Advent message to all corners of the world, began to send out missionaries, first to Europe, then to other continents and island fields. Here they often come into contact with local national customs other than their own (including—in some quarters—the wearing of

¹ See [The Review and Herald, July 10, 1855](#), pp. 1, 2; an extract was subsequently reprinted in [The Review and Herald, November 30, 1972](#), p. 6.

the wedding band by married women, and even men, as a matter of imperative social obligation). Apparently, in a desire to meet the spirit of the apostle (and missionary) Paul (see [1 Corinthians 9:20-23](#)) some SDA missionaries apparently adopted the custom of wearing the wedding band, and also, apparently, when they returned home to North America they continued the practice, to the growing concern and disapproval of their less-traveled fellow believers.

The question of the propriety of this custom within Adventism—in North America, and in other places—was raised increasingly during the succeeding decades of the 19th century. By the 1890s, Adventism’s prophet and co-founder of the church, now residing in Australia, penned her one-and-only statement of counsel upon the subject. It originally appeared as “[Letter 2b, 1892](#),” written on August 3, from Preston [Melbourne], Victoria. It was addressed to “My Dear Brethren and Sisters.” The context strongly suggests that the immediate intended audience comprised:

- a. Primarily Australian Adventists.
- b. Secondly American Adventist missionaries in Australia.
- c. Ultimately the church back in North America.

It was first published July 21, 1895, by O. A. Olsen,² and it found final published form, in 1923, in the posthumous compilation, *Testimonies to Ministers*, as the eighth (and final) paragraph of a testimony with the overall title “Economy to be Practiced in All Things.”³ [See Sec. II, below.] The wearing of the wedding band was here discouraged by Mrs. White, except in countries where it was seen to be a matter of imperative social obligation, and where SDA Christians—in that context—could wear it in good conscience. Mrs. White did *not* (in this, her only statement on the question) place the question on the level of the 10 Commandments (where no exceptions to the rule are permitted, at any time, in any place). It was *not* given the status of a black-and-white moral issue, such as

[5] the total prohibitory ban against Sabbath-breaking, lying, stealing, adultery, etc. This is not to say, however, that there are no moral

²Special Testimonies to Ministers and Workers 3:6,

³pp. 180,181.

issues involved in the total consideration of the question of wearing the wedding band.

While in Australia, Ellen White's son, Elder William C. White, a widower, remarried; and his mother expressed no objection to her new daughter-in-law's wearing of a wedding band after their marriage. [See Sec. 11, below, for details.] However, Ellen White herself never wore a wedding band, either in America, or in Europe (1885-87), or in Australia (1891-1900).

During the 20th century the question of "to-wear-or-not-to-wear" became increasingly a matter of agitation and irritation in North America. With the passage of each succeeding decade the numbers within the SDA church who declared that the wearing of the wedding band had now become a matter of imperative social obligation in America grew increasingly larger and more vocal. And, today, there are many who allege that, as far as the custom goes, America in the 1980s is now at the point where Australia was in the 1890s.

Cross-cultural currents continued to take many North American SDAs abroad to lands where the wearing was held to be socially obligatory, and to bring many non-North Americans to the New World, where—increasingly—many if not most in local churches continued to resist the practice as a form of "creeping compromise" with the world. In 1930 an Australian SDA minister was elected president of the GC. Upon arrival in the USA his wife continued to wear her wedding band, and some in the churches felt this justified their adopting the custom. Some local churches (and even some local conferences) went so far as to take matters into their own hands, and (illegally) pass restrictive, punitive regulations to preclude wearers of the wedding band from baptism, membership in the SDA Church, the holding of local church office, and employment by any agency or organization of the SDA Church.

In 1969 the North American Union Conference Presidents in Council reviewed the matter of "to-wear-or-not-to-wear":

1. They recognized "that custom in North America is changing somewhat."
2. They still felt, however, that the custom was not yet "obligatory" or "demanded" by custom on this continent.

3. They therefore continued to “discourage” its use in their territory.

4. They requested SDA ministers not to perform ring ceremonies.

5. They suggested that among members who felt it to be all right to wear the wedding band, they be counseled to remove it (a) During the rite of their baptism, and/or (b) While serving as an officer in a local church lest the consciences of fellow church members be affronted and offended.

On August 9, 1971 the North American Division Officers considered a proposal which, had it been voted [it was *not* adopted], would:

1. Discourage the wearing of the wedding band whenever and wherever possible.

2. Remind pastors of the fact that the *Church Manual* did *not* prohibit *baptism* for those who felt they could wear the wedding band conscientiously.

3. Urge pastors “against establishing individual standards” [tests of *membership* or *officership*] in this matter.

4. Remind pastors of the earlier decision that they not conduct ring ceremonies for church members.

5. Discourage church employees [denominational workers] from wearing the wedding band on the grounds that to do so would exert an undesirable influence ⁴

[6] As already noted, on Oct. 2, 1972 the General Conference Officers voted a Statement of “Counsel Regarding the Wedding Band in North America,” recommending that the practice need not constitute a bar to baptism/membership of conscientious Christians who felt that they must continue to wear it. But even in opening the door of accommodation ever so slightly, the leaders were concerned that the church not “lower its standard, blur its identity, or muffle its

⁴NADCA Agenda item 71-293.

witness.”⁵ Finally, again as already noted, on Nov. 11, 1986, the North American Division Committee voted to make the “counsel” of Oct. 2, 1972, the official policy of the Division.

There is a growing number in the SDA Church today who affirm, vigorously, that the custom of wearing the wedding band in North America in the 1980s is as obligatory socially as was the custom in Australia, the British Empire, and Europe in the 1890s, which was addressed by Ellen White. Others, with equal vigor, aver that the two decades are not properly to be so equated. The fact remains that it is probably impossible to “prove” either position. We therefore turn next to a detailed examination of Ellen White’s position.

⁵As Agenda item 72-411, the original proposal was more liberal than the amended version voted. The original proposal included a further clause (“nor forbidden to hold church office”) which did not survive debate. The question of whether or not to ban wedding-band-wearers from local church office has yet to be addressed definitively at the General Conference or North American Division levels.

Chapter 2—Ellen White’s Position on the Wearing of the Wedding Band

A. The Published 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. Let the ministers’ wives have the golden link which binds their souls to Jesus Christ, a pure and holy character, the true love and meekness and godliness that are the fruit borne upon the Christian tree, and their influence will be secure anywhere. The fact that a disregard of the custom occasions remark is no good reason for adopting it. Americans can make their position understood by plainly stating that the custom is not regarded as obligatory in our country. We need not wear the sign, for we are not untrue to our marriage vow, and the wearing of the ring would be no evidence that we were true. I feel deeply over this leavening process which seems to be going on among us, in the conformity to custom and fashion. 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; but let not our missionaries feel that the wearing of the ring will increase their influence one jot or tittle. If they are Christians, it will be manifest in their Christlikeness of character, in their words, in their works, in the home, in association with others; it will be evinced by their patience and long suffering and kindness. They will manifest the spirit of the Master, they will possess His beauty of character, His loveliness of disposition, His sympathetic heart. ¹

¹Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers, 180, 181.

B. An Analysis of the Passage: EGW Raises at Least FOUR Major ISSUES:

1. The Issue of *Influence*: she holds that the wearing by American missionaries in Australia in 1892 is unnecessary for the following reasons:

a. If the church worker has a pure, holy character, it will be evident in fruitage in his life. Therefore his influence will be secure.

b. The fact that non-compliance [by Americans in Australia in 1892] occasions public comment is insufficient reason for adoption of the custom; Americans can always say plainly that it is not [for them, in 1892, in Australia] a national custom, even in their own country.

c. The irrelevance of the custom:

1. Wearing is not a proof of marital fidelity

2. Abstinance from wearing is not proof of marital infidelity.

d. Compliance [by Americans, in Australia, in 1892] will not enhance their influence “down under”:

1. If one is a Christian, the evidence of Christ-likeness will be borne as fruit in the character.

2. The true Christian will always manifest the Spirit of the Master by reflecting His beauty of character, loveliness of disposition, and sympathetic heart.

2. The Issue of Leavening of the Church [in America]:

a. The wearing of the wedding band [in America by SDAs, in 1892] is another example of conformity [there] to custom/fashion, insidiously coming in among our people [there] [since the wearing of it is not a national custom there in 1892].

3. The Issue of Stewardship of Finances:

[7]

a. Not one penny should be spent [by Americans, in 1892] for this purpose.

4. The Issue of Individual Conscience:

- a. We recognize and accept the fact that the wearing of the wedding band is a matter of imperative social obligation in some countries [in 1892].
- b. As such, we have no burden to condemn the wearing of it, under those circumstances.
- c. We leave this matter, therefore, at the altar of personal conscience, to be decided between the individual Christian and his God.

C. Ellen White's Position In Europe [1885-1887]:

Mrs. White served as a missionary in Europe for two years. During this time she had to meet the wedding band issue there.

In Basel, Switzerland, a series of meetings was held late in 1885. A Brother A. V. [a European SDA minister] was preaching on the subject of plainness of dress. One evening he denounced the wearing of jewelry, including the wearing of rings. One worshipper spoke up to inquire if he included the wedding band. He responded, "Yes, everything." It created no small stir, because in Europe the wearing of the wedding band was not viewed as a matter of ornamentation, but rather, as a token of marital fidelity. The question was referred to Mrs. White. According to her son, W. C. White (who was present), "She said that where the wearing of the wedding ring was demanded by custom as a matter of loyalty, our preachers should not press the matter of its being laid aside."²

D. Ellen White's Position in Australia [1891-1900]:

Mrs. White's son, Elder W. C. White, was a widower while serving with his mother in Australia. He fell in love with, and became engaged to, Ethel May Lacey. May was a British young woman, born in India, educated in Britain, and now [in 1895] living in Tasmania, Australia. (In all three of these countries the culture not only accepted but demanded wearing of the wedding band as a sign

²William C. White [WCW] letter to D. C. Babcock, Aug. 6, 1913, p. 1.

of marital fidelity.) May's father was in the British police service, and he had now retired in Australia.³

Anticipating a problem, because she was British (and knowing of Ellen White's objection to American missionaries in Australia wearing the wedding band), May went to her future mother-in-law (Mrs. White) to seek counsel. Shortly thereafter May wrote to her fiancé, "Willie," and reported the interview: "She [EGW] says she has no objection whatever to my wearing one."⁴

The couple was married at the bride's home in Tasmania. As there were no SDA ministers on that island at that time, the service was conducted by an Evangelical clergyman; a ring ceremony was performed. May subsequently wore her wedding band on the trip from Tasmania to Australia's mainland; and for several weeks thereafter she continued to wear it.⁵ Then, a little later, May removed her wedding band. Noting that fact, her new husband inquired as to the reason. She replied simply that it had gotten in the way while she was doing the family washing.⁶ She never again wore this simple, plain band of gold, neither in Australia, nor on the journey from Australia to the United States, nor during her subsequent years in America. Her wearing of it, in Australia, in the 1890s, was in total harmony with the EGW counsel as published in the single statement in [Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers, 180-81.](#)⁷

³ Arthur L White [ALW] letter to Walter F. Wright, Feb. 22, 1971, p. 1.

⁴ Ethel May Lacey letter to WCW, Feb. 13, 1895.

⁵ ALW, loc cit.

⁶ WCW letter to Mrs. W. E. Ingle, Apr. 14, 1913.

⁷ ALW, loc. cit.

Chapter 3—A Position For North America-A Personal Statement

I have served in North America as a pastor of three churches in Southern California (four years), as a professor of religion at Pacific Union College (eleven years), and—most recently—as senior pastor of the GC “headquarters” church in Takoma Park, (three years). In addition, my wife and I spent twelve years as missionaries in West Africa. And in our present work (I in the White Estate, she as an assistant auditor in the GC Auditing Service), we have traveled together in North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Neither of us has ever worn (or even owned) a wedding band. I am, however, willing to grant any SDA member his or her private conviction that the wedding band is, today, in North America, a matter of imperative social obligation.

Although I do not myself yet see it that way, and although my policy and practice in North America continue in the direction of discouraging its wearing (for reasons to be set forth in detail below), I resist relating in any kind of judgmental, condemnatory manner toward those who feel that they in good conscience should wear it.

In seeking to persuade wedding-band wearers to become non-wearers, I have strenuously endeavored to conduct myself in the *right way* (and not in what I perceive as the *wrong way*), and I have endeavored to use what I conceive to be the *right reasons* (even as I have endeavored to avoid using what I strongly believe to be the *wrong reasons*). Let me explain what I mean by this statement.

A. The “Wrong” Way Versus the “Right” Way

The Wrong Way—for me—is to impose coercion in order to achieve conformity. This may be done overtly or covertly. Its most frequent manifestations are in refusing the “offender” the privilege of baptism, church membership, church office, or even social fellowship with other believers within the local church community.

Ellen White made it clear while she was alive that “it is no part of Christ’s mission to *compel* men to receive Him. It is Satan, and men actuated by his spirit, that *seek to compel the conscience*....Christ is ever ... seeking to win by the revealing of his love ...but He desires only *voluntary* service, the willing surrender of the heart under the *constraint of love*.” ¹

In 1906 (while the prophet was still alive), her son, Elder W. C. White, received a letter from an SDA member in Grand Rapids, Mich., inquiring as to the propriety of selecting as a church officer one who wore a wedding band. He replied:

“In the teaching of the gospel we must always be outspoken regarding the principles of simplicity in dress, but we need not enter into the specific work of saying that individuals [who] wear the wedding ring...are to be disciplined by the church....I have seen very devoted, earnest people wearing the wedding ring, wearing the gold watch, wearing the gold chain, and I felt no burden to say to them, You must lay it off.” ²

In 1881 Ellen White wrote concerning another item in the category of dress, the “reform dress” which she had advocated for some time. Certain statements made concerning the attitude of some church members pressing this reform unduly in her day seem (to me, at least) to have somewhat of a parallel in the discussion today on the non-wearing of the wedding band:

“Some who adopted the reform [dress] were not content to show by example the advantages of the dress, giving, when asked, their reasons for adopting it, and letting the matter rest there. *They sought to control others’ conscience by their own*. If they wore it, others must put it on. They forgot that none were to be compelled to wear the reform dress.”

“It was *not my duty to urge* the subject upon my sisters. After presenting it before them as it had been shown me, *I left them to their own conscience*.”

¹The Desire of Ages, 487.3; emphasis supplied.

²WCW letter to M. W. Crother, Dec. 30,1906.

“Much unhappy feeling was created by those who were constantly urging the reform dress upon their sisters. With extremists, this reform seemed to constitute the sum and substance of their religion. It was the theme of conversation and the burden of their hearts; and their minds were thus diverted from God and the truth. *They failed to cherish the spirit of Christ and manifested a great lack of true courtesy.*”

“Some were greatly troubled because I did not make the dress a test question, and still others because I advised those who had unbelieving husbands or children *not* to adopt the reform dress, as it might lead to unhappiness that would counteract all the good to be derived from its use.”³

An important distinction needs to be made between the *teachings* of the church and the *tests* of the church.

- [9] William H. Branson, while President of the General Conference [1950-54], addressed the clergy of our church on this subject. He distinguished between Bible doctrines—the acceptance of which is a *test* of church fellowship, and therefore is required—and the *teachings* concerning certain standards—which the church advocates, but finally leaves to the individual conscience of the member (or prospective member). He wrote:

“Some of these [latter] matters that are not tests for membership should be taught but not enforced upon the people. After proper instruction is given, then the matter of compliance must be left to the individual conscience.”

Not every *teaching* is a *test*. And he pointedly warned pastors and laity alike that for them to impose their own private tests of membership or officership in the church would serve only to “bring in confusion,” and would thereby make them out of harmony with the body of the church generally.⁴

³Testimonies for the Church 4:636, 637; emphasis supplied.

⁴“What Are Our Tests of Fellowship?” The Ministry, Oct. 1951, pp. 12, 13.

In 1984 Andrews University Professor Robert C. Kistler, in a slightly different context, came to the matter directly in his book on labor unions:

“It is important to differentiate between what is a teaching of the church and what is a test of fellowship. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has some teachings which it encourages members to follow, but will not disfellowship them if they do not. Such teachings are regarded as a matter of individual conscience reflecting growth in grace rather than as a doctrine of the church. In addition to [the teaching against labor] union membership, such teachings would include the desirability of a lacto-ovo vegetarian diet; the teaching in North America against the wearing of wedding rings; the blessing that comes from giving generous offerings to the church’s program in addition to the practice of tithing, and similar points.”⁵

It cannot be too strongly pointed out that:

- a. The *Church Manual* is the only constitution of the SDA Church.
- b. Tests of membership and of officership for the church at large can only be voted by a General-Conference-in-Session (after which they are incorporated into the *Church Manual*).
- c. The world church has *never* yet made the non-wearing of a wedding band either a test of baptism, or membership, or of officership.
- d. For any local congregation, or conference, or union conference, to adopt (publicly, or privately) any other test than those published in the *Church Manual*

⁵Adventists and Labor Unions in the United States (Washington, D. C.: Review & Herald Publishing Association, 1984),p48, footnote 23. Kistler also devotes space to a consideration of the wedding band in Chapter 3 (“With or Without a Ring?”) in his more recent work, Marriage, Divorce, And. ..(Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1987), pp. 43.59.

is not only *immoral* but *unconstitutional* as well; and effectively places that unit of the church in rebellion against its duly constituted authority, leaving it wide open for disciplinary action by the next higher body!

What do I envisage as the Right Way? Ellen White, in her one-and-only published statement on the wedding band, laid down two conditions where it might be worn without her prophetic condemnation: (1) In countries “where the custom is imperative,” and (2) If persons in such places “can do so conscientiously.” Ellen White left the matter at the level of the individual, personal conscience. It is my own deep conviction that we should follow her example in this. Paul made it abundantly clear in Scripture that some issues are solely to be settled within the precincts of a man or woman’s own conscience. [See [Romans 14:5](#)] I believe that the minister should explain the whole matter to the member (or prospective member)—including good reasons for removing the wedding band [see below] in an atmosphere of love, kindness, and acceptance. It is an educational activity. But, once explained, the minister should leave it where God’s prophets have left it: at the altar of personal, individual conscience. That, for me, is the Right Way.

B. The “Wrong” Reason Versus the “Right” Reason:

[10] The Christian religion is a “reasonable” religion; and the Apostle Peter urged all sanctified Christians to “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.” [1 [Peter 3:15](#)] And lest any Seventh-day Adventists adopt the Jesuit-inspired dictum that “the end justifies the means,” and thereby be tempted to use a bad argument to support a worthy cause, Ellen White added this pointed testimony:

Agitate, agitate, agitate. The subjects which we present to the world must be to us a living reality. It is important that in defending the doctrines which we consider fundamental articles of faith we should never allow ourselves to employ arguments that are not wholly sound. These may avail to silence an opposer, but they

do not honor the truth. We should present sound arguments that will not only silence our opponents, but will bear the closest and most searching scrutiny. With those who have educated themselves as debaters there is great danger that they will not handle the word of God with fairness. In meeting an opponent it should be our earnest effort to present subjects in such a manner as to awaken conviction in his mind, instead of seeking merely to give confidence to the believer.⁶

I believe that there are two very Wrong Reasons that have been advanced by Seventh-day Adventists for the removal of the wedding band in North America:

- a. That the wedding band is “bad” because it had its origin in paganism.
- b. That the wedding band is “bad” because it is a part of the total “Jewelry Question”—and SDA Christians are called to lay off *all* forms of jewelry.

Let us first examine the validity of each of these arguments.

There can be no question but what the wedding band had its origin in paganism; that fact has been too carefully documented historically to be seriously challenged or doubted. For example, Roman Catholic Cardinal John Henry Newman, in discussing various pagan customs which crept into the early Christian Church, states:

“The ring in marriage [among other customs] are all of pagan origin.”

He claims, however, that the adoption of them by the Church of Rome “sanctified” them and made them legitimate.⁷ O. A. Wall, in an historical study, demonstrates in rather vivid and explicit clinical detail just how the wedding band came to be worn.⁸

⁶Testimonies for the Church 5:708.1.

⁷An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1960), pp. 351-53.

⁸Sex and Sex Worship (St. Louis: C. V. Mosby Company, 1932), pp. 529-32. 23

Certainly SDA church members and prospective converts ought to be acquainted with the pagan origin of this custom. But solely of itself, is this a good and sufficient reason to urge the abolition of the custom? I think not. And for these reasons:

I have no trouble accepting the fact that Mrs. White was probably clearly aware of the pagan origin of the Christmas festival in general, and of the Christmas tree in particular. Yet she approved (and in the case of families with small children, even urged) the recognizing of this festival in the homes of SDAs, and she approved the use of unadorned Christmas trees even within the sanctuary of the SDA houses of worship, where offerings for missions might properly be placed among the boughs! ⁹

I also am satisfied that Mrs. White and the early SDA church leaders were probably aware of the pagan origin of the practice of placing spires or steeples on the top of houses of religious worship (and of affixing crosses to them as well). Yet when the “Dime” Tabernacle was built in Battle Creek, Michigan, in 1879 (it seated 3,000 and was one of the largest SDA church buildings ever built), it had not one but a number of steeples or spires adorning it; and on top of the main clock tower there appears in old photographs of the structure something that very distinctly appears to be a Maltese or Celtic cross. At least four other lesser spires are also apparently adorned with additional ornamentation. Also, I understand that when the South Lancaster, Mass. church was built in 1899 (adjoining what is now the campus of Atlantic Union College), that it, too, had a similar spire arrangement; and many SDA houses of worship built in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1896s resembled these two pioneer churches in Battle Creek and South Lancaster. ¹⁰

[11] I conclude, therefore, that—on the basis of the practice of the prophet of the church in our midst in the latter part of the 19th century—the origin of a custom or practice in paganism was not, alone, in and of itself, sufficient reason to abandon it.

⁹[The Adventist Home, 477-83.](#)

¹⁰See Roger W. Coon, “Paganism, Culture, and Commitment: How Far Dare a Conscientious Christian Go?”, [Pacific Union Recorder, June 1, 1986](#), pp. 4-6; a synopsis of this article was published ten days later under the title, “Reviving Ancient Paganism?”, [Adventist Review, June 11, 1987](#), pp. 8-10.

Some—perhaps many—in the SDA church in North America have tacitly concluded that the wedding band is a ring; that rings are a part of jewelry; that jewelry should not be worn by good SDAs; and therefore the wedding band should not be worn by SDAs for this reason. It is apparent that the publishers of *Testimonies to Ministers* were of this conviction, for in subsequent editions of that work they have added, at the conclusion of this single statement on the wedding band on p. 181, cross-references “for further study” which deal not with the wedding band but, rather, with statements on jewelry in general!

There is evidence, however, that there was a distinction between the two in Ellen White’s thinking. A survey of her statements upon jewelry in general make it clear that she made no exceptions for any category of ornamentation—she unsparingly condemned it in a total and forthright manner. Yet she never linked—in print or in oral instruction—the simple, non jeweled wedding band with jewelry in her prohibitions against the latter. Not once. And she *did* make provision for the wedding band, when society was perceived as making it socially obligatory and the SDA Christian could, in good conscience, wear it.

A scant thirteen months after the death of the prophet, her son, Elder W. C. White, was writing to a church member in Florida in response to an inquiry concerning his mother’s position on the wedding band vis-a-vis jewelry. He wrote:

“Mother was always opposed to the wearing of jewelry of any sort as a matter of ornamentation. When we were in Switzerland [in the 1880s], one of our Swiss ministers took a very radical and harsh attitude toward the wearing of the wedding ring. Mother [Ellen G. White] reproved him, and protested against that kind of work, and we all understood from what she said that it was right for us to discern a difference between wearing rings as a matter of adornment and wearing the wedding ring as a token of loyalty to the husband. In some countries custom has led people to put special emphasis upon the wearing of the wedding ring as a matter of loyalty. While serving in Australia, Mother encouraged our

brethren [American missionaries serving there] not to press the matter of our sisters laying aside the wedding ring [there], but when some of our American sisters, wives of ministers, put on the wedding ring because they were criticized while traveling among strangers, Mother advised that this was not necessary.”¹¹

It seems unwise, then, to me at least, to employ what I perceive as unsound arguments—origin in paganism or linking the simple, non-Jeweled wedding band to ornamental jewelry—in trying to persuade members and prospective members to abandon, in North America, the wearing of the wedding band. Does that mean, then, that there are no sound arguments that may be usefully employed? By no means. Let me share an approach with you that I employ in personal work which has never yet failed me (when presented in the right way, and not in the wrong way!).

There are Right Reasons, in North America, for a minister to work—in the right way—toward encouraging members and prospective members to abandon the practice of wearing the wedding band. In my opinion they involve:

- a. The question of financial stewardship.
- b. The question of avoidance of idolatry.
- c. Questions associated with the dress-code for Christians.
- d. The question of one’s personal influence, within the church and without.¹²

The question of financial stewardship

[12] The doctrine of stewardship holds that the Christian does not own anything; all the possessions he may have are owned by God, and as a “steward” he manages these goods for the “real” owner, recognizing that ultimately he is accountable for the faithfulness in which he operates in this trust relationship.

¹¹WCW letter to J. W. Siler, Aug. 9, 1916.

¹²William [“Skip”] MacCarty, now associate pastor, Pioneer Memorial SDA Church, Andrews University, pioneered in the development of many of the following ideas while senior minister of the Wasatch Hills SDA Church, Salt Lake City, UT, in the 1970’s.

Stewardship is not concerned merely with 10% (tithe) of a Christian's money; it is concerned with *all* of it. God should be consulted, and His will followed, as far as it is possible to ascertain it, in the expenditure of every penny.

Of course, if the individual *already* owns a wedding band before coming to Christ, and becoming acquainted with the claims of Christ upon one's pocketbook, the question of stewardship does not apply; it is moot. But for those contemplating marriage, it is a serious question which cannot be evaded. Many couples are pressured by jewelry salesmen into expensive purchases for engagement/wedding band sets which they cannot afford; some are still paying for them when the marriage disintegrates and a divorce is sought.

The question of avoidance of idolatry

Wedding bands, with their big stones, beautiful diamonds, jewels, etc., can easily become an idol for some Christians. Idolatry was condemned in both Old and New Testaments—and in both the warning is given that it leads to eternal destruction. The danger of idolatry is probably one of the biggest reasons why the church historically has frowned upon jewelry and taken a negative attitude toward anything that “smacked” of jewelry. Of course, a minister cannot tell a church member whether or not his or her wedding band is an idol—or merely an object of sentiment. But the Christian must honestly face the possibility that idolatry *could* be involved here, and honestly face God with a heart willing to be led by the Holy Spirit.

While Ellen White appears to have excluded the wedding band from the category of ornamental jewelry, it is nevertheless a legitimate consideration to examine its relationship to the dress-code of a Christian. Andrews University Religion Department professor Carl Coffman, in instructions to prospective young ministers, has made some helpful, if pointed, suggestions for consideration:

- a. Ellen White discusses a “sacred circle” about Adam and Eve before sin in Eden. ¹³
- b. In [Genesis 3:7-10](#) two points are worth noting especially:

¹³See especially [Christ's Object Lessons, 310.4-311.0](#); the context—the parable of the man without the wedding garment—is interesting!

1. With the entrance of sin, the circle was severed, and deterioration began.

2. An *external* covering was formed to take the place of *internal* purity.

c. with the passage of time, far more than clothing was added externally:

1. See especially [Isaiah 3:16-23](#).

2. It is a human characteristic that the less one has on the inside, the more he seems to feel he needs on the outside.

3. Note, also, that God did not approve.

d. The great object of the plan of restoration is to restore inward purity. ¹⁴

e. Hence, we have the New Testament counsel:

1. “Women again must dress in becoming manner, modestly and soberly, not with elaborate hair-styles, not decked out with gold or pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, as befits women who claim to be religious.” [1 Timothy 2:9-10](#), NEB.

2. “In the same way you women must accept the authority of your husbands, so that if there are any of them who disbelieve the Gospel they may be won over, without a word being said, by observing the chaste and reverent behaviour of their wives. Your beauty should reside, not in outward adornment—the braiding of the hair, or jewellery, or dress—but in the inmost centre of your being, with its imperishable ornament, a gentle, quiet spirit, which is of high value in the sight of God. Thus it was among God’s people in days of old: the women who fixed their hopes on him adorned themselves by submission to their husbands. Such was Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him ‘my master’. Her children you have now become, if you do good and show no fear.

“In the same way, you husbands must conduct your married life with understanding: pay honour to the

¹⁴See especially [Christ’s Object Lessons](#), 310.3.

woman's body, not only because it is weaker, but also because you share together in the grace of God which gives you life. Then your prayers will not be hindered."

1 Peter 3:1-7, NEB (note especially verses 2-4).

f. The great object of restoration is to restore inward purity. The restored "sacred circle" of holiness is God's circle of *genuine* safety about any married couple.

[13]

The question of a Christian's influence—within the church and without—must be studied and safeguarded. In at least two of Paul's epistles he expresses a concern for the Christians of his day that they safeguard their influence, and not become "stumbling-blocks" to their fellow (and weaker) Christians. (See especially [Romans 14:21, 13](#); and [1 Corinthians 8:9](#)). He elaborates the doctrine of "expedience" by stating that although some things are "lawful" for him to do—perfectly all right in and of themselves—yet he will not do them because it is not "expedient"—a weak brother in the church might take offense, and be led astray. (See [1 Corinthians 6:12](#); [1 Corinthians 10:23](#))

In 1 Corinthians [Chapter 8](#) his ideas are most fully developed along the line of the Christians's responsibility for the stewardship of his personal influence, in the context of an immediate, local problem in Paul's day: whether or not a Christian should eat foods that had been consecrated to pagan idols before ever sold on the public market. Farmers often received higher prices for food if first offered to heathen deities by pagan priests. Sometimes it was the best, choicest food. (Nutrition is a legitimate consideration and concern for a Christian—get the best food possible.) Paul's position: it is perfectly permissible for a Christian—legally—to eat this kind of food, because he knows it isn't poisoned, and idols do not exist in the "real" world in which the Christian operates. And if these were the only considerations, there is no impediment to his eating food "offered to idols."

The "rub" comes, however, in the fact that not all Christians of that day had this knowledge. Some still believe that eating this food is a betrayal of Christ and their faith in Him. If *they* ate it, their consciences would be defiled; and if they saw *you* eat it, it might be enough of a stumbling-block to cause them to lose their way

spiritually and be lost eternally. And so Paul said, Even though it is perfectly all right for me to do this, I will protect my influence—and my weak brethren—and refrain from doing something that otherwise would be perfectly acceptable.

Many in the church today, incredibly, are saying in effect, How close can I live to Satan, and yet win eternal life? For Paul, the question was, How close can I live to Christ, so that in every aspect my influence is going to tell for Christ in a way that won't offend anyone weaker in knowledge than I am? Paul made it abundantly clear that the issue was *not* eating the food itself; and he did not restrict anyone on *that* ground. But there *was* a moral issue: we are responsible in great measure for the effect of our influence upon others, within and without the church. A Christian wearing the wedding band, in North America, where there are many “weak brothers—and sisters” who are morally offended and affronted by a fellow church-member wearing it, needs to ask God (not any mere man): What is the effect of my action upon others? How can I best preserve my influence and credibility among the church of Christ?

There *are* moral issues involved in the wearing (or non-wearing) of the wedding band, as we consider all of the ramifications, even though the matter in and of itself may be merely a matter of culture or custom. And there *are* questions that each Christian must ask himself—and God—in this context.

Conclusion

There are perhaps five questions/issues that we must finally consider—

1. The question of Perspective

[14]

It is well for each Christian to keep the wedding band question (which, as already noted, is a part of the greater, overall dress question) in proper perspective. In 1883 the then-General Conference president; George I. Butler, wrote concerning the importance and necessity of keeping the various aspects of the dress question in an overall perspective:

“The dress question should never be exalted to an equality with the great moral questions of the Bible, such as keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. Meekness, humility, charity, goodness, patience, and other Christian graces, are ever more important than the cut of the clothes we wear or the eating of certain kinds of food. We should give those subjects just the place God gives them in His word; and if we will notice closely, we shall soon discern that that place is not near so prominent as that which He gives to the great moral principles of His law, and the teachings of Christ. We claim that Sister White in her teachings has ever taken this position.”¹

2. The question of Motivation

That God is generally more concerned with the motivation which prompts the deed, than with merely the deed itself, cannot be seriously challenged:

“The Searcher of hearts weighs the motives.”²

¹Review & Herald Supplement, Aug. 14, 1883, p. 10.

²Gospel Workers, 275.

“It is the motive that gives character to our acts, stamping them with ignominy or with high moral worth.”³

“Many acts which pass for good works ... will ... be found to be prompted by wrong motives.”⁴

“It takes patience to keep every evil motive weeded from the garden of the Lord.”⁵

If you tend to Favor the wearing of the wedding band, ask yourself, “Why?” Is it because you desire, like ancient Israel, to be like the nations around us, so that you will not appear singularly different? Is it because you desire to hide your identity as a Christian who is in the world but not of the world? Is it because you desire to draw attention to yourself (one of the main reasons God disapproves of ornamental jewelry)? Or is it because you desire to exhibit loyalty to your spouse, avoid, bringing discredit against the cause of Christ, and to meet the reasonable expectations of society?

If you tend to Oppose the wearing of the wedding band, again, ask yourself, “Why?” Is it because you enjoy being the policeman of the church, and you enjoy castigating and censuring the “liberals” who “need to be straightened out”? Is it because such acts tend to reinforce your security found in self-righteousness, and a legalistic spirit affirms you as “good” because you do some good things? Is it because such opposition reinforces in you a conviction that you are better than others, and—like the Pharisee in Christ’s parable—you are thankful you are not as other men are? Or is it because you discern in the adoption of this custom a lowering of the necessary and important standards of the church, bringing its good name into question (if not disrepute), and diluting the effectiveness of its witness by the adoption of a custom which you discern to be a leavening influence among God’s people?

Can you honestly face *your* motive, whatever your position may be?

3. The question of Honesty

³The Desire of Ages, 615.

⁴Gospel Workers, 275.

⁵Sons and Daughters of God, 312.

Intellectual honesty is an absolute imperative. Can you pray—honestly and sincerely—this prayer suggested by Ellen White?

“Each day, each hour, let the heart go out after God: ‘Here, Lord, am I, Thy property; take me, use me today. I lay all my plans at Thy feet; I will have no way of my own in the matter. My time is Thine; my whole life is Thine.’ Let the heart be constantly going forth to God for strength, for grace every moment.”⁶

Now, while it is true that there *are* some places in the world where the wearing of the wedding band is not only appropriate but necessary, it is probably *also* true that there are some places where it is not yet necessary today. [15]

Ellen White clearly indicated that, in her day, there *were* places (the United States was particularly singled out) where—at that time—the custom was *not* imperative, obligatory, or necessary. In such places she saw the adoption of an unnecessary custom as a leavening agent within God’s people. And such (as history has since borne witness) it has become. It has, indeed and in fact, opened the door to jewelry generally. The wedding band itself has become conspicuously larger in size, has come noticeably more ornate, and has even become encrusted with precious and semi-precious stones—on the fingers of Seventh-day Adventist Christians. And it has paved the way for the tacit acceptance of other rings (engagement rings, class rings, friendship rings, etc.) on the hands of Seventh-day Adventist church members. With the lessening of opposition to the wearing of the wedding band on the campuses of some of our colleges in North America in the early 1970s, we find a more complex problem with jewelry in the early—and mid—1980s.

4. The question of Attitude:

The attitude of the individual church leader or member—whether such is for, or against—is crucial. In the context of the advocacy of diet reform, Ellen White wrote some counsel equally applicable to those who seek legitimate dress-reform:

“We must go no faster than we can take those with us whose consciences and intellects are convinced of

⁶The Upward Look, 237.

the truths we advocate. We must meet the people where they are. Some of us have been many years in arriving at our present position in health reform. *It is slow work to obtain a reform* in diet. We have powerful appetites to meet; for the world is given to gluttony. If we should allow the people as much time as we have require to come up to the present advanced state in reform, we should be very patient with them, and allow them to advance, step by step, as we have done, until their feet are firmly established upon the health reform platform. But we should be very cautious not to advance too fast, lest we be obliged to retrace our steps. In reforms we would better come one step short of the mark than to go one step beyond it. And if there is error at all, let it be on the side next to the people.”⁷

“Our ministers and teachers are to represent the love of God to a fallen world. With hearts melted with tenderness let the word of truth be spoken. Let all who are in error be treated with the gentleness of Christ. If those for whom you labor do not immediately grasp the truth, do not censure, do not criticize or condemn. Remember that you are to represent Christ in His meekness and gentleness and love. We must expect to meet with unbelief and opposition....But though you should meet the bitterest opposition, do not denounce your opponents....We must manifest patience, meekness, and long-suffering.”⁸

“In the advocacy of the truth the bitterest opponents should be treated with respect and deference....Therefore treat every man as honest.... The influence of your teaching would be tenfold greater if you were careful of your words. Words that should be a savor of life unto life may by the spirit which accompanies them be made a savor of death unto death. And remember that if by your spirit or your words you close

⁷Testimonies for the Church 3:20, 21; emphasis supplied.

⁸Testimonies for the Church 6:120.

the door to even one soul, that soul will confront you in the judgment.”⁹

“Be sure that you do not make the word of the Lord offensive. We long to see reforms, and because we do not see that which we desire, an evil spirit is too often allowed to cast drops of gall into our cup, and others are embittered. By our ill-advised words their spirit is chafed, and they are stirred to rebellion. Every sermon you preach, every article you write, may be all true; but one drop of gall in it will be poison to the hearer or reader...[We should use] words that will reform but not exasperate. The truth is to be spoken in love.”¹⁰

Paul advises us that the three greatest gifts, or qualities, or attributes, in the Christian life, when all is said and done, are faith, hope, and love. But even here, one is more important than another: “The *greatest* of these is love.” [1 Corinthians 13:13, emphasis supplied] If (God forbid!) one is forced to choose between the doctrines and standards of the faith, and Christian love, then love would have to be the most important. (It is *not*, however and fortunately, an either/or dichotomy!) [16]

5. The question of Conscience:

Whether the custom of wearing the wedding band in the United States in the 1980s is as of imperative obligation as it was in Australia in the 1890s (when and where Ellen White permitted it), is probably an issue that today cannot be objectively “proven.” The human mind is perfectly capable of believing anything it wants to believe; and the corollary also is true; as Ben Franklin once suggested, “Man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.”

Ellen White left the matter of the wearing (or non-wearing) of the wedding band, in her day, at the altar of conscience. Her example is safest for us to follow today. Let us leave it where she left it.

But let us *also* be sure that our conscience today is alive, active, acute, and operating well; may it not be slumbering, or—worse yet—seared with a hot iron. [1 Timothy 4:2]

⁹Testimonies for the Church 6:122.

¹⁰Testimonies for the Church 6:123.

The *only* safe course for any Christian to follow is to inquire of the Lord, in the quiet privacy of the soul, “Lord, what wilt Thou have *me* to do?” And our only safe response, after our Lord answers this prayer (and He will, if we are totally honest with Him), is that of Mary of Nazareth at the wedding feast of Cana: “*Whatsoever* He saith unto you, *do it!*” [John 2:5]

By all means, let us have convictions. And let us express these convictions to others who may not share them—in the right manner. But let us validate our convictions by the inspired word, let us evaluate our logic and our argument by reason, and let us validate our evidence by demonstrable fact. But let our advocacy be always in love, being “ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.” [1 Peter 3:15] And then, having given our reason, let us kindly, lovingly, leave the matter at the altar of individual conscience.

“As for me and my house,” after having weighed carefully all of the evidence, pro and con, in the light of what I hope is an enlightened and progressively sanctified conscience, my personal position, policy, and practice—in North America—continues to remain one of endeavoring to persuade our members and prospective members to discard the practice of wearing the wedding band. Having said that, I must say more:

I am totally persuaded that this must be done in the right way, and for the right reason. And in the end, the member (or prospective member) must “be fully persuaded in his own mind.” [Romans 14:5] And, ultimately, the decision of what *you* will do must be left with you, to be made prayerfully as well as personally, alone with God. And so I say to you, It is not wrong to have things of a sentimental value; and many who no longer wear their wedding bands in public retain them as a keepsake in a bureau drawer, to look at occasionally. Your church or your minister will not dictate your response. We ask only that you allow God to lead you—totally—in your decision. And whichever way you decide the matter, I will respect your decision, I will support your decision—even if opposite from my position, and I will accept you, totally, unconditionally, both as a person, and as a fellow brother or sister in Jesus, who, with me, is seeking to climb the upward path to eternal life.

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Third Draft: Maranatha, 9, 1984 For NAD study committee
N.B. Drafts in 1983 and 1984 inadvertently contained a technical
error. On pages 4 and 5 agenda proposals were inadvertently taken
to be actual committee actions and were presented as formal actions.
This draft corrects that inaccuracy, which is deeply regretted. R.W.C.

Fourth Draft: Feb. 13, 1985 For GSEM 534 class discussion

Fifth Draft: Nov. 29, 1987 For GSEM 534 class discussion

Sixth Draft: Dec. 10, 1987 Minor editorial changes

APPENDIX A—REPORT OF 1986 ANNUAL, COUNCIL DEBATE

North America, Adopts Adornment Action

A newly written statement on jewelry spurred lively debate among delegates to the North American Division year-end meeting. Discussion lasted so long that NAD officers had to schedule an extra session. The document, “Jewelry: A Clarification and Appeal,” reaffirms and clarifies a 1972 Annual Council action that counseled against the use of necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and rings. That same action encouraged the selection of watches, brooches, cuff links, and tie clasps, with simplicity, modesty, and economy.

The North American Division document also cites a 1972 General Conference officers’ statement that counseled ministers not to perform ring wedding ceremonies—and urged evangelists and pastors to encourage baptismal candidates to examine their motives in deciding whether to wear a wedding band.

Although the GC officers’ statement spoke strongly against the use of jewelry, it drew a distinction between ornaments and the simple wedding band, providing for the baptism of converts who conscientiously felt they should wear a simple ring.

The current NAD document also appeals to members for a commitment to simplicity in lifestyle and holds the wearing of jewelry as unacceptable.

However, one clause in the NAD statement differed from the actions in 1972—and that difference sparked over two dozen speeches, remarks, and declarations.

The clause states: “Some churches members feel that the use of a simple marriage band is a symbol of faithfulness to the marriage vow, and such persons should be fully accepted in the fellowship and service of the church.”

NAD delegates approved the document by a substantial majority after a three-hour debate.

Several delegates, like Leonard Newton, Northeastern Conference president, believed that the clause will lead to a greater use of jewelry among Adventists. “We didn’t have the problem of jewelry before the change in 1972,” Newton said.

Other delegates, like Herman Bauman, Montana Conference president, expressed satisfaction because the document unifies the church position around the world.

NAD president Charles Bradford insisted that there is no change in the church’s stand on jewelry. He argued that the difference in attitudes over the wedding band between native and foreign born citizens has actually weakened the church’s case against jewelry.

“The increasing number of over seas church employees [who conscientiously wear wedding bands] coming to the United States to work in various church settings has caused conflicts with North American members [who traditionally have not worn wedding bands],” Bradford explained. “The 1972 statements [which tolerated the use of wedding bands] were never read carefully enough. They were never widely circulated.”

“We gave attention to this issue because of the repeated appeals from church leaders for clarification,” he said.

“We’re saying that there is a distinction. We can draw the line here and say, ‘Take off the earrings. Take off the class rings. Take off all the ostentatious brooches and the clasps.’”

“The wedding band has never been an issue outside of North America. People were wearing it all around the world even back in 1892 when Ellen G. White wrote on it,” Bradford explained. “It was never an issue in England, France, Italy, and Australia. The members outside outside North America have been always persuaded that the wedding hand was a symbol of their marriage commitment.”

—*Adventist Review*, Dec. 4, 1986, pp. 9, 10.

APPENDIX B—TEXT OF 1986 ANNUAL COUNCIL ACTION

Jewelry: A Clarification and Appeal

*Action voted at the North American Division 1986 annual meeting.—
Editors*

At the 1972 Annual Council the General Conference officers gave counsel regarding the wedding band in North America. An examination of this statement reveals the following salient points:

1. Ministers were counseled not to perform ring ceremonies since the wearing of the wedding band still “is not regarded as obligatory” or an “imperative” custom in North America.

2. Pastors, evangelists, and Bible instructors were urged to present to candidates for baptism the biblical principles regarding display and ornaments, encouraging careful self-examination concerning the motives involved in deciding whether to wear the wedding band.

3. Baptism was not to be denied to converts who conscientiously felt they should wear the wedding band.

4. Church officers, ministers and their wives, teachers, and other SDA workers were urged to give strong support to the standards and principles that have distinguished the remnant church.

The Annual Council of the same year also, stated very clearly its position to personal adornment as follows.

“That in the area of personal adornment, necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and rings (including engagement rings) should not be worn. Articles such as watches, brooches, cuff links, tie clasps, etc., should be chosen

in harmony with the Christian principles of simplicity, modesty, and economy.”

It seems, therefore, that in 1971 the church had a strong desire to maintain a high standard in the matter of personal adornment. Yet it also recognized the simple wedding band as being in a category distinct from that of jewelry worn for ornamental purposes.

The *Church Manual* likewise states the principles involved in the matter of personal adornment (see pp. 145,146—“Dress”). Included in this particular section is the following statement:

“In some countries the custom of wearing the marriage ring is considered imperative, having become, in the minds of the people, a criterion of virtue and hence is not regarded as an ornament. Under such circumstances we have no disposition to condemn the practice” (*Church Manual*, p. 146).

During the intervening years large numbers of members who have come from areas in the world where wearing a wedding band is an accepted and necessary symbol of marriage have joined the church in North America. A growing number of employees from such areas have also come to serve the church at all levels. In North America there are many loyal, clear thinking members who believe that conditions have changed greatly since 1892 when Ellen White’s counsel was given and that her statement “in countries where the custom is imperative, we have no burden to condemn, those who have their marriage ring, let them wear it they can do so conscientiously” is now applicable in North America.

Across the division the position concerning the wedding band has not been uniform, and possibly it never will be. However, there has developed an ambivalence on the part of many, and the lack of consistency has caused embarrassment and even hardship and misunderstanding. It has also obscured the Church’s position on the wearing of jewelry.

In the light of these and other factors it is VOTED

1. To reaffirm the principles regarding personal adornment as outlined in the *Church Manual*, the 1972

Annual Council action, and the General Conference officers' statement October 2, 1972.

2. To affirm that the wearing of jewelry is unacceptable and is a denial of principles enunciated in the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy concerning personal adornment.

3. To recognize that in harmony with the position stated in the *Church Manual* (pp 145, 146), some church members in the North American Division, as in other parts of the world, feel that wearing a simple marriage band is a symbol of faithfulness to the marriage vow and to declare that such persons should be fully accepted in the fellowship and service of the church.

4. To make an immediate appeal to our people for a commitment to simplicity in lifestyle and by pen, voice, and example to halt the rising tide of worldly attitudes and practices that have made their subtle appearance within the church in recent years

APPENDIX C—The Wedding Band and the SDA Church Manual

The first edition of the *SDA Church Manual* was published in 1932. Subsequent editions were issued in: 1934, 1938, 1940, 1942, 1951, 1959, 1963, 1967, 1981, and 1986. The *SDA Encyclopedia* notes that minor revisions were made in the editions of 1934 and 1940, and a major revision occurred in the edition of preceding the publication of the article on “*Church Manual*” in the 1976 Revised Edition.

In 1946 the General Conference Session voted that all further revisions of the *Church Manual* must be approved in advance by the GC in world session. At the next quadrennial session (1950) major changes were approved, and published in the edition of 1951. Since the GC Session of 1958 it has become standard practice to publish an updated edition of the *Church Manual* in the year following each session (quadrennial through 1970, quinquennial since).

Through the years there have been only two statements relating to the wedding band which have appeared in various editions of the *Church Manual*, if my research is correct and complete:

1. *Ring Ceremony*: From the first edition of 1932 through the edition of 1942 there was no section in the *Church Manual* on “Church Standards” (as there has been since 1951), but Section X dealt with “Marriage.” This statement (which included a section on divorce) covered parts of seven pages in the editions of 1932, 1934, 1938, 1940, and 1942. The last portion of the first section on marriage cited an “Autumn [now Annual] Council” action from 1925, which was worded:

“*Resolved*, That in the marriage ceremony simplicity be observed, and that some simple formula as that in the ‘Manual for Ministers’ be used; also that we look with disfavor upon the ring ceremony, and upon our ministers officiating at the marriage of believers with

unbelievers or with those not of our faith.”—*Autumn Council Actions*, 1925, pp. 12, 13

[This statement appears on p. 175 of the editions of 1932, 1934, 1938, and 1940, and on p. 187 of the 1942 edition, with no change of text between 1932 and 1942. (The next edition was published in 1952.)]

2. *Marriage Ring*: With the major revision of the *Church Manual* in 1951, the compilers devoted an entire chapter to “Standards of Christian Living,” one section of which dealt with “Dress.” It consisted of a statement of seven paragraphs, the fifth of which reads:

“In some countries the custom of wearing the marriage ring is considered imperative, having become, in the minds of the people, a criterion of virtue, and hence is not regarded as an ornament. Under such circumstances, we have no disposition to condemn the practice.”

[This statement appears on p. 202 of the editions of 1951, 1959, and 1963; on p. 212 of the editions of 1967 and 1971; on p. 225 of the edition of 1976; on p. 222 of the edition of 1981, and on p. 146 of the edition of 1986, with no change of text between 1951 and 1986.]

To summarize, then: only two statements have ever appeared in the *Church Manual* from the 1st edition of 1932 through the latest edition of 1986: (a) from 1932 to 1951 the church said, simply, “we look with disfavor upon the ring ceremony;” and (b) from 1951 to 1987 it declares “we have no disposition to condemn” the wearing of a wedding band by SDA church members in such countries where the custom is “considered imperative.” (The determination of which country is which is wisely left to the individual church member by the church.)

Therefore, when arch conservative opponents of the wearing of the wedding band by SDA Christians today affirm “The *Church Manual* has been changed,” they are right. . . and wrong. A change *was* indeed made 36 years ago, from a statement which discouraged

the performing of ring ceremonies at SDA weddings, to a recognition that cultural differences must be recognized by the world church in determining the “rightness” or “wrongness” of a member’s wearing a wedding band. But it is important to note that this change (a) is not one of recency, as some critics allege, nor (b) was it a reversal of an alleged earlier proscription against SDA’s wearing wedding bands, as these critics also alleged.

If the various editions of the *Church Manual* contain other references to the wedding band than those cited above, their respective Tables of Contents fail to indicate the page upon which the statement is to be located, nor were they detected in a rather exhaustive search of each edition which the statement examined individually.

I have yet to find *any* statement in *any* edition of the *Church Manual* which prohibits or even discourages the wearing of a wedding band by an SDA Christian in *any* country, although it seems reasonable to infer an unspoken discouragement from the statement on ring ceremonies and the statement that approves of the wearing of a wedding band in cultures, where it is deemed necessary.

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