

## CHRISTIAN DRESS AND ADORNMENT<sup>1</sup>

### Chapter 5: A LOOK AT THE WEDDING RING

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Should Christians wear a marriage ring? Does a plain marriage band fall in the category of the inappropriate ornaments of gold and pearls mentioned by Paul and Peter (1 Tim 2:10; 1 Pet 3:3)? These questions have engendered endless controversies in my own Seventh-day Adventist church, as well as in other churches.<sup>1</sup>

Part of the problem is that the debate on the wedding ring has largely been based on strong personal feelings rather than on a clear understanding of the issues involved. Those who favor wearing the wedding ring feel strongly that for them the ring is a valuable symbol to affirm their marital status and commitment, as well as a protection from uninformed suitors. On the other hand, those who oppose wearing the wedding ring feel strongly that a golden ring is an ornament forbidden by the apostolic admonitions against wearing "gold or pearls or costly attire" (1 Tim 2:10; cf. 1 Pet 3:3).

**Objective of this Chapter.** My objective in this chapter is not to sit in judgment upon those who wear or do not wear a marital ring, but rather to look at the whole question of the wedding ring from a broader historical, cultural, and Biblical perspective. This chapter attempts to provide some basic information about the evolution of the meaning, usage, and influence of finger rings both in pagan Rome and Christian history. We shall give special attention to the religious impact of the wedding ring in the life of Christian churches. These data will provide a basis for reflecting at the end on whether or not it is advisable for Christians to wear a wedding ring today.

I must confess that this chapter has caused me to do much soul searching. Coming from Italy, a country where wearing the marriage ring is considered imperative, a sign of fidelity to one's spouse, I approached this study with strong personal convictions conditioned by my cultural upbringing. I must admit that my convictions have been altered as a result of reading and reflecting upon the evolution and socio-religious impact of the wedding ring in both pagan and Christian history. I submit my findings and reflections, not to cast judgment on anyone, but to provide a broader basis to better determine what the Christian's attitude toward the wedding ring should be.

#### 1. FINGER RINGS IN PAGAN HISTORY

**Origin of the Finger Ring.** The story of the finger ring is in a way like the ring itself, without beginning and without end. No one can tell for certain how far back the ring goes. Finger rings appear to have originated with the ancient Egyptians, evolving from the seal or signet. Because the seal was a sign of power, the wearer of a portable seal, a signet ring, was regarded as a person of great authority. A royal personage wishing to delegate his power to one of his officials, would hand him his signet ring. This would enable the subordinate to issue commands with full royal authority. We find a good example of this practice in Genesis 41:42: "Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand" (cf. Esth 8:2).

The transformation of the signet ring into an ornament appears to have occurred also in Egypt. Wealthy Egyptian women wore gold rings on different fingers. The poorer classes wore rings of less costly materials, such as silver, bronze, glass, or pottery covered with a siliceous glaze and colored blue or green with various copper oxides.<sup>2</sup>

Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans refined the art of making ornamental rings. Throughout the period of the Roman Republic (449-31 B.C.), however, only iron finger rings were worn by most of the citizens. Slaves were forbidden to wear rings on their fingers. This policy of austerity came to an end at the beginning of the Imperial period (about 31 B. C.). Gold finger rings appeared but the right to wear them was restricted to ambassadors, then extended to senators, consuls, and chief officers of state.

Different laws were passed during Imperial Rome to govern the wearing of finger rings. Pliny informs us that Emperor Tiberius required that those who were not of free descent be owners of large property before having the right to wear gold finger rings.<sup>3</sup> Emperor Severus extended the right to wear gold finger rings—*jus annuli aurei*—first to Roman soldiers and then to all free citizens. Silver finger rings were worn by freedmen, that is, slaves who had become free. Iron finger rings were worn by slaves. Under Emperor Justinian these restrictions were abolished. It is interesting to note that during Imperial Rome gold, silver, and iron finger rings were worn in accordance with the social class to which one belonged. The finger ring, so to speak, tied a person down to his or her social class.<sup>4</sup>

**"Binding" Finger Rings.** The use of a ring to "tie" a person to a social class may have derived from the legendary origin of the finger ring. In his *Natural History* Pliny tells us that the ring first entered Greek mythology when Prometheus dared to steal fire from heaven for earthly use. For this wanton crime Zeus chained him to a rock up in the Caucasus Mountains for thirty thousand years, during which time a vulture fed daily on his liver. After straining at the chain for many years, Prometheus finally succeeded in breaking away, taking a chunk of the mountain with the chain. Eventually Zeus relented and liberated Prometheus from the chain. However, to avoid a violation of the original judgment, Prometheus was ordered to wear a link of his chain on one of his fingers as a ring. On the ring was set a piece of the rock to which he had been chained as a constant reminder that he was bound to the rock.<sup>5</sup>

Apparently Pliny's legend became a superstition which eventually evolved into a custom. "When a Roman slave was allowed his liberty," wrote James McCarthy, "he received, along with cap and white vest, an iron finger ring. The slave had been fastened, so to speak, by a Caucasian chain of bondage. When granted his freedom he still had to wear, as Prometheus wore, an iron ring by way of remembrance. He was not permitted to have one of gold, for at that time that was a badge of citizenship."<sup>6</sup>

**Betrothal Ring.** The Romans were also the first to use finger rings to "tie" people not only to their social classes, but also to their marital partners. During the betrothal ceremony the bridegroom gave a plain iron finger ring to the family of the bride as a symbol

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of his commitment and financial ability to support the bride. Marriages were not made in heaven but over a negotiating table. Originally the betrothal ceremony was more elaborate and important than the marriage rite, which was a simple fulfillment of the betrothal commitment. It was only much later in Christian history that the ring was made part of the wedding ceremony.

In his book *How It Began* Paul Berdanier claims that the binding use of the ring for betrothal ceremonies developed from an older superstitious practice in which a man tied cords around the waist, wrists and ankles of the woman he had fallen in love with, to make sure that her spirit would be held under his control.<sup>7</sup> The pagan superstitions surrounding the origin of the Roman betrothal ring did not deter early Christians from adopting its use. Before looking at the Christian use of the finger ring, it may be well to mention a few pagan superstitions associated with the finger ring. This will help us place the wedding ring in its historical context.

**The "Magic Power" of Finger Rings.** Many legends have come down to us about the magic powers of finger rings. According to a popular legend, King Solomon had a finger ring that transported him every day at noon into the firmament, where he heard the secrets of the universe. This explains his unfathomable wisdom. Another legend claims that Solomon had his ring set with unusual precious stones which served as a magic mirror in which he was able to see reflected the image of any place or person he wished. "Chronicles of long ago say this ring explained his uncanny gift of jurisprudence, as in the case of the two women who claimed a child as their own. Gazing into the depth of the mirror he was apprised of things to come."<sup>8</sup> Allegedly Solomon's ring was later found and used by Jewish exorcists to drag demons out through the noses of sick people.<sup>9</sup>

There are also many stories about the healing power of finger rings. "The Greek physician Galen, of the 2nd century A. D., wrote of the Egyptian king's green jasper amulet that had the design of a dragon surrounded by rays. Galen held that it was a potent remedial agent for maladies of the digestive organs. Numbered among the medicinal rings are the royal 'cramp rings.' These were believed to offer protection against cramps and other ailments. Edward the Confessor, king of England in the 11th century, supposedly began the practice of using curative rings. When the king was accosted one day by an aged pilgrim, the story goes, he had no money but gave the pilgrim a ring as alms. The pilgrim, the Apostle John in disguise, returned the ring to the king, saying that he had blessed it and had given it curative powers. From that time on, up to the reign of Queen Mary I in the 16th century, on Good Friday, English kings and queens blessed and distributed rings held to be a cure for the 'falling sickness' (epilepsy)."<sup>10</sup>

**Poison Finger Rings.** In Roman times finger rings were worn not only to effect healing but also to poison oneself or others. Poison rings carried a liquid poison in a small cavity in the bezel. A spring was connected to the cavity in such a way that the murderer could give a fatal scratch while shaking the hand of the enemy. This device was probably suggested by the poison fang of a snake.

The Carthaginian general Hannibal took a fatal dose of poison from his ring (183 or 182 B. C.) rather than surrender to the Romans. The sixteenth-century Borgia family in Italy, known for its treachery, supposedly used poison rings to murder its enemies.

**Astrological Finger Rings.** Astrology, the belief that the stars influence the destinies of people, was popular among the Chaldeans, the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans, and it has flourished in the Western world even to our time. Until the seventeenth century astrological finger rings were very popular. These rings developed out of the belief that heavenly bodies have a special influence over nations, cities, and individuals. They can affect the personal appearance, temperament, disposition, character, health, and fortune of people. To court the help of the planetary deities, it was important to wear rings formed of the gems and metals assigned to each of the seven planetary gods:

"The Sun: a diamond or sapphire set in a ring of gold.

The Moon: a crystal in silver ring.

Mercury: a 'magnet' set in quicksilver.

Venus: an amethyst in copper ring.

Mars: an emerald in an iron ring.

Jupiter: a cornelian set in tin.

Saturn: a turquoise set in lead."<sup>11</sup>

These various rings set with different precious stones were worn according to the preference of the planetary god whose help was sought. A related development occurred just before the beginning of Christianity, when the Romans adopted from the Jews the seven-day week we use today. Prior to that time the Romans had used an eight-day week, known as *numdinum*. When the Romans adopted the seven-day week, they decided to name each day of the week after the planet-god which allegedly controlled the day (Sunday for the Sun god, Monday for the Moon god, etc.). The Jewish custom was to designate the days of the week by number (that is, first day, second day, etc.).

This belief that each day of the week was controlled by a planet-god, led to the development of finger rings set with the stone favored by the planet-god controlling the day. Wealthy people wore a different ring each day in accordance to the stone preference of the planet-god controlling that day. Apollonius of Tyana, a Pythagorean philosopher of the first century, offers the following list of finger rings set with different precious stones, to be worn on the proper planetary day of the week to ensure the favor of celestial influences:

<i>Day</i>	<i>Gem of the Day</i>	<i>Talismanic Gem</i>	<i>Astral Control</i>
Sunday	Diamond	Pearl	Sun
Monday	Pearl	Emerald	Moon
Tuesday	Ruby	Topaz	Mars
Wednesday	Amethyst	Turquoise	Mercury
Thursday	Cornelian	Sapphire	Jupiter

Friday	Emerald	Ruby	Venus
Saturday	Turquoise	Tourmaline	Saturn <sup>12</sup>

**Implications of Ring's Pagan Origin.** The few examples cited above about the various superstitious and idolatrous use of finger rings are far from being exhaustive. The major encyclopedias I have consulted have lengthy articles describing the superstitious use of finger rings as charms, amulets, talismans, and as aids to the worship of various pagan gods.<sup>13</sup> What has been mentioned should suffice to show that the origin of the finger ring is to be found in pagan superstitions and idolatrous practices.

The pagan origin and meanings of the finger ring raise questions about the legitimacy of its adoption by Christians to represent marital commitment. In the Bible the value of symbols is determined by their origin and meaning. The Sabbath, the Passover lamb and blood, the Lord's Supper, baptism, and footwashing are all valuable symbols, because they have been established by God to help us conceptualize and internalize spiritual realities. Their value is derived from their divine origin, meaning, and function. By contrast, the meaning of the wedding ring as a symbol of marital commitment finds its origin not in Scripture, but in pagan mythology and superstitions. To invest a pagan symbol with a sacred Christian meaning, can easily lead to a secularization of the symbol itself. As we shall see, this is exactly what has happened with the use of the wedding ring.

A case in point is the adoption of Sundaykeeping in early Christianity. As I have shown elsewhere,<sup>14</sup> an important contributory factor to the Christian adoption of Sunday was the pagan veneration of the Sun god on its Sun-day. The attempt that Christians made to transform Sunday from a pagan holiday into a Christian Holy Day, was never successful. In spite of all the attempts that have been made throughout the centuries by church councils, popes, and Puritans to make Sunday into a holy day, the historical reality is that Sunday has largely remained a holiday, a day in which most people seek for personal pleasure and profit rather than for the presence and peace of God.

To a large extent the same has been true of the wedding ring. As we shall now see, in spite of the attempts made by church leaders to restrict the use of rings only to one plain marital ring, the historical reality is that many Christians throughout the centuries have given in to the temptation of wearing all sort of rings to adorn themselves rather than to express their marital commitment.

**A Lesson from Ancient Rome.** The trend to multiply the use of rings began in ancient Rome. In fact, the story of the betrothal ring in ancient Rome can be instructive for us today. Originally, as mentioned earlier, the betrothal ring was a plain iron ring, but it soon evolved into elaborate golden rings. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* states: "The giving of a ring to mark a betrothal was an old Roman custom. The ring was probably a mere pledge, *pignus*, that the contract would be fulfilled. In Pliny's time [about 70 A. D.] conservative custom still required a plain ring of iron, but the gold ring was introduced in the course of the second century. This use of the ring, which was thus of purely secular origin, received ecclesiastical sanction, and formulae of benediction of the ring exist from the eleventh century."<sup>15</sup>

Tertullian (about 160-225), a pagan lawyer who became an influential church leader, lamented the extravagance in dress and ornaments that was evident among the Romans in his time. He commended the ancient Romans for encouraging modesty by condemning the wearing of gold, except the marital ring: "I see now no difference between the dress of matrons and prostitutes. In regard to women, indeed, those laws of your fathers, which used to be such an encouragement to modesty and sobriety, have fallen into desuetude, when a woman had yet known no gold upon her save on the finger, which, with the bridal ring, her husband had sacredly pledged to himself."<sup>16</sup>

The "laws of your fathers," which restricted the use of gold to the bridal ring, presumably were laws passed in the early part of the second century; as we just noted, at the time of Pliny (about A. D. 70) only the wearing of a plain betrothal iron ring was permitted. In other words, what began in the first century as a plain iron betrothal ring to express conjugal commitment, developed by the end of the second century into elaborate gold rings to display wealth, pride, and vanity. We shall see that the same thing happened in the Christian church.

James McCarthy noted the reason for this development: "The trouble with the Romans, as with others enamored of anything, was that they began to overdo the wearing of rings. They covered their fingers with them. Some even wore different rings for summer and winter. They were immoderate not only in the number of rings worn but also in their size. Even on the little finger extremely heavy rings of gold were worn during the twilight days of the Empire. Thumb rings of even more gigantic size were sported. It would seem as though the flash of rings paralleled the inevitable fall of the Roman Empire."<sup>17</sup>

McCarthy continues noting that in spite of the moralists' denunciations of their own countrymen for wearing too many rings, "rings continued to be worn and Rome continued to decline. Rome fell and the rings continued on. Whether there is a moral here I cannot say."<sup>18</sup> Indeed there is a moral, because what happened in the history of imperial Rome, has been largely repeated in the history of Christianity.

## 2. THE WEDDING RING IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY

**Rings in the Bible.** The Bible gives no indication that finger rings were used as betrothal or nuptial rings. The signet ring is the earliest type of ring mentioned in the Bible. When Tamar disguised herself as a harlot to entice her father-in-law, Judah, she asked him for his signet, cord, and staff as a pledge for his promise to send her "a kid from the flock" (Gen 38:17-19). Jeremiah informs us that the Israelites wore the signet ring on the right hand (Jer 22:24). The signet ring was used to seal various contracts. It was a symbol of authority, dignity, and social status (James 2:2). Pharaoh gave his signet ring to Joseph as a symbol of authority (Gen 41:42). Likewise, Ahasuerus gave his signet to Haman to seal a royal decree (Esth 3:10, 12). Upon his return the prodigal son received a ring from his father as a symbol of dignity (Luke 15:22).

The finger rings mentioned in the Bible are signet rings used as symbol of authority and dignity. The Romans are credited for pioneering the use of the signet ring as a betrothal ring. The Jews and the Christians borrowed the practice from the Romans. Since

the betrothal ceremony usually involved the groom giving a sum of money or a valuable object to the bride, it was a natural transition to make this object a ring.

**Betrothal Rings in Early Christianity.** How early the Christians adopted the Roman custom of the betrothal ring is unknown. There is no mention of betrothal rings in the New Testament, apparently because their use had not yet begun. The earliest Christian betrothal rings have been found in the Roman catacombs, underground burial-places dug outside the city of Rome from about A. D. 200.<sup>19</sup> From about the same time we have the testimonies of Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria about the Christian use of the betrothal ring. In the light of these archeological and literary evidences we can assume that Christians adopted the use of betrothal ring in the latter part of the second century.

The most common material of the betrothal ring found in the catacomb is bronze, though a few iron rings have survived. "As a rule, early Christian rings of gold are rare. This might be expected, as the use of rich and numerous ornaments was not in accordance with the teaching of the early church."<sup>20</sup> Contrary to the pagan fashion of wearing a "ring on nearly every joint," the early Christians wore *only one* ring, the marital ring.<sup>21</sup>

It is interesting to note that the early Christians followed the Roman custom of using the ring for the betrothal ceremony rather than the wedding service. The reason appears to be that originally the wedding was not an elaborate ceremony as it is today, "but a simple affirmation of mutual love and obedience."<sup>22</sup> In other words, betrothal rituals were more elaborate than wedding services. Even the betrothal, as Joseph Bingham explains, "was an innocent ceremony, used by the Romans before the beginning of Christianity, and in some measure admitted by the Jews, whence it was adopted among the Christian rites of espousal without any opposition or contradiction."<sup>23</sup>

**Purpose of the Marital Ring.** The reason Christians did not oppose the adoption of the betrothal ring is because they perceived it to be not an ornament but a symbol of marital commitment. They did not anticipate that the betrothal ring would eventually tempt Christians to follow the example of the pagans in wearing all sorts of ornamental rings.

Tertullian (about 160-225), though known as a "rigorist" for promoting strict standards of Christian conduct and for condemning the use of jewelry, seems to have approved the use of the marital ring. We noted earlier that Tertullian lamented the adoption by Roman women of seductive ornaments, but he commends the ancient Romans for teaching women "modesty and sobriety" by condemning the wearing of gold "save on the finger, which, with the bridal ring, her husband had sacredly pledged to himself."<sup>24</sup> This passage suggests that Tertullian viewed the marital ring not as an improper adornment, but as an evidence of modesty and a symbol of a sacred pledge to one's spouse.

A similar view was expressed by Clement of Alexandria (about 150-215), a contemporary of Tertullian who headed the catechetical (baptismal) school of Alexandria from 190 to 202. In his book *The Instructor*, Clement went to considerable length to explain why Christian women should not wear luxurious clothes, rings, earrings, or elaborate hair styles, and "smear their faces with the ensnaring devices of wily cunning."<sup>25</sup> In the midst of his treatment of the various inappropriate Christian ornaments, he wrote approvingly of the signet ring as the only permissible one. "The Word [Christ] permits them [women] a finger-ring of gold. Nor is this for ornament, but for sealing things which are worth keeping safe in the house, in the exercise of their charge of housekeeping."<sup>26</sup>

The "sealing" function of the ring suggests that it was a signet ring that apparently functioned also as a marital ring. It is evident that by the time of Clement (about 200) the ring was made of gold. This represents a departure from the first century custom of wearing only plain iron betrothal rings. "Even now," wrote Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* at about A. D. 70, "the bridal ring is made of iron and without jewels."<sup>27</sup>

The purpose of the ring for Clement was not ornamental ("Nor is this for ornament"), but practical and protective. It is *practical* because the wife used the signet ring the husband gave her to seal those goods "worth keeping safe in the house." If a servant ran away with some household goods, the seal on them would prove the ownership. The signet ring worn by the wife represented the authority her husband had delegated to her to manage all the household goods.

It was *protective* because it served as "a band of chaste modesty, lest through giddiness they [women] slip away from the truth."<sup>28</sup> The signet ring was the only ring allowed to Christian women: "He [Christ] allows us a signet for this purpose only. Other finger-rings are to be cast off, since, according to the Scripture, 'instruction is a golden ornament for a wise man'"<sup>29</sup>

**Rings in Wedding Ceremonies.** The use of rings in wedding ceremonies is traced back to the early part of the fourth century.<sup>30</sup> However, the first explicit description of the ring's usage seems to come from Isidore of Seville, who became archbishop of that city in 595. He wrote: "The ring is given by the espouser to the espoused either for a sign of mutual fidelity or still more to join their hearts by this pledge; and therefore the ring is placed on the fourth finger because a certain vein, it is said, flows thence to the heart."<sup>31</sup>

The belief that the fourth finger (counting from the thumb), has a *vena amoris*—a love vein running directly to the heart—is obviously pure superstition. The annular (ring) finger shares the same "route" to the heart as the other fingers. In spite of its superstitious origin, the custom of wearing the wedding ring on the fourth finger of the left hand has prevailed in most Christian countries to this day.

**Episcopal Rings.** Knowing the attraction that rings have exerted upon the laity, it is not surprising that the clergy also adopted the use of rings. The most famous ecclesiastical rings are the "episcopal ring" that was conferred upon the newly elected bishop and the "fisherman's ring" worn by the pope. The latter derives its name from the gemstone which carries an engraving of Peter in a boat pulling up a fishing net.

The episcopal ring, as *The Catholic Encyclopedia* explains, "was strictly speaking an episcopal ornament conferred in the rite of consecration, and it was commonly regarded as emblematic of the betrothal of the bishop to His Church."<sup>32</sup> The Gregorian

formula, still used today in delivering the ring, says: "Receive the ring, that is to say the seal of faith, whereby thou, being thyself adorned with spotless faith, may keep unsullied the truth which thou pledged to the spouse of God, His holy Church."<sup>33</sup> The idea of conjugal fidelity is symbolically present also in the episcopal rings.

It is noteworthy that the same encyclopedia traces the origin of the episcopal ring back to the golden ring worn by ancient pagan priests consecrated to the worship of Jupiter: "Knowing as we do, that in the pagan days of Rome every flamen Dialis (i.e., a priest specially consecrated to the worship of Jupiter) had, like the senators, the privilege of wearing a gold ring, it would not be surprising to find evidence in the fourth century that rings were worn by Christian bishops."<sup>34</sup> The same source, however, questions the validity of the fourth century's evidence, arguing instead that the first unmistakable evidence comes to us from a Decree issued by Pope Boniface IV in 610, requiring monks elevated to the episcopal dignity to wear the ring.<sup>35</sup>

Bishops and popes came to love their rings so much that they wanted to be buried with them. This explains why splendid collection of episcopal rings have been found in papal sarcophagi (coffins) and have come down to us. The influence of paganism is evident in many of the episcopal rings since they are set with ancient pagan gems engraved with pagan symbols. Referring to episcopal rings, *The Encyclopedia Britannica* says: "In many cases an antique gem was mounted in the bishop's ring, and often an inscription was added in the gold setting of the gem to give a Christian name to the pagan figure."<sup>36</sup> In other cases, according to the same source, no change was made to the pagan engraving and "the gem appears to have been merely regarded as an ornament without meaning."<sup>37</sup>

**Leavening Influence.** The pagan influence on the Christian use of the finger ring is evident, not only in the pagan engravings on the episcopal rings, but also in the proliferation of ornamental rings on the fingers of both laity and clergy. What happened in pagan Rome was repeated in the Christian church. As in pagan Rome so in the Christian church the betrothal ring began as a single plain iron ring to express conjugal fidelity, but it soon evolved into elaborate gold rings set with gems to display wealth, pride, and vanity. This was true not only for the laity but also for the clergy.

*The Encyclopedia Britannica* states: "In the 15th and 16th centuries bishops often wore three or four rings on the right hand in addition to a large jewel which was fixed to the back of each glove."<sup>38</sup> This image of church leaders bedecked and bejeweled with gold rings, precious stones and gold embroidered vestments stands in stark contrast to the apostolic call to dress modestly, without "gold or pearls or costly attire" (1 Tim 2:9; cf. 1 Pet 3:3).

It is obvious that when church leaders became enamored with gold rings, jewels, and costly vestments, they could no longer in good conscience admonish the people to be modest in their outward adornment. This explains why, as we saw in chapter three, during the Middle Ages the admonitions to modesty in dress and ornaments are most often given to the clergy rather than to the laity.

Looking back from the vantage point of history, one cannot help but see the leavening influence of the wedding ring. The concession that church leaders made for Christians to wear only the marital ring, soon became a pretext for wearing all kinds of ornamental rings. By the fourth century the proliferation of rings must have assumed such alarming proportions that the so-called *Apostolic Constitutions* outlawed the use of finger rings: "Neither do thou put a gold ring upon thy fingers; for all these ornaments are signs of lasciviousness, which if thou be solicitous about in an indecent manner, thou will not act as becomes a good man."<sup>39</sup> Apparently this ecclesiastical law was soon forgotten, because, as we have just seen, even the very church leaders decked themselves with gold rings set in gems.

**History Repeats Itself.** The saying that "history repeats itself" applies in a special way to the history of the wedding ring. What happened in the early church and during the Middle Ages has been repeated in the internal history of several denominations which grew out of the Reformation. We have found that in the early church the use of the marital ring evolved through three main stages. In the first stage of the apostolic period, there was no apparent use of the marital ring. In the second stage of the second and third centuries, there was a restricted use of only one plain inexpensive conjugal ring which served also as signet ring for sealing purposes. In the final stage from the fourth century onward there was a proliferation of all kinds of ornamental rings and jewelry. This pattern of no marital ring in the first stage, plain marital ring in the second stage, and all kinds of ornamental rings and jewelry in the final stage, has recurred in the internal history of various denominations that grew out of the Reformation. To appreciate more fully the recurrence of this pattern, we shall briefly look at the history of the wedding ring within the Methodist, Mennonite, and Seventh-day Adventist churches.

**The Wedding Ring in the Methodist Church.** From the very beginning of the Methodist movement John Wesley (1703-1791) advocated plainness of dress and avoidance of jewelry in general and rings in particular. In his *Advice to the People Called Methodists, with Regard to Dress*, he wrote: "Wear no gold, no pearls, or precious stones . . . I do not advise women to wear rings, earrings, necklaces."<sup>40</sup> Wesley went to great length to give Scriptural support for his position, quoting among other scriptures the words of Peter, "Let not yours be the outward adorning with braiding of hair, decoration of gold, and the wearing of fine clothing, but let it be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit" (1 Peter 3:3).

Wesley's preaching brought results. Both in England and America the Methodists dressed as "plain people," without jewelry or rings. At the organizing conference of the Methodist Episcopal church in 1784 the question was asked "should we insist on the Rules concerning Dress?" The answer was, "By all means. This is no time to give encouragement to superfluity of apparel. Therefore give no ticket to any, till they have left off superfluous ornaments . . . Allow no exempt case, not even of a married woman. . . . Give no admission to those who wear rings."<sup>41</sup> Tickets were given for the admission to the communion service. Those who did not comply with the very high standard of the church were not admitted to this service. Such a strict policy sounds unreasonable to many today. We must understand this policy in the social context of eighteenth-century America where the church regulated the lifestyle of its members.

The original rule regarding dress and ornaments became part of the Methodist church manual, known as *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Church* and continued in this form until 1852. The early Methodists took the admonitions of their founder seriously. They lived a plain lifestyle, avoiding gambling, dancing, cosmetics, and jewelry, including rings.

**The Adoption of the Wedding Ring.** The first mention of the wedding ring as an option in a marriage ceremony, occurs in the 1872 manual of the Methodist Church, known as *Discipline*: "If the parties desire it, the man shall here hand a ring to the minister, who shall return it to him and direct him to place it on the third finger of the woman's left hand. And the man shall say to the woman, repeating after the minister, 'With this ring I thee wed, and with my worldly goods I thee endow, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.'"42

One year later, in 1873, the Presbyterian Church followed the example of the Methodists by changing their manual to allow for the use of the ring in the marriage ceremony: "If they desire to pass a ring, the minister, here taking the ring, may deliver it to the man, to put it upon the fourth finger of the woman's left hand."43 Gradually other denominations relaxed their standards of dress and ornaments, allowing the wearing of rings and jewelry in general.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the use of the ring in wedding ceremonies became very popular in America. A book on etiquette published in 1881 says: "All the churches at present use the ring, and vary the sentiment of its adoption to suit the custom and ideas of their own rites."44 This statement is not quite accurate, because there were churches which did not use the ring in the wedding ceremony. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a case in point.

It must be recognized, however, that even those churches which did not approve the wearing of the wedding ring had difficulty in preventing its use among their members. In writing about his own Mennonite church, Melvin Gingerich mentioned "instances of wedding rings being worn by wives in the church during the latter part of the nineteenth century from eastern Pennsylvania to Iowa and Missouri, although this was not the usual practice."45

The Methodist Church upheld Wesley's standard on dress and ornaments until 1852.46 After that date the Methodist manual no longer regulates the dress and jewelry of the clergy or the people. Several Methodist clergymen I consulted about this question have confirmed to me that jewelry has not been an issue in their church for many years now. No disciplinary measures are taken toward those who wear excessive jewelry. Dean Kelly, a Methodist scholar, goes as far as to say that "for decades there hasn't been anything you could do that would get you drummed out of the Methodist Church."47

**Wesley's Law.** The result of the relaxation of church standards in such areas as dress, ornaments and amusements is usually a loss of sense of identity and mission of the church. The reason is that members identify more with the secular values of society than with the religious values of their founding fathers. It appears that to the degree that churches become prosperous and permissive in lifestyle, to the same degree they experience decline in spirituality and membership.

In his classic book *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, Dean Kelly calls this cycle "Wesley's Law:" "John Wesley, the founder of the [Methodist] movement, has summed up this process in what might be called Wesley's Law. 'Whenever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore, I do not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches. . . . Is there no way to prevent this—this continual decay of pure religion?'"48

Wesley understood with amazing clarity what causes the growth or decline of a church. The fulfillment of his "prophetic" insight can be seen in the history of many churches, including his own Methodist Church. In fact, The United Methodist Church is one of the six major Protestant churches which in recent years have experienced a consistent significant decline in membership, church school enrollment, and number of overseas missionaries.49

To reverse the trend, Kelly proposed three steps which can be summarized as follows: First, a church must clarify her goals, central convictions, and standards of lifestyle. Second, a church must decide how to enforce her standards. Third, a church must communicate effectively "its beliefs, its standards, to members (internal) and to others (external)."50

**A Warning for the Adventist Church.** What has happened in the Methodist Church can serve as a warning to the Adventist Church. Kelly, though himself a Methodist, made this point in an article entitled, "How Adventism Can Stop Growing." His answer is simple and yet profound: "Be like the Methodists."51 According to Kelly all that Adventists need to do to stop growing and begin declining is to emphasize that church standards of abstinence, dress, diet, tithing, etc., are "not really essential to salvation." Such an emphasis causes the decline of the church because it "deprives faith of its unique and necessary texture and practice and cost."52

In the light of the above observations, it is evident that church standards affecting such sensitive areas as dress and jewelry can contribute to the growth or decline of the church. Believers who observe high standards are constantly reminded of their calling and mission in the world.

**Jewelry in the Mennonite Church.** Like the early Methodists, the Mennonites have maintained historically a strong stand against the wearing of jewelry, including the wedding ring. In his book *Mennonite Attire Through Four Centuries*, Melvin Gingerich noted that "at least thirty-nine conference resolutions against wearing of jewelry were passed in the years 1864-1949, half of which came after 1918."53 The articles of jewelry to be avoided included "wedding rings, gold rings, pearls, bracelets, broaches, pins, necklaces, and engagement rings."54 "In some instances an attempt was made to distinguish between the ornamental and the utilitarian [jewelry], only the former being prohibited."55

Gingerich admitted that it has not been easy for the Mennonite Church to enforce her policy against jewelry, especially regarding the wedding ring. He writes: "Perhaps the most difficult struggle in enforcing the above regulations has to do with the wedding ring. . . . As long as the (old) Mennonites remained a rural people and lived in almost solid communities, there was not much need

for wives to declare their marital status to the public. But when men began to enter the professions and move to the cities away from their solid communities, often the couples became convinced that the use of the wedding band both as a symbol and as a protective device was essential."<sup>56</sup>

The wearing of the wedding ring among the Mennonites has accelerated since World War II, according to Gingerich. "Since World War II the increasing urbanization of Mennonites has made it more difficult for them to maintain their distinctive costumes, including the practice of not wearing wedding rings, and as a result in many congregations the practice of wearing it is now common, not only for wives but also for husbands."<sup>57</sup>

Historically we have found that the acceptance of the wedding ring has opened the door for the use of all kinds of jewelry. Gingerich acknowledges this trend in his own Mennonite church: "Along with this [wedding ring] has come an increasing use of other forms of jewelry."<sup>58</sup> Recognizing the implication of this trend for the Mennonite Church, Gingerich urges his church to continue to stress the importance of bringing the whole Christian life "under the scrutiny of the New Testament standards relating to humility, stewardship, modesty, and simplicity."<sup>59</sup>

### **PART III: THE WEDDING RING IN THE HISTORY OF THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH**

**Pressure to Conform.** The wedding ring has been a sensitive issue in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is important to remember that Ellen White and other Adventist leaders came out of the Methodist Church and other churches which had a firm stand against wearing jewelry, including rings. As these churches relaxed their stand in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Adventists felt the pressure to follow the trend.

The situation which confronted Adventists is reflected in an article entitled "The Practice of Wearing Gold," published in the *Review and Herald* in 1869. The author, Daniel Bourdeau, a French-speaking American who labored among the French people in Canada, the United States, and Europe, wrote: "Not many years since it was considered a sin by Baptists, Methodists, and other denominations, to wear gold; and I well remember when the Baptists, to whom I belonged, and who used to enjoy more of the spirit of God than they now do, made it a rule to take up a labor, in love, with those members who put on gold. But for quite a number of years the different denominations have undergone a great change on this point, and have almost universally adopted the practice of wearing gold and other vain ornaments."<sup>60</sup>

A factor which contributed to this new trend was the successive waves of immigrants arriving on the American shores in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Understandably, these immigrants brought with them their customs, including that of wearing jewelry, especially the wedding band. Various denominations adapted to the new situation by assuming a permissive attitude toward the wearing of jewelry.

The new and growing Adventist Church felt the same pressure. Thus it is not surprising that Ellen White had to address the encroachment of jewelry. She told the story of a recently baptized lady who had given up her costly jewelry. During a visit to Battle Creek this new convert was surprised to see her sisters in the faith wearing various kinds of jewelry. One day she visited with a sister who occupied a responsible position at an Adventist institution in Battle Creek. In the course of the conversation she expressed her intent to dispose of some jewelry she kept in her trunk and "put the proceeds in the Lord's treasury." The sister of more experience tried to dissuade her, saying: "Why do you sell it? I would wear it if it were mine." To demonstrate that she meant what she said, she "displayed a gold ring on her finger, given to her by an unbeliever." And then she commented, "We are not so particular as formerly." The new convert was astonished but decided to adhere to the Biblical principles of modesty and simplicity she had accepted upon joining the Adventist Church.<sup>61</sup>

**Negative Influence Upon Others.** This story reveals a fundamental reason Ellen White counseled Adventists against wearing jewelry, namely, the negative influence upon others. In 1881 she wrote: "Here the Lord, through His apostle, speaks expressly against the wearing of gold [1 Timothy 2:9-10]. Let those who have had experience see to it that they do not lead others astray on this point by their example. That ring encircling your finger may be very plain, but it is useless, and the wearing of it has a wrong influence upon others."<sup>62</sup>

To call a plain ring "useless" may sound harsh, but we must understand this comment in the context of that time. In America rings were still worn primarily as ornaments. The use of the ring in wedding ceremonies, as we have seen, was still an option in most American churches. As we shall see, Ellen White did not condemn wearing a wedding ring "in countries where the custom is imperative."<sup>63</sup> Consequently the "plain ring" she had in mind most likely was an ornamental ring. Such rings were "useless" because they did not fulfill any utilitarian function. Wearing ornamental rings or other kinds of jewelry was for Ellen White not only a departure "from the plain teachings of the Bible,"<sup>64</sup> but also a negative influence upon others.

Ellen White understood the important truth that Christianity is more easily caught than taught. Throughout her ministry she appealed for simplicity and modesty, in order to influence people for Christ. "Let us dress in such a modest, becoming way that we will be received wherever we go. Jewelry and expensive dress will not give us influence, but the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit—the result of devotion to the service of Christ—will give us power with God."<sup>65</sup>

**Negative Influence Upon Self.** A second important reason Ellen White counseled Adventists against wearing jewelry and extravagant clothes is that they encourage vanity and pride. "Those who cling to the ornaments forbidden in God's word cherish pride and vanity in the heart. They desire to attract attention. Their dress says: Look at me; admire me. Thus the vanity inherent in human nature is steadily increasing by indulgence. When the mind is fixed upon pleasing God alone, all the needless embellishments of the person disappear."<sup>66</sup>

Indulgence in vanity and pride by displaying jewelry and costly apparel "stifles the desire to do good,"<sup>67</sup> because when people become obsessed with beautifying the body, they have less interest, time, or money for the needs of others.

**Responsible Stewardship.** This leads to the third reason Ellen White admonished Adventists not to wear jewelry, namely, responsible stewardship. She rightly believed that God calls us to be responsible stewards of our time, health, and money. "Every dollar saved by denying one's self of useless ornaments may be given to the needy or may be placed in the Lord's treasury to sustain the gospel, to send missionaries to foreign countries, to multiply publications to carry rays of light to souls in the darkness of error. Every dollar used unnecessarily deprives the spender of a precious opportunity to do good."<sup>68</sup>

Like Wesley, Ellen White was very conscious of the needs of the poor and of the fledgling church. She stretched every dollar to meet the many needs of the expanding programs of the church. She viewed her money as God's money to be spent judiciously. "How much money [have you] expended to please your fancy and win the admiration of hearts as vain as your own? It was God's money. How much good you might have done with it!"<sup>69</sup>

**The Wedding Ring Statement.** Ellen White's concern for responsible stewardship helps us understand her position about the wedding ring. It should be noted that, contrary to what many Adventists think, the wedding ring was not a burning issue in Ellen White's mind. This is shown by the fact that in all her writing of about 100,000 pages, we find only one single explicit statement about the wedding ring.

This important statement first appeared in a letter she wrote in 1892 from Melbourne, Australia, addressed to "My Dear Brethren and Sisters." The statement was later published in 1923 in the compilation entitled *Special Testimonies to Ministers and Workers*, under the chapter "Economy to be Practiced in All Things."<sup>70</sup> At that time Ellen White was in Australia guiding the beginning of the Adventist work on that vast continent. The members were few, 376 to be specific,<sup>71</sup> but the needs were many. The church was in financial distress as the building program was getting started with the construction of a publishing house.

The financial situation was so tight that every penny was needed to alleviate the situation. She lamented the fact that in spite of the financial crunch, some members were spending their money for extravagant furniture, food, and clothes, instead of placing it in the church's treasury. American missionaries who struggled to live on a meager salary were also carried away and buying expensive wedding rings just to comply with customs.

In the context of this difficult and complicated situation Ellen White penned her statement about the wedding ring: "Some have had a burden in regard to the wearing of a marriage ring, feeling that the wives of our [American] 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 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 conformity to custom and fashion. Not one penny should be spent for a circlet of gold to testify that we are married."<sup>72</sup>

This statement is clearly addressed to American missionaries serving in Australia who had not worn marital rings before, because in America it was not obligatory. Ellen White felt that there was no need for American missionaries to buy rings. Her counsel was based on four major considerations. First, it was not difficult for American missionaries to explain why they did not wear a wedding ring, since it was not their national custom. Second, the custom was irrelevant, because wearing a ring was not a proof of marital fidelity. Third, the money spent to buy rings could be used to meet the urgent financial needs of the church. Fourth, wearing marriage rings could have "a leavening process" by encouraging "conformity to custom and fashion." These were legitimate considerations which to a large extent are still relevant today.

**Gradual Reform.** It is important to note that Ellen White respected, without endorsing, the custom of wearing the wedding ring in countries where it was regarded as imperative. Her statement continues: "*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."<sup>73</sup>

The phrase "*if they can do so conscientiously*" suggests that Ellen White did not give a blanket endorsement to the wearing of the marital ring even in countries where it was a social imperative. The "if" suggests that even in such countries some may have difficulty reconciling the wearing of the ring with their conscience. This may be true when the conscience is enlightened by a fuller understanding of the origin, meaning, and spiritual impact of the marriage ring.

Personally I must confess that I could have worn a wedding band conscientiously until now (though I have never done so) because I viewed it solely through the glasses of my Italian culture as a symbol of marital status. For the same reason I have never dissuaded my wife from wearing her wedding band. However, now that I have learned about its pagan origin, its negative impact on the history of Christianity, and its potential leavening influence upon my spiritual life and that of others, I could never consider wearing a marriage ring in good conscience. I am pleased that my wife also has come to view the wedding band from a different perspective.

Ellen White understood this important truth: to be successful reforms must be conducted no faster than people can understand new truths. This is why she did not object to our members wearing the wedding ring in Europe or Australia. She understood that it would take time for them to understand "the leavening process" of the wedding ring. Her philosophy is well expressed in the counsel she gave about diet reform, which is applicable to reform in dress and jewelry: "*We must go no faster than we can take those with us whose consciences and intellects are convinced of 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. . . . *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.*"<sup>74</sup>

**Ellen White's Respect for Local Custom.** William C. White, son of Ellen White, related two episodes which illustrate his mother's respect (but not endorsement) for the local custom of wearing the marriage ring. The first is from Europe, where Ellen White served from 1885 to 1887. Late in 1885 in Basel an Adventist minister was preaching one night against the wearing of jewelry, including rings. A lady interrupted the preacher to ask if the wedding ring was included. Without hesitation, he responded, "Yes, everything." The incident stirred up considerable controversy, because in Europe the wedding band was not viewed as an ornament.

When the matter was reported to Ellen White, according to her son W. C. White, who was present at the meeting, "She [Ellen White] 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."<sup>75</sup> Referring to the same episode in a place where wearing the ring was considered imperative, W. C. White wrote again in another letter: "She [Ellen White] 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."<sup>76</sup> It should be noticed that such difference applies to countries where the wearing of the marriage band was demanded by custom.

The second episode involves W. C. White himself. While he was in Australia working with his mother, he met a young lady, Ethel May Lacey, with whom he fell in love. She was a Britisher, living in Tasmania. Her father had retired in Australia from the British police service. Her family and friends viewed wearing the wedding ring as essential. Knowing Ellen White's objection to American missionaries wearing the wedding band, May decided to talk the matter over with her future mother-in-law (Ellen White). Shortly afterwards she reported the conversation to her fiance, "Willie," saying: "She [Ellen White] says she has no objection whatever to my wearing one."<sup>77</sup> After they settled in their new home, and everyone knew them, she removed the ring and never wore it again, because she did not feel comfortable with it.<sup>78</sup>

In the light of this experience W. C. White explained that his mother did not object to "wearing a ring as token of loyalty in those countries and among those people where such a custom is so thoroughly established, [that] the departure from that custom will be universally misunderstood."<sup>79</sup>

These considerations lead us to conclude that Ellen White never envisioned that her counsel on the wedding ring should become a rule by which every Adventist member around the world had to live. In countries where wearing the marriage ring was imperative, she left it to the individual conscience to decide whether or not to follow the custom. However, she did not hesitate to express her strong concern that wearing a ring does contribute to a "leavening process" by encouraging conformity to fashion. Her strong concerns were not without merit. We have found historically that allowing the wedding ring has given to many the pretext for wearing ornamental rings, earrings, necklaces, bracelets, etc. We shall see that this "leavening process" has also affected the Adventist Church.

**Adventist Views Since 1925.** The use of the ring in wedding ceremonies became well established in most American Protestant churches during the early part of the twentieth century. Not surprisingly, some Adventists also wanted a "ring ceremony." To discourage such practice, which would have sanctioned the widespread use of the wedding ring and eventually of ornamental rings, at the 1925 Autumn Council church leaders voted an action which would later be included in the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*: "Resolved . . . that we look with disfavor upon the ring ceremony and upon ministers officiating at marriages of believers and unbelievers or with those not of our faith."<sup>80</sup> This statement appeared in several editions of the *Church Manual* until 1951.

The disapproval of the "ring ceremony" by the *Church Manual* did not curtail the use of jewelry, especially rings. This led church leaders in North America to address the question again three years later at the 1935 Autumn Council. This time they expressed themselves more explicitly: "Our church members have from the beginning been a plain people. Our standard calls for discarding of jewelry, especially those articles mentioned in the Scriptures and the Spirit of Prophecy, such as rings, earrings, bracelets, and necklaces; we appeal for a greater loyalty to these important and divinely given standards."<sup>81</sup>

This statement makes no specific mention of the wedding ring, apparently because at that time the problem in the church was more the wearing of jewelry in general than of the wedding ring in particular. The situation soon changed. As the wedding ring gained popularity in the American society during World War II for reasons to be mentioned below, an increasing number of Adventists in North America also began wearing the wedding band.

To discourage the growing custom of wearing marriage rings a new statement specifically mentioning the wedding ring, was introduced in the 1951 edition of the *Church Manual*. The statement is largely based on the counsel given by Ellen White in 1892 and restricts the wearing of the wedding band to those countries where such custom is imperative: "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 it is not regarded as an ornament. Under such circumstances we have no disposition to condemn the practice."<sup>82</sup>

**Approval of Marriage Band in North America.** The restrictive policy of the 1951 *Church Manual* remained in effect in North America until 1986. In that year the North American Division Annual Council voted to lift the restriction and to allow church members in North America the possibility of wearing a plain marriage band as in other countries. The statement reads: "Voted 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."<sup>83</sup>

Several factors have contributed to lifting the restriction on the wearing of the marriage band in North America. Since 1951 large numbers of Adventist members have come to America from countries where wearing a wedding band is socially indispensable. In

many cases these members have continued wearing the marriage band in America. There are also American Adventists who believe that wearing a marriage band has become imperative in North America as it has been in other countries. Consequently, they maintain that Ellen White's 1892 concession for "countries where the custom is imperative" is now applicable to North America as well.

There is no doubt that the custom of wearing the wedding ring has gained momentum in the United States since World War II. In his book *Rings Through the Ages*, James McCarthy gives a reason for this development: "With the coming of war [World War II], home never seemed so precious to the young man; never did he cling so poignantly to home and wife and all that his marriage meant. Bridegrooms began insisting on the double-ring ceremony. A ring was about all of home they could carry off to war. The young bride demanded that her soldier husband have some appropriate reminder of his marital status while gallivanting around the globe."<sup>84</sup>

The popularity of wedding rings has steadily increased in the United States since World War II, giving rise to a new industry dedicated exclusively to designing new styles of rings. Today most wedding rings are no longer plain golden bands without jewels but come in all kinds of shapes, often studded with diamonds and other precious stones. According to several jewelers I consulted, about 90% of the wedding rings they sell are set with diamonds or other precious stones. This means that only about 10% of the people buy and wear plain wedding bands. The jewelers told me that plain wedding bands are fast falling out of fashion, and it will not be long before they will be a thing of the past. Thus, it can no longer be said that wedding rings are not an ornament, because most of them are set with diamonds or other gems. Bejeweled wedding rings are costly ornaments, not in keeping with the Biblical principles of modesty and simplicity.

**A "Leavening Process."** The increasing popularity of rings is influencing Adventists both in North America and overseas. My itinerant ministry in many parts of the world exposes me constantly to the reality of the "leavening process" of conformity to fashionable jewelry. In our large churches it is becoming a common experience for me to greet church members wearing not only diamond wedding rings, but also earrings, bracelets, and necklaces.

I recall that when I was growing up in Italy our sisters wore only a plain marital band. How different it is today! Recently I preached in some of the largest churches in Northern Italy, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, and England. Everywhere I saw an increasing number of members profusely adorned with jewelry, including ornate marital rings. The situation is not much different in North America. The comment that I often hear is that jewelry is not an issue anymore.

The intent of these observations is not to judge the motives of those members who wear diamond rings and other types of jewelry. My experience has been that many of these members are very sincere and do not attach much importance to the jewelry they wear. They wear it to dress up for formal occasions, as expected by social etiquette. They do not necessarily make an "idol" of the jewelry they wear and they are willing to remove it when they understand the principles of modesty, simplicity, and stewardship.

Rather, my intent is to show that Ellen White had reason to "feel deeply over this leavening process"<sup>85</sup> of conforming to the world in such small things as a plain marital band. This survey of the marriage ring in the history of some Christian churches has shown how such a small thing as a plain marital band can open the door to much greater compromises by tempting people to wear other kinds of jewelry.

**Conclusion.** We asked two questions at the outset: (1) Should Christians wear a marriage ring? (2) Does a plain marriage band fall into the category of the inappropriate ornaments of gold and pearls mentioned by Paul and Peter? We have sought for an answer to these questions by tracing the history of the ring first in ancient Rome, and then in Christian churches. What we have learned from this historical survey can be summarized in five major points.

First, the origin of the finger ring is shrouded in pagan mythology and idolatrous practices. To invest a pagan symbol with a sacred Christian meaning can easily lead to the secularization of the symbol itself. A case in point has been the Christian adoption of the Day of the Sun as the Lord's Day, which soon became a holiday rather than a Holy Day.

Second, the Romans introduced the use of a plain iron ring to "tie" the betrothal commitment of two lovers. However, we have found that the plain iron betrothal ring soon evolved into elaborate gold rings used to cover all the fingers.

Third, what happened in pagan Rome was repeated in the Christian church. We have found that in the early church the use of the marital ring evolved through three main stages. In the first stage of the apostolic period, there was no apparent use of the marital ring. In the second stage of the second and third centuries, there was a restricted use of only one plain inexpensive conjugal ring. In the final stage from the fourth century onward there was a proliferation of all kinds of ornamental rings and jewelry.

Fourth, what happened in the early church has been repeated in modern denominations. The two examples we have considered, namely, the Methodist and Mennonite churches, show the same pattern. In the first stage, no jewelry or wedding rings were allowed. In the second stage, a concession was made for wearing the wedding ring. In the final stage, the concession to wear the marital ring became a pretext for wearing all kinds of jewelry, including ornamental rings.

Fifth, what has happened in the Methodist and Mennonite churches has occurred also in the Adventist church. The pattern is similar. In the first stage of the early days of Adventism, no jewelry or marriage rings were worn. In the second stage, a concession was made for wearing the marriage ring only in those countries where the custom was imperative. In the final stage, the concession was extended to church members in North America. The result of this evolution is a steady rise in the wearing of various kinds of jewelry, including ornamental rings.

In summary, the lesson of history is evident. Both in ancient Rome and in Christian history, marital rings have exercised a leavening influence by tempting people to wear ornamental rings and other types of jewelry. Rings seem to exercise almost a fatal attraction. People can become so enamored with their marriage ring as to be easily tempted to increase the number of rings on their fingers and "improve" their style.

In the light of these findings, what should be our answer to the first question, "Should Christians wear a plain marriage ring?" The answer is: Christians can wear a plain marriage band, if they can do so conscientiously, in those cultures where the custom is imperative. To the second question, "Does a plain marriage band fall into the category of the inappropriate ornaments of gold and pearls mentioned by Paul and Peter?" the answer is: Historically the plain wedding band has not been regarded as an ornament, but history also teaches us that the plain wedding band did not remain plain for very long. The plain wedding band evolved into elaborate rings, set with precious stones.

**A Final Warning.** Rapid cultural changes are taking place today. In many Western countries the old view of marriage as a sacred, indissoluble, lifelong commitment is being challenged and replaced by the new secular view of marriage as a social contract easily dissolved through the legal process. Truly, divorce is no longer an American disease. It is spreading fast in most developed Christian countries. The result is that the marriage band is gradually losing its meaning of mutual fidelity "till death do us part," and is becoming more and more a mere ornament.

Furthermore, people today are no longer satisfied with a plain gold wedding band, but want more elaborate rings, with diamonds or other gems. The plain marriage band is fast becoming a relic of the past. This means that wedding rings are becoming a costly ornament, not in keeping with the Biblical principles of modesty and simplicity. In the light of these trends, wearing the wedding ring may soon become inappropriate for Christians even in countries where traditionally it has been a sign of virtue.

Many insist that jewelry in general and rings in particular are a minor thing that should not obscure more important matters. I agree. There is more to Christianity than jewelry and rings. This is why they receive limited coverage in the Bible. On the other hand, both the Bible and history reveal that the love and use of jewelry have consistently resulted in spiritual decline and apostasy. Since a wedding ring is such a minor thing, why not play it safe and remove it altogether, unless it is a social imperative? Why not wear instead "the golden link which binds [our] 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 [our] influence will be secure anywhere".<sup>86</sup>

#### NOTES TO CHAPTER V

1. On the relaxation of the standard regarding jewelry among some Mennonite groups, see Melvin Gingerich, *Mennonite Attire Through Four Centuries* (Breinigsville, Pennsylvania, 1970), pp. 142-144. For the same trend among the Methodists, see *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, 1977 ed., s.v. "Dress."
2. For further information, see *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1926 ed., s. v. "Ring."
3. Pliny, *Natural History* 23, 8.
4. See *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1926 ed., s. v. "Ring."
5. *Ibid.*
6. James Remington McCarthy, *Rings Through the Ages* (New York, 1945), p. 5.
7. Paul Berdanier, *How It Began*, as cited by James Remington McCarthy (note 6), p. 154.
8. James Remington McCarthy (note 6), p. 6.
9. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 8, 2, 5. For a lengthy discussion of the use of rings and other amulets as charms, see *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 1914 edition, James Hastings, ed., s. v. "Charms and Amulets (Christian)," (vol. 3, pp. 413-430).
10. *The Encyclopedia Americana*, 1994 ed., s. v. "Ring," (vol. 23, p. 531).
11. James Remington McCarthy (note 6), p. 26.
12. As cited by James Remington McCarthy (note 6), p. 30.
13. Besides the encyclopedias already mentioned above, see *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade, ed., 1987 edition, s. v. "Jewelry;" also *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, James Hasting, ed., 1913 edition, s. v. "Charms and Amulets."
14. See my doctoral dissertation, *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Origin of Sunday in Early Christianity* (Rome: The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977), chapters 8 and 9.
15. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1926 ed., s. v. "Ring," (vol. 23, p. 351).
16. Tertullian, *Apology* 6, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. (Grand Rapids, 1973), vol. 3, p. 22.
17. James Remington McCarthy (note 6), p. 66.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
19. Churchill Babington, "Rings," *A Dictionary of Christian Antiquities* (London, 1908), vol. 2, p. 1794.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. James Remington McCarthy (note 6), p. 152.
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29. *Ibid.*, p. 285.

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31. Isidore of Seville, *De Ecclesiasticis Officiis* 2, 20, cited in *A Dictionary of Christian Antiquity* (note 19), vol. 2, p. 1808.
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35. *Ibid.*
36. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1926 ed., s. v. "Ring" (vol. 23, p. 350).
37. *Ibid.*
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39. *The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles I, 2, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. (Grand Rapids, 1970), vol. 7, p. 392.
40. Cited in *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, 1977 edition, s. v. "Dress" (vol. 2, p. 717).
41. *Ibid.*, p. 718. See also *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Church* (New York, 1835), p. 88.
42. *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York, 1872), p. 272, emphasis supplied.
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44. *Our Deportment* (Detroit, 1881), p. 19.
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58. *Ibid.*
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75. William C. White letter to D. C. Babcock, August 6, 1913, p.1. 76. William C. White letter to J. W. Siler, August 9, 1916.
77. Ethel May Lacey letter to William C. White, February 13, 1895.
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79. W. C. White letter to W. E. Ingle, Sanitarium, California, April 14, 1913.
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81. *Actions of Autumn Council Committee from the General Conference*, Louisville, Kentucky, October 29-November 5, 1935, p. 24.
82. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Washington, D. C., 1951), p. 202. This statement has appeared with no change of text on all the editions of the *Church Manual* from 1951 to 1990.
83. *1986 Year-end Meeting of the North American Division* (November 5-11, 1986), pp. 24-25.
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