

Should Christians Wear the Wedding Band?

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We live in a time of serious moral decay. In our society, marriage is generally no longer considered a sacred union, but rather an arrangement that is kept only as long as it is convenient. Pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relationships are expected and sometimes even encouraged. Divorce has become more the rule than the exception. When relationships in the home begin to sour or someone comes along who appears more exciting than one's current spouse, the old relationship is thrown aside to make room for a new one.

In response to this moral decay, those who serve God and are truly committed to preserving their marriage wisely search for ways to build strong marriages and keep them intact. Among conservative Mennonites there has been a recent surge in interest in wearing the wedding band. The thinking is that the wedding band will deter ungodly men or women from making improper advances toward those who desire to be faithful to their wedding vows, and remind the wearer of commitments they have made. Traditionally Mennonites have shunned the use of the wedding band along with all other jewelry out of obedience to scriptural commands about rejecting outward adornment. Now there are some conservative Mennonites who wish to make an exception for the wedding band. Would the adoption of the wedding band be a preserving factor for our marriages or is it a human solution for which God has a better answer?

The History of the Wedding Band

To understand the meaning and significance of the wedding band we need first to understand its origin and history. It is thought that the custom of a man giving a wedding ring to his new bride originated in ancient Egypt. These rings, however, were not made of gold but rather of plant fibers.¹ They wore the ring on the third finger of the left hand because they believed there was a vein in that finger which provided a direct connection to the heart.² Therefore a ring (an unending circle) on that finger symbolized unending love in a marriage. It was from this tradition that this particular finger became known as the ring finger.

The modern custom of a metal wedding ring seems to have originated with the Romans. They fashioned the rings of iron which made them inexpensive and therefore quite common. The Roman men used wedding bands as a sign of ownership of their wives, "claiming" their woman with the giving of a ring.³ The Romans also connected the giving of the wedding band to an exchange of valuables (usually gold and silver) to help ensure the economic safety of the couple.⁴ From many varied traditions, the wedding band gradually became accepted world-wide as a symbol of life-long commitment to marriage.

It is apparent that the varied beginnings of the wedding band were pagan, having no Christian or Scriptural basis at all. Christians were attracted to a pagan custom and sought to "Christianize" it by changing its meaning and practice to conform to their traditions. The idea of being able to wear something which symbolizes unending love is certainly appealing to those who believe marriage is for life. For this reason the wedding band has become accepted among Christians worldwide to symbolize their commitment to the principle that marriage is for life.

But the fact that the wedding band has come to be widely used among Christians is not enough reason to join them in its use. It is important that all our actions are supported by the principles we find in God's Word. Therefore, we need to examine what the Bible has to say on the subject before deciding whether it is God's will for us to adopt this practice.

What Does the Bible Say?

Unfortunately, the Bible is completely silent on wedding bands per se. The reason is simple. As far as we know this custom was not widely practiced during Bible times. The Bible does have something to say concerning the use of jewelry, however, and we can learn much about God's will concerning the use of wedding bands from a brief study on the use of jewelry in the Bible.

The Old Testament

It is very instructional to study the use of jewelry in the Old Testament. There is not space here to do an exhaustive study, but a representative sampling will reveal a great deal concerning God's design in this area.

The first mention we have in Scripture concerning the wearing of jewelry is found in Genesis 24 when Abraham sent his servant to Nahor to find a wife for Isaac. When Rebekah volunteered to give his camels water, the servant perceived that she was God's chosen wife for Isaac; upon this sign he gave Rebekah golden bracelets and earrings. It would appear that these ornaments were in some way part of the betrothal process for Isaac and Rebekah. It would also appear that this was a common custom of that day to which Abraham as a man of God was consenting. This is the only reference I find in Scripture where the wearing of jewelry by God's people seems to be endorsed. From this account it is apparent that there was no express command given by God to Abraham against the wearing of jewelry or for the wearing of jewelry.

We are also told in Genesis 41:42 that when Joseph became the second in command in Egypt he was given a ring for his finger and a gold chain for his neck. This was not done because of a command of God, but simply because he was consenting to customs in the land of Pharaoh.

As we look at the account of the Israelites' escape from Egypt and their journey to Canaan in Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy we find a number of references to jewelry. In Exodus 12:35, the people (following Moses' instructions) permanently "borrowed" jewels of silver and gold from the Egyptians just before they escaped from Egypt. It was not God's intention for these to be for

their personal use, but to beautify the tabernacle which He instructed them to build. Exodus 35:22 is just one place where an offering of gold and silver was willingly given for use in the tabernacle. A great deal of gold and silver went into the construction of the tabernacle and it seems the majority of this came from the spoiling of the Egyptians.

We find no injunctions against the wearing of jewelry in the Mosaic law. However, there was one situation where the gold which they were wearing caused them to sin. In Exodus 32:2 when Aaron gave in to the peoples' demand for a god to go before them he instructed them to break off their golden earrings, which he in turn molded into a calf. In Exodus 33:5 as the LORD pondered His response to this blatant idolatry He instructed them to strip off their ornaments lest He would consume them. This is an indication that their jewelry was somehow an offense to the LORD, possibly because it could so easily become a snare to them.

In the time of David and Solomon there are indications that, because of the abundance of gold and silver, jewelry came into common use among God's people. But as we look at the voices of the prophets we see God taking a dim view toward the use of jewelry among His people because of its connection with idolatry and an attitude of pride. In Isaiah 3:16-26 God speaks of how He would take away their jewelry and other adornments. He describes the daughters of Zion as "haughty" and condemns their tinkling ornaments, chains, bracelets, earrings, rings, and nose jewels along with all kinds of fancy apparel. In Hosea 2:13 the putting on of jewelry by God's people is connected with idolatry and forgetting the LORD.

In an interesting passage in Ezekiel 16:1-14 God describes how He loved and nourished His people from the time of their birth. He tells of how He cared for them and dressed them in fine linen and silk. Then He describes how He decked them with ornaments, bracelets, a neck chain, a forehead jewel, earrings and a beautiful crown. In this God was speaking in a figurative sense, expressing how He had given His people great gifts and made them very attractive to other nations. But as we read the rest of this chapter we find God lamenting the results of His abundant provision for His beloved people. In Ezekiel 16:17 we read:

Thou hast also taken thy fair jewels of my gold and of my silver, which I had given thee, and madest to thyself images of men, and didst commit whoredom with them.

God's lament here is that they had taken that which He had given them and turned it into a source of pride and idolatry. We are so prone to the same error today!

What we read concerning jewelry in the Old Testament is largely negative because it so often was connected with God's people turning away from Him. At the least it seems to have been a source of pride, and at the worst it was a contributing factor in the people turning to idols which God repeatedly describes as "whoredom."

The New Testament

There is very little written concerning the wearing of jewelry in the New Testament. This is understandable considering that Jesus had no earthly possessions and taught His followers to live simply. In Acts 3:6 when the lame man at the temple asked Peter and John for alms Peter replied, "Silver and gold have I none...." In Acts 2:44-45 we are told that in the early church those who had abundance sold their possessions and distributed the proceeds to the believers who had needs.

There are two passages, one written by Paul and one by Peter, which communicate clearly God's will for the Christian concerning the wearing of jewelry. The first is found in I Timothy 2:9

In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array;

The second is I Peter 3:3

Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel;

These passages clearly teach that as Christians our emphasis toward beauty should be on beautifying the inside, which is our spirit. These verses are written to women, but the principles of modesty and decency apply to men as well as to women. We are

not to put on costly clothes or jewelry, or to fix our hair or apply makeup in such a way as to draw attention to physical beauty. There would seem to be two reasons here that we should not wear jewelry. The first is that it is costly, making its purchase a poor stewardship of the money God has graciously given to us. The second reason is that we are not to put on apparel which draws attention to our outward body. Christians who put on jewelry blatantly ignore the clear intent of these two verses.

It is also interesting in Revelation 17, when we are given a description of the woman called the "great whore", who represents the future one-world mystery religion, she is said to be arrayed in purple and scarlet and decked with gold, precious stones, and pearls. This description is in direct contrast to the commands given in the above verses by Paul and Peter. We can see from this passage that there will be those in the church who will be led astray by the heresies of Satan and will teach that the wearing of costly clothes and jewelry is right for Christians. This is a clear sign of the apostate church.

We find, then, that in the Old Testament God soundly condemned jewelry when it caused them to become prideful and led them into idolatry. This alone should cause us to realize the wrongness in wearing that which can so easily become a snare. In the New Testament we are commanded not to put on gold or costly array and not to place any emphasis on outward beauty. Both of these commandments should make it clear to the Christian that God's plan for us is to dress and array ourselves simply, negating the wearing of all jewelry, including the wedding band.

Arguments Given for the Use of the Wedding Band

Having examined what Scripture has to say concerning the wearing of jewelry we will now consider some arguments which are given to justify wearing the wedding band.

"These scriptures do not apply to the wedding band"

There are two closely related arguments which are sometimes used to teach that 1 Timothy 2:9 and 1 Peter 3:3 do not apply to the

wedding band.

The first argument is that there is no mention of rings in these verses as something the Christian should not wear. True, the scriptures do not address the wearing of rings or of wedding bands per se. However, rings and wedding bands obviously and clearly fall into the category of "gold, pearls, and costly array" and, as such, are expressly forbidden. Furthermore, one should note that wedding bands were not part of the prevailing first century culture and, for that reason, were not mentioned in Scripture. Nonetheless, Paul's inspired instructions, general in nature as they are, certainly encompass the specific application we are addressing here.

The second argument is that the wedding band is not actually jewelry, but is a symbol of one's marital status. I would counter that the purpose or motive for something does not define what it actually is. To say that a given reason for wearing jewelry makes it something other than jewelry is illogical. Since the ring is forbidden as "gold, pearls, and costly array," then it is forbidden, regardless of lofty motives. If one begins to use such faulty reasoning, where would he draw the line? He could reverse God's directives for anything. Thus human reasoning could redefine whatever the Scripture teaches.

"I want to display my commitment to my marriage"

The most common reason given for desiring to wear the wedding band by those who traditionally have not worn it is that they want to display their commitment to the permanence of their marriage in our increasingly decadent culture. This is an honorable sentiment and reason. Marriage is under attack in our culture like never before. However, this motive, when examined more closely, is troublesome at best. We must ask the question, "In the wearing of the wedding band, whose values are we adopting?" Just whose idea is it that the wedding band is a testimony of a couple's faithfulness to each other?

Since we can find no support for such a display in God's Word, we cannot claim that this is God's idea. The wedding band is a man-made custom which has no Biblical or Christian roots. We must conclude, then, that the belief that the wedding band is a statement of a man's and woman's faithfulness to each other comes

from observing those in the culture around us, not because of any command from God. Essentially, the desire to wear the wedding band is a desire to fit into the values of the culture around us. This is the very attitude and desire that so frequently turned the Israelites to the idols of other nations and away from God. As mentioned before, in Exodus 32 we have the account of the golden calf which turned the peoples' hearts away from God. When Moses did not come down from Mount Sinai for many days, the people despaired of waiting and demanded that Aaron make them gods like they had seen (and had likely worshipped) in Egypt. They refused to trust the LORD to care for them. This resulted in the deaths of 3,000 men and much sorrow to the people. The idols of the nations around them were a trap in which the Israelites repeatedly found themselves snared from that time until they were taken captive to Babylon some 850 years later. We also see the problem of desiring to be like other nations in I Samuel 8 as the people longed for a king to rule them. The people came to Samuel saying, "Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations." (I Samuel 8:5b) Although Samuel expressly warned them of the burden a king would place on them, they refused to be deterred. Under the rule of the kings, the people drifted further and further from God until He sent them into bondage under the Assyrians and later the Babylonians to teach them not to violate His laws.

"The wedding band protects against infidelity"

This is closely related to the previous point. The idea here is that when a man or woman wears a wedding band it publicly signals the wearer's commitment to his/her partner. This in turn helps to avoid unwanted advances from promiscuous members of the opposite gender.

Aside from the fact that there is no Scriptural basis for this contention, the biggest problem with this idea is that in today's culture marriages are not fulfilling the lifelong commitment to one partner that the wedding band portrays. Fifty years ago the wedding band was a definite sign of commitment to being faithful to one's partner. It may have been useful in helping the wearer avoid inappropriate situations where immorality could occur. In the past if persons indulged in immorality, they first removed their wedding

band. However, in today's post-modern society many people feel no guilt in displaying one thing and doing another. They find it just as easy to "cheat" on their spouse while wearing a wedding band as while they are not wearing one. For these people the wedding band seems to be worn so others will believe they are faithful to their marriage when in truth they are not.

An example of this is a man with whom I am acquainted. He is a member of a church, although he is not very faithful in attending. He has been married to the same woman for more than thirty years and faithfully wears his wedding band. He professes that he never takes his ring off, whether he is working or bathing or sleeping. Yet he openly flirts with many different women and has a reputation of becoming sexually involved with women other than his wife. He demonstrates the fallacy of believing that the wedding band protects against infidelity when it has largely lost its original meaning to him.

"We should wear wedding bands to show we are not divorced"

This argument is related to the above reasons, but with an added twist. The primary problem with this idea is that in our culture at large the wedding band no longer definitively communicates a person's marital status. While it is unlikely that a person who has never been married will wear a wedding band, there definitely are some who never take their wedding band off when they get a divorce. In this post-modern era the attitude of many people is that it is no one's business what their marital status is at the moment. Just as there is no longer any stigma attached to a couple living together and even having children together without being married, so there is often no negative reaction when those who are divorced continue to wear their wedding band. It also does not matter to those who continue to wear the wedding band after divorce that they are telling a lie. They find it easier to act as though they are still married because divorce involves pain and they don't want others to know their pain. This is again a testimony to the loss of meaning that once was attached to the wearing of the wedding band.

"Wearing a wedding band is no different than wearing a watch."

A wrist watch, some would argue, is like jewelry but is worn for a valid purpose (to tell the time); similarly, the wedding band is a form of jewelry worn for a valid purpose (to show one's commitment to his marriage). If a watch is acceptable, why not accept the wedding band?

It is certainly true that many watches are designed and worn as jewelry, meant for others to see as much as for the use of the wearer. However, there are many watches available which are plain and are obviously not meant for jewelry. Such a watch is worn, not for display to others, but solely for the use of the wearer as a timepiece. If a person is wearing long sleeves his watch is not for display because it is covered except when it is consulted for the time. A wedding band, on the other hand, is worn exclusively for display and is meant to be seen at all times. A watch, therefore, is acceptable as a useful timepiece, but not for display. The wedding band is forbidden as "gold and pearls" despite its honorable purpose (1 Timothy 2:9).

Having said these things, however, I must confess that we "plain people" have not always been consistent in rejecting showy watches. An inexpensive gold-colored watch which copies the design of much more expensive watches is just as much jewelry as is a ring with a glass "jewel" instead of a real diamond. Since we reject the wedding band because it is jewelry, we need to be consistent in rejecting all other forms of jewelry, including watches.

The Wedding Band Fails to Preserve Marriage

In the history of the wedding band we looked at its original purpose, which was to show that a woman was married and not available for any other man. It gradually came to represent a circle of unending love, symbolizing that the one wearing it was committed to his/her spouse for life. That is no longer true in our culture today. The wedding band still symbolizes a commitment to one's marriage, but for many it is only intended for as long as they love their spouse, not as long as they are both living. This has directly paralleled a change of wording in many marriage vows;

today a couple may commit themselves to be faithful to each other "so long as they both shall love" rather than until death parts them.

For a number of centuries it was primarily women who wore wedding bands. Then in the years following World War II a large advertising campaign by the jewelry trade persuaded many men to wear wedding bands also.⁵ This, along with increasing prosperity in our country, brought a marked increase in the number of both men and women who chose to wear a wedding band. This increase continued through the '60s and '70s and we do not see its popularity waning even today. Since the purpose of the wedding band was ostensibly to preserve marriage it should follow that the divorce rate would have either gone down or at least not have increased. We well know that the complete opposite is true. In the 1950's divorce was rare. In the 1960's, along with the sexual revolution, divorce rates began to go up and climbed sharply for several decades. Today divorce rates have leveled off and possibly even declined, but this is, at least in part, because many couples are now living together without the complication of marriage in case they decide to separate. It is obvious that the wedding band has done little in keeping marriages intact. Indeed, for many in our society it has become a hypocritical symbol which displays to others what the wearer wishes the observer to believe about them while inwardly they practice something entirely different. Sadly, divorce rates among professing Christians are nearly the same as those in general society.

The Slippery Slope

Besides the fact that wedding bands do not help in preserving marriages, there is another significant problem with Christians adopting their use. The problem is that when one opens the door to the use of the wedding band, other types of jewelry are sure to follow. This principle has often been referred to as the "slippery slope". Once a person is on the slope, it is almost impossible to stop. For example, if the wedding band is allowed as a sign that one is married, how can we legitimately not allow the use of a high school class ring or some other ring that displays the wearers' membership in a select group? After all, these types of rings are

worn for the same reason that the wedding band is worn, which is to display to others one's loyalty to something. It is true that the wedding band is usually a plain gold ring while these other rings will likely have a stone set in them. However, as pointed out before, a wedding band is just as much jewelry as any other ring or similar adornment. Because the wedding band has no Scriptural basis, the only way we can say we will allow it but no other type of ring is by making an arbitrary rule based solely on man's reasoning.

A case in point is what has happened in many Mennonite churches where once no jewelry was allowed, but where now there is widespread use of all types of jewelry. It is the testimony of those who have observed jewelry being accepted in the church that, in a least some of these cases, the door was opened by the adoption of the wedding band. Using the reasoning that acceptance of the wedding band would give support to the principle of the permanence of marriage, its use was allowed, but other forms of jewelry were initially banned. It was not many years until the use of other jewelry began to creep in. In these same churches there is now a general acceptance of all kinds of jewelry, some of which would have been considered repugnant even in secular society not many years ago. Incidentally, in many of these same Mennonite churches where the wedding band has been accepted, the acceptance of divorce and remarriage has slowly but steadily followed. Although this at first seems contradictory, when we closely examine this trend we find that this is exactly what we can expect. We will next look at why this is true.

Defending Marriage God's Way

As we have already seen, the wedding band is man's idea of how to honor and preserve marriage. We have also seen that it has not been effective in bringing about that which it symbolizes, namely unending love. In fact, as the wedding band has grown in popularity (which should, in theory, result in a decrease in divorce rates), the popularity of divorce has grown also. In pondering the reason for this puzzling problem I have come to the conclusion that it is largely a result of the departure from Biblical principles.

We must remember first of all that marriage was instituted by

God at the creation of all things. Since marriage is an institution from God, it follows that we need to use God's principles to keep marriages intact. Therefore, when we use a man-made method to strengthen and preserve marriages, it should not surprise us if it does not work, especially when it conflicts with God's principles and commands.

We have an example of this in II Samuel 6 when David brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. In David's first attempt to move the ark, he used a new cart pulled by oxen. When the oxen shook the ark, Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark and was immediately struck dead. The problem was that the wrong mode of transport was used, making it seem necessary for Uzzah to touch the ark. This method had worked for the Philistines some years before when they returned the ark after they had captured it (I Samuel 6). But David and the priests should have known that God's method of transportation for the ark, given to them by Moses, was that it be carried on the shoulders of four priests. When David used this method he was able to successfully bring the ark to Jerusalem.

For the Christian, when a human idea conflicts with a Biblical principle it has the effect of turning its users from dependence on the principles of God to dependence on the ideas of men. One of these human ideas is that when a marriage doesn't work we can simply divorce and start over. Thus what we were seeking to preserve through wearing the wedding band becomes dispensable. This reliance on human ideas causes one to reject other Biblical principles as well. These could include, but are not limited to, the rejection of the headship veiling and cutting of hair for women, the acceptance of women in leadership, the adoption of immodest clothing, and the acceptance of sodomite relationships as an acceptable lifestyle. In this way of thinking if a Biblical principle doesn't make sense to us, we can simply reason our way around it.

So how would God have us to strengthen marriages? We need to start with Jesus' command in Matthew 19:6b: *What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.*

We must be committed to our marriages for life. Since God is the one who makes a man and woman one flesh, He is the only One who has the right to separate them through death. Divorce cannot be an option when both husband and wife are believers. If a

believer is divorced by an unbelieving spouse, the believer is to remain committed to that marriage by remaining unmarried and ready to take that spouse back if he/she repents. Nowhere in Scripture is there a command to wear anything to display this firm commitment.

The Christian is also to demonstrate his commitment to marriage by living in a Christ-like manner. Two references from Peter's writings will suffice to demonstrate this. I Peter 2:12 tells us,

Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.

The word "conversation" here means our whole way of life, not just how we talk. Peter was speaking primarily to Jews, who saw Gentiles as unbelievers. We as Gentiles who are now believers can also cause others to glorify God simply by the way we live; by our dress, our actions, and our speech.

I Peter 3:4 instructs women that their "adornment" should

...be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.

It is my observation that a Christian, whether man or woman, who behaves in a truly Christ-like manner, is soon recognized by unbelievers as different and worthy of respect. In our immoral culture this marked difference does more to show support for the permanence of marriage than a wedding band can ever do. Though most unbelievers likely do not understand why we live as we do, they do understand that it is because of a commitment to righteousness and purity, which they also understand to include commitment to one marriage partner for life.

One woman testifies that she has found the headship veiling to be of much greater value in protecting her from improper advances of immoral men than her wedding band. She had come to the conviction that she should wear a headship veil and thus wanted to become a member in a congregation which practiced it. The congregation she chose, however, did not allow the wedding band

among its members. Having worn her wedding band for about thirty years of marriage, she was reluctant to take hers off. In her work as a hospital nurse her frequent contact with men who were far from pure was a real concern for her. However, when she began wearing a veiling at work, she found the veiling to be a greater testimony to her chastity than the wedding band had ever been.

For women, the wearing of modest dresses also signals to unbelievers that the wearer is dedicated to righteous living, which is readily understood to include marital fidelity.

As for men, neat and modest attire coupled with discreet conduct does more to protect one from the improper advances of women than a wedding band. Women can readily tell by a man's eyes and actions whether or not he will respond to their advances. It is my experience that a man who freely speaks of his wife and children in a respectful manner will rarely be faced with advances from immoral women.

Would you rather be protected from improper advances by members of the opposite gender by wearing the wedding band, which identifies you with popular culture and its moral indecency, or by wearing godly clothing and having a godly lifestyle which signal that you have convictions that set you apart from popular culture? The answer to that question should be readily apparent to one who is truly committed to serving God and to being faithful to his/her spouse.

The Conclusion of the Matter

The question before us then is, "To whom are we going to look for principles in strengthening marriage?" Are we going to live by principles from the Bible or are we going to get our cues from our culture? We have seen that Scripture urges Christians not to wear gold or costly apparel nor to adorn themselves in any way which draws undue attention to their bodies. This would exclude any jewelry, which would, in turn, exclude wedding bands. The wearing of the wedding band opens the door to a very dangerous precedent. When we begin allowing man's ideas rather than God's principles to determine our decisions, we will inevitably drift further and further from the truth. Once we have begun adopting man's ideas for

preserving marriage in opposition to God's principles, it is a very small step to rejecting God's plan for the permanence of marriage. Thus the wedding band can actually destroy that which it was thought to preserve. Christians are wise in searching for ways to help one another to strengthen and preserve marriages, but attempting to do so by adopting the wedding band will not bring the results we desire. The words of an old hymn aptly sum up these thoughts:

*So let our lives and lips express
The holy Gospel we profess;
So let our walks and virtues shine,
To prove the doctrine all divine.⁶*

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