

Modesty in Apparel: Bringing a Believer's Attire into Subjection to the Word of God

Chapter 4: The Biblical Teaching on Jewelry

[Brian Schwertley](#)

We have made jewelry a separate topic for discussion for two reasons. First, there are certain Anabaptist “holiness” sects (e.g., the anti-trinitarian, heretical United Pentecostal Church) and even a few Reformed groups (e.g., the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland) that teach that Peter (1 Pet. 3:3) and Paul (1 Tim. 2:9) have declared an *absolute prohibition* regarding the wearing of jewelry in their epistles. For example, a self-appointed apologist for the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland writes, “...in the Apostolic era plainness and simplicity of attire was commanded as a general rule, and the wearing of ornamental jewelry was expressly forbidden.”¹ “[T]he Puritans of England and America, as well as the Church of Scotland (starting with Knox) prohibited jewelry.”² Given this interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9 and 1 Peter 3:3, we need to study the word of God in order to see if we should ban all ornamental jewelry. We either need to adopt the no jewelry position and apply it; or, we need to expose the absolute prohibition position as legalism, as nothing more than a human tradition imposed on the sacred text. In this monograph we will be doing the latter.

Second, there are so many passages in Scripture that contradict the absolute prohibition position that this topic needed its own chapter. Given the abundant biblical evidence, we will demonstrate beyond a shadow of doubt that Peter and Paul only condemn an excessive, worldly, ostentatious display of jewelry. The principle that “Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture” is one of the most important rules of sacred hermeneutics. It is wrong and irrational to interpret a passage in a manner that contradicts the clear teaching of *many other passages* in God’s Word. Those who do so (as we shall see) really have only two options. They can either twist the meaning of such passages in order to attempt to harmonize them with their presuppositions and fallacious understanding of 1 Timothy 2:9 and 1 Peter 3:3; and/or they can attempt to circumvent them by resorting to a dispensational understanding of the contrary sections of Scripture. In other words, God permitted jewelry in the Old Covenant era and even spoke favorably about it, but in the New Covenant era He condemns it as unethical and bans it. Such argumentation we will see is desperate, irrational and unscriptural. A brief survey of jewelry and its use in Scripture will prove this point.

Precious metals and jewels are first mentioned in the pre-fall description of Eden and the surrounding lands: “Now a river went out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it parted and because four riverheads. The name of the first is Pishon, it is the one which goes around the whole land of Havilah; where there is gold. And the gold of that land is good. Bdellium and the onyx stone are there” (Gen. 2:10-12). Note, that in this narrative Moses deliberately points out that the land of Havilah has supplies of precious metal and stones. He also points out that the gold is good (i.e. precious, excellent, fine). Moses points to the unique quality of gold and

¹ J. Parnell McCarter, “On Jewelry and Attire” in *Puritan News Weekly* (4, 06, 04), 11.

² *Ibid*, 5.

precious stones because he wanted his readers to understand that the land was blessed by God, valuable and magnificent. The pre-fall environment was one of generosity and splendor. If Adam had not fallen, the whole human race would have used precious metals and gemstones as a tool and resource for godly dominion. “God had provided man with all the ingredients for a rich life, but He had also made work mandatory to the legitimate gaining of wealth.”³

The first account of jewelry being used by godly people is in Genesis 24 when the holy patriarch Abraham sent his senior or chief servant (v. 2) into Mesopotamia (Hebrew, *Aram Naharaim*) to find a suitable wife for his son Isaac: “Then the servant took ten of his master’s camels and departed, for all his master’s goods were in his hand. And he arose and went to Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor...Now it was, when the camels had finished drinking, that the man took a golden nose ring weighing half a shekel, and two bracelets for her wrists weighing ten shekels of gold, and said, ‘Whose daughter are you?’...And she said, ‘The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor’s son, whom Milcah bore to him.’ So I put the nose ring on her nose and the bracelets on her wrists. And I bowed my head and worshipped the LORD, and blessed the LORD God of my master Abraham, who led me in the way of truth to take the daughter of my master’s brother for his son...Then the servant brought out jewelry of silver, jewelry of gold, and clothing, and gave them to Rebekah. He also gave precious things to her brother and to her mother” (vs. 10, 22, 47, 48, 53).

In this narrative Moses points out that the goods the servant took with him belonged to Abraham (“his master’s goods” v. 10). Certainly, the motive behind this whole endeavor was godly. Abraham was determined to make sure that under no circumstances was his son to marry a Canaanite woman. Abraham was a wealthy man and thus provided his servant with impressive bridal gifts. These beautiful gifts of jewelry were bestowed as a direct answer to prayer for an intervention of special providence (vs. 12-14, 47). After the jewelry was given to Rebekah, the servant immediately worships Jehovah for His special guidance in this important mission (v. 48) and asks for further guidance (v. 49). Leupold notes this servant’s devotion to God: “True, the outcome of the enterprise as granted to this man in answer to his prayer was as marvelous a display of divine providence, perhaps, as ever a mortal witnessed. Such mercy called for acknowledgment. But he that will make his acknowledgment as freely and as openly as does this man is both a devout and a courageous soul.”⁴

This narrative raises a number of questions regarding the jewelry issue. If the wearing of jewelry is in all cases worldly and sinful, then why does Abraham own jewelry and why does he give it as gifts to the people of God? If Abraham was ignorant regarding jewelry, then why didn’t God correct him? In addition, the narrative indicates that Abraham’s head servant was both wise and godly. Was he ignorant and guilty of sin also? For these and other reasons the vast majority of interpreters do not regard 1 Timothy 2:9 and 1 Peter 3:3 as teaching an absolute prohibition on jewelry. As the great Reformed Baptist scholar John Gill notes, “*Or gold, or pearls, or costly array*: not that the apostle forbids all use or wear of such things by proper persons, whose circumstances would admit of it, and upon proper occasions, and at proper times: certain it is, that ear-rings and bracelets of gold, and jewels set in silver and gold, and raiment, costly raiment, were sent by Abraham, and given to Rebekah, and wore by her, who was a woman professing godliness: so the church in Psal. xlv. 9, 13, 14. Though in figurative expressions...”⁵

³ Rousas John Rushdoony, *Genesis* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2002), 27.

⁴ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Columbus, OH: The Wartburg Press, 1942), 671.

⁵ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1809), 3:285.

If this were the only passage in the Bible that shows the godly owning, giving and wearing jewelry, then perhaps one could explain it away. But there are many passages that speak positively of jewelry. In Genesis 41:42 we read, “Then Pharaoh took his signet ring off his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand; and he clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck.” If wearing jewelry were a sin, would Joseph, who was probably the holiest man on earth at that time, accept and wear jewelry? In Job 42:11 after Job’s ordeal was over and he was vindicated by God the account notes, “Then all his brothers, all his sisters, and all those who had been his acquaintances before, came to him...and they consoled him and comforted him for all the adversity that the LORD had brought upon him. Each one gave him a piece of silver and each a ring of gold.” Job received gifts of money and jewelry from God’s people without complaint, rebuke or guilt. Like Abraham and Joseph before him, Job was known as an exceptionally godly man (“Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?” [Job 1:8]). It is rather obvious that Job did not consider jewelry immoral.

In the book of Proverbs Solomon, writing under divine inspiration, compares jewelry to a sanctified ear that listens to and heeds godly instruction: “Like an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold is a wise rebuke to an obedient ear” (Prov. 25:15). He also speaks positively of a lawful use of jewelry in Song of Solomon 1:10-11 when he describes his bride: “Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments of gold with studs of silver” (cf. 5:11-14; 7:1). If jewelry is sinful, then why did the Holy Spirit record this and place this poetry in the Bible as something positive? Would God use something immoral as a metaphor to describe the love of Christ for His church? Perish the thought!

God speaking through Isaiah described the gathering of God’s people unto Zion with the metaphor of a bride who binds ornaments upon herself for decoration: “As I live declares the LORD, ‘You will surely put on all of them as jewels and bind them on as a bride’” (49:18 NASB). In Isaiah 61:10 the Holy Spirit places beautiful poetic expressions of joy for the blessings of salvation on the lips of the true Israel, the elect, the church of God: “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” Once again, we ask the question, would Jehovah who is righteous and holy use something wrong, immoral or sinful as a metaphor to describe something right, good and holy? Does it make sense to essentially argue that the Bible teaches two completely contradictory positions on jewelry? Must we impose the absurd notion that one must interpret the poetic passages above as saying: “Look church how much Jesus Christ loves you. He is going to make you beautiful by adorning you with gold and silver and placing jewelry around your neck. By the way, just make sure you do not put any jewelry on your wife because it’s a sin and I hate it. It is wicked, so avoid it completely!”

Such a statement is completely absurd and that is the point. If you believe that wearing jewelry is a sin, then you should think about the logical absurdity of your position next time you read Ezekiel 16:8-14:

“When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time *was* the time of love; so I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine,” says the Lord GOD. “Then I washed you in water; yes, I thoroughly washed off your blood, and I anointed you with oil. I clothed you in embroidered cloth and gave you sandals of badger skin; I clothed you with fine linen and covered you with silk. I adorned you with ornaments, put bracelets on your wrists, and a chain

on your neck. And I put a jewel in your nose, earrings in your ears, and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing *was of* fine linen, silk, and embroidered cloth. You ate *pastry of* fine flour, honey, and oil. You were exceedingly beautiful, and succeeded to royalty. Your fame went out among the nations because of your beauty, for it *was* perfect through My splendor which I had bestowed on you,” says the Lord GOD.

What is particularly illuminating about this chapter of Ezekiel is how poetic metaphor shifts over to the stark reality of Israel’s betrayal of God through idolatry in the following verses:

“But you trusted in your own beauty, played the harlot because of your fame, and poured out your harlotry on everyone passing by who *would have* it. You took some of your garments and adorned multicolored high places for yourself, and played the harlot on them. *Such* things should not happen, nor be. You have also taken your beautiful jewelry from My gold and My silver, which I had given you, and made for yourself male images and played the harlot with them. You took your embroidered garments and covered them, and you set My oil and My incense before them. Also My food which I gave you—the pastry of fine flour, oil, and honey *which* I fed you—you set it before them as sweet incense; and *so* it was,” says the Lord GOD (vs. 15-19).

These verses are intended to be taken literally, not figuratively. Note that Jehovah has absolutely no problem with the fact that the Jews took God’s gold and silver and made themselves beautiful jewelry. If making or wearing jewelry were a sin, this would be a perfect place for God to express His displeasure with such behavior. But, instead, Jehovah *only condemns* the Jews for turning their jewelry into idols.

The Old Testament teaching on gold, silver, gemstones and jewelry is consistent and unambiguous. Precious metals and gemstones are a gift from God that man is to use in his task of godly dominion. Jewelry is lawful as ornamentation to express honor and glory (e.g., Ex. 41:42; Job 42:11; Esther 8:15) as well as love and beauty (e.g., Song 1:10-11; Isa. 49:18; 61:10; Ezek. 16:8-14, 17; etc.). There are no prohibitions against wearing jewelry in the moral law and there are no historical examples of God’s displeasure with jewelry except when it is associated with or used in idolatry (e.g., Gen. 35:2-4; Ex. 32:2-4) and/or ritual prostitution and fornication (e.g., Hos. 2:12). This reality has forced those who advocate a total prohibition of jewelry to resort to a forced, unnatural reading of such passages and to absurd reasoning.

Excurses on the Appeal to John Calvin against the Use of Jewelry

The papers against all uses of jewelry by Christian women on the internet are very short on exegesis and instead rely almost exclusively on selective quotes from church history, especially John Calvin. For this reason, we will take a moment to analyze one of Calvin’s lengthiest anti-jewelry remarks from his commentary on Genesis 24:22:

His adorning the damsel with precious ornaments is a token of his confidence. For since it is evident by many proofs that he was an honest and careful servant, he would not throw away without discretion the treasures of his master. He knows, therefore, that these gifts will not be ill-bestowed; or, at least, relying on the goodness of God, he gives them, in faith, as an earnest of future marriage. But it may be asked, Whether God approves ornaments of this kind, which pertain not so much to neatness as to pomp? *I answer, that the things related in Scripture are*

not always proper to be imitated. Whatever the Lord commands in general terms is to be accounted as an inflexible rule of conduct; but to rely on particular examples is not only dangerous, but even foolish and absurd. Now we know how highly displeasing to God is not only pomp and ambition in adorning the body, but all kind of luxury. In order to free the heart from inward cupidity, he condemns that immoderate and superfluous splendor, which contains within itself many allurements to vice. Where, indeed, is pure sincerity of heart found under splendid ornaments? Certainly all acknowledge this virtue to be rare. *It is not, however, for us expressly to forbid every kind of ornament; yet because whatever exceeds the frugal use of such things is tarnished with some degree of vanity; and more especially, because the cupidity of women is, on this point, insatiable; not only must moderation, but even abstinence, be cultivated as far as possible.* Further, ambition silently creeps in, so that the somewhat excessive adorning of the person soon breaks out into disorder. With respect to the earrings and bracelets of Rebekah, as I do not doubt that they were those in use among the rich, so the uprightness of the age allowed them to be sparingly and frugally used; and *yet I do not excuse the fault.* This example, however, neither helps us, nor alleviates our guilt, if, by such means, we excite and continually inflame those depraved lusts which, even when all incentives are removed, it is excessively difficult to restrain. The women who desire to shine in gold, seek in Rebekah a pretext for their corruption. Why, therefore, do they not, in like manner, conform to the same austere kind of life and rustic labor to which she applied herself? *But, as I have just said, they are deceived who imagine that the examples of the saints can sanction them in opposition to the common law of God.)*⁶

While we have the utmost respect for John Calvin and regard him as perhaps the greatest Christian after Augustine, this quote reveals his fallibility and bias on this issue. Note the following reasons: First, Calvin asserts that “the things related in Scripture are not always proper to be imitated.” This is a true statement in that many immoral and devious acts of wicked men and women and even backslidden believers are recorded in the Bible. The question, however, with regard to this passage and others like it (e.g., Gen. 41:42; Job 42:11; Esther 8:15), is whether there is anything within the narrow or broader context to indicate that Abraham’s actions were immoral. The answer is certainly not. In addition, Calvin would have to explain why God repeatedly uses the imagery of the gift of jewelry to a bride to describe His covenant love and relationship to His church. While one could accept the *remote* possibility that Abraham, his servant, Rebekah, Joseph, Job and Mordecai were all ignorant and mistaken in their use of jewelry, one cannot accept the idea that God would use an immoral, unlawful practice as a metaphor for His love of the church. Such an idea reveals the utter bankruptcy and absurdity of the absolute prohibitionist position.

Second, Calvin appeals to a sound principle of interpretation: “Whatever the Lord commands in general terms [i.e. a divine imperative; e.g., “Thou shalt not...”] is to be accounted as an inflexible rule of conduct; but to rely on particular examples [that contradict the divine commandment] is not only dangerous, but even foolish and absurd.” While this is a good and true statement, there is no evidence that it applies to Genesis 24:22. This point can be inferred from the following considerations. (1) The historical examples regarding jewelry discussed above are not given in neutral contexts as an objective historian might record the actions in a battle. Instead, in passage after passage the giving or receiving or wearing of jewelry is presented in a positive light by the inspired author. It is for this reason that attempts to circumvent or dismiss them are “foolish and absurd.” (2) The only passages that Calvin could appeal to as

⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 2:20-21, emphasis added.

possible “commands in general terms” would be 1 Timothy 2:9 and 1 Peter 3:3. The better articles in favor of an absolute prohibition follow the same approach. They point out the hermeneutical principle that clear passages must be used to interpret the less clear. (With this we heartily agree.) Then, they assert that 1 Timothy 2:9 and 1 Peter 3:3 are “the most clear and explicit passages” on this topic. Consequently, they argue that all other passages in Scripture must be interpreted in light of and harmonized with these “explicit prohibitions.” From a logical standpoint this argument sounds pretty good. But, it suffers from a number of insurmountable problems and must be rejected. For one, it assumes that the historical examples are “less clear.” When God Himself speaks favorably about jewelry as an ornament for His bride, who is clothed with the perfect righteousness of Christ, how can we consider this unclear? It is only unclear to those who *assume* it cannot mean what it so plainly implies.

Moreover, contrary to what the absolute prohibitionist may say, 1 Peter 3:3 and 1 Timothy 2:9 do not support their position. A careful study of these passages proves that Peter and Paul are condemning excess, while advocating what ought to be most important to every Christian woman or wife. This can be demonstrated from the following exegetical considerations. First, the examples cited by the apostles are examples of *excess* or *ostentatious* display. Paul says, “not with braided hair or gold or pearls”; while Peter writes, “arranging the hair, wearing gold.” To what does this refer? Is Paul arguing that braided hair is sinful? Are pigtailed of the devil? Is Peter telling women that any hair styling merits church discipline? No, not at all! They are referring to a specific Greco-Roman practice of their own day that was exceptionally expensive, showy, ostentatious and even gaudy. Women would have their hair braided with gold and pearls and even jewels intertwined in the braids. “The wealthy women braided their hair by using it to hold costly emeralds, pearls, and gold ornaments. It was a display of wealth. It was done to impress.”⁷ As J. N. D. Kelly notes, “The elaboration in hair-styles, make-up, dress and personal jewelry in the 1st and 2nd cents. is eloquently attested by the literature and art of the period.... Later writers (e.g., Clement Alex., *Paed.* iii.11.66; Tertullian, *De orat.* xx.; *De cultu fem.* i.6; 7-13; Cyprian, *De hab. Virg.* viii) take these texts literally as wholesale ban on feminine finery, but the real object of the apostolic authors was a constructive one, to inculcate a proper sense of values.”⁸

“It is the excess and sensuality that the items connote that Paul forbids (cf. Jas. 5:1-6), not braids, gold, pearls, or even costly garments in and of themselves. This is borne out by the fact that the Christian community of the NT is quite willing to use these terms with positive connotations (gold: Mt. 2:11; 1 Cor. 3:12; Rev. 3:18; 21:18ff.; pearls: Mt. 7:6; 13:45, 46; Rev.

⁷ Gordon H. Clark, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1983), 43.

⁸ J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 1969), 129. William Hendriksen comments on the styles of that day are informative. He writes, “But what about these *braids* which were popular in the world of Paul’s day? No expense was spared to make them dazzling. They actually sparkled. The braids were fastened by jeweled tortoise-shell combs, or by pins of ivory or silver. Or the pins were of bronze with jeweled heads, the more varied and expensive the better. The pin-heads often consisted of miniature images (an animal, a human hand, an idol, the female figure, etc.). *Braids*, in those days, often represented *fortunes*. They were articles of luxury! The Christian woman is warned not to indulge in such extravagance.

Similarly, a woman who is a believer must not try to make herself conspicuous by a vain display of ornaments of *gold*. Also, she will not yearn for *pearls*, obtained (at that time) from the Persian Gulf or from the Indian Ocean. These were often fabulously priced and thus way beyond the purchasing power of the average church-member. In order to obtain a pearl of great value a merchant might have to sell all his possessions (Matt. 13:46). Yet someone who was living in Paul’s day said, “I have seen Lollia Paulina [wife of emperor Caligula] covered with emeralds and pearls gleaming all over her head, hair, ears, neck, and fingers, to the value of over a million dollars” (*Thessalonians, Timothy and Titus* [Grand Rapids; Baker, (1955, 57) 1979], 107).

21:21; a bride adorned [keko-smemenen]: Rev. 21 2), as is the OT (e.g., the Song of Solomon).”⁹ William Hendriksen concurs, “The very combination of the word ‘braids’ with ‘and gold or pearls or expensive clothing’” should have sufficed to inform the reader that the apostle is thinking of the sin of extravagance in outward adornment. As to these ‘braids’ the sense is not that under any and all circumstances women throughout all future generations are here forbidden to wear their hair braided. Not at all.”¹⁰ Gordon Clark’s analysis of 1 Peter 3:3 is also helpful:

If the verse were an absolute prohibition against plaiting the hair and wearing a piece of gold, it would also be an absolute prohibition of wearing clothes. The three items, hair, jewelry, and clothes are all equal parts of the same grammatical construction. What is said of any one is equally said of the other two.... Some women are attractive only in the sense that they attract attention. Their adornment is external. The Christian woman depends on an inward spiritual attractiveness. Let her plait her hair, let her wear gold jewelry...and of course let her wear clothes [all modestly or in moderation of course]; but let her not depend on these for her

⁹ George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 136.

¹⁰ William Hendriksen, *Thessalonians, Timothy and Titus*, 107. The idea that the absolute prohibitionist position is the position of the Puritans and early Presbyterians is not true. The Presbyterian minister Alexander Nisbet (c. 1623-1669) whose commentary was first published in 1658 writes, “Although the Lord allows persons who are in eminency above others to have ornaments beyond necessity, Isa. 22:20, 21, 22, and others to have more than ordinary at some special occasions, Gen. 24:30, and all of his people to provide for things honest in the sight of all men, Rom. 12:17, yet when any professor of religion becomes excessive in the use of his liberty in these things, he will be so far from commending religion to others thereby that his practice will rather be a hindrance to others to fall in love with it, who may or will readily take occasion thence to think that Christians have no better things to take them up than these whereupon they waste their time, pain and means; for, from this evil the Apostle here dissuades Christian women as they would gain their heathen husbands; importing that their vanity and excess in the matter of their apparel would rather hinder them than gain them to fall in love with Christianity” (*1&2 Peter* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, (1658) 1982], 119-120). The 17th century Presbyterian Matthew Poole also rejected the absolute prohibitionist position. He writes, “...ornaments of gold, or pearls, or costly array. The Apostle commandeth not these ornaments where they are suited to the quality of women, and ask not too much time to put on, and in order; but *where they are too excessive* with respect to the purse of those who wear them, or take up more time to be spent in putting them on than is fit to be spent, especially on the Sabbath day, or where they are put on out of pride, or to make a vain show...” (*Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 3:778; emphasis added). He adds in his commentary on 1 Peter 3:3, “The apostle doth not absolutely condemn all kind of ornaments, or rich attire, which we find used sometimes by the godly themselves in the Scripture, Gen. xxiv.22, 30; Esth. v.1 compared with Psal. xlv.9, 13, where the spiritual ornaments of Christ’s spouse are set forth by terms taken from the external ornaments of Solomon’s wife; and Ezek. xvi.12, these things are spoken of as God’s gifts. But he taxeth all vanity, levity, immoderate sumptuousness or luxury in apparel, and bodily ornaments in women (or men) whatsoever is above their place or condition in the world, or above their estate and ability...” (Ibid, 3:908). See also John Gill, *Exposition of the New Testament*, 3:285, 555. Even Martin Luther (who, like Calvin, was strongly influenced by the negative view of jewelry among the church fathers) did not adopt an absolute prohibitionist position. He writes, “This treasure, which is within us, should be possessed not only by the wife, but also by the husband. Possibly one may ask whether that which Peter here says of ornaments is commanded or not. We read of Esther, Esther 2:12, that she wore a golden crown and precious ornaments, decking herself as a queen. So also of Judith, Judith 10:3f. But in the context it is recorded, that she despised the ornament and wore it from necessity, Esther 14:16, Vulgate on Esther 3:11. Hence we say a wife should be so disposed as not to care for this adorning; yet, inasmuch as people convinced on the subject of ornaments, cease not to use them, because of their habit and nature; therefore a Christian wife should despise them. *But if the husband require them, or there is a reasonable cause for her to adorn herself, it may be done.* But she should be adorned, as Peter here says, be inwardly attired in a meek and quiet spirit. You are beautifully enough adorned when you are adorned for your husband” (*Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, (1902) 1982], 136; emphasis added). The neoplatonism and asceticism of the church fathers shines through in this quote. While Luther cannot deny that the Scriptures allow women to wear jewelry under certain circumstances, they “should despise them.”

personality [or attractiveness].... The adornment of the Christian woman is to come from the hidden personality of the heart—an adornment that never goes out of style and that becomes more and more attractive as the years pass by.¹¹

This is the essence of Peter and Paul’s thought.

Second, the examples set forth (“in former times, the holy women who trusted in God”), in particular Sarah, essentially renders the absolute prohibitionist view impossible. Sarah was the wife of Abraham who owned jewelry and gave it as a pledge or wedding gift to Rebekah. Consequently, the point of the passage is not to ban all jewelry, but to emphasize godliness or spiritual beauty over outward adornments. The hidden, incorruptible beauty is far more important than outward adornments which are passing away. Even the most beautiful woman in the whole world must grow old and die. As the wife of rich Abraham, Sarah probably owned jewelry like Rebekah, but her priority in life was not on external, perishable things but rather on serving her husband through godly submission. Moreover, if jewelry was lawful in the Old Covenant era, but was now made unlawful for New Covenant believers, why would Peter appeal to an Old Covenant example of a family that owned jewelry and gave it to a godly woman as a gift? It ought to be obvious to anyone (not governed by presupposition or wedded to human traditions), that the dispensational attempt to circumvent the Old Testament passages that speak positively of the use of jewelry for God’s people is untenable.

The third argument in Calvin’s quote is essentially pragmatic and legalistic. After Calvin essentially admits that we cannot impose a full prohibition (“It is not, however, for us expressly to forbid every kind of ornament.” If wearing jewelry is a sin then we should and must “expressly...forbid every kind of ornament.”), he argues that “because whatever exceeds the frugal use of such things [This also appears to be an admission that a “frugal” or moderate use of jewelry is lawful] is tarnished with some degree of vanity; and more especially because the cupidity [i.e. carnal desire] of women is, on this point, insatiable; not only must moderation, but even abstinence, be cultivated as far as possible.” If Calvin believed that Peter and Paul taught an absolute prohibition, moderation would not even be an option. Believers cannot argue for a moderate practice of something sinful. His argument in favor of complete abstinence assumes essentially that with regard to this issue, abstinence is the best way to proceed. This assertion is fallacious. Sarah, Rebekah and Esther did not exhibit an insatiable desire for jewelry and adornments.¹²

¹¹ Gordon H. Clark, *New Heavens, New Earth: A Commentary on First and Second Peter* (Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1967, 72), 112, 113.

¹² In the Westminster Standards “rich apparel” and “ornaments” (i.e. jewelry) are items listed as “lawful,” that are to be abstained from during public solemn fasting. In the *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* we read, “When some great and notable judgments are either inflicted upon a people, or apparently imminent, or by some extraordinary provocations notoriously deserved; as also when some special blessing is to be sought and obtained, publick solemn fasting (which is to continue the whole day) is a duty that God expecteth from that nation or people. A religious fast requires total abstinence, not only from all food, (unless bodily weakness do manifestly disable from holding out till the fast be ended, in which case somewhat may be taken, yet very sparingly, to support nature, when ready to faint,) but also from all worldly labour, discourses, and thoughts, and from all bodily delights, and such like, (although at other times lawful) rich apparel, ornaments, and such like, during the fast; and much more from whatever is in the nature or use scandalous and offensive, as gaudish attire, lascivious habits and gestures, and other vanities of either sex; which we; recommend to all ministers, in their places, diligently and zealously to reprove, as at other times, so especially at a fast, without respect of persons, as there shall be occasion” (“Concerning Publick Solemn Fasting,” emphasis added). Note that the directory makes a distinction between *lawful things* that are to be avoided during fasting and things which are always wrong, “scandalous or offensive.” The Westminster Standards make a clear distinction between “rich apparel,” “ornaments” and “gaudish attire, lascivious habits” and “other

Those who claim that Calvin was a strict prohibitionist go too far anyway, for he denies that Paul and Peter forbid all ornamentation in his commentaries on these passages. Concerning 1 Timothy 2:9 he writes,

He intended to embrace the opportunity of correcting a vice to which women are almost always prone, and which perhaps at Ephesus, being a city of vast wealth and extensive merchandise, especially abounded. That vice is — *excessive eagerness and desire to be richly dressed*. He wishes therefore that their dress should be regulated by modesty and sobriety; for *luxury and immoderate expense* arise from a desire to make a display either for the sake of pride or of departure from chastity. And *hence we ought to derive the rule of moderation*; for, since dress is an indifferent matter, (as all outward matters are,) *it is difficult to assign a fixed limit*, how far we ought to go.... It would be great baseness to deny the appropriateness of modesty as the peculiar and constant ornament of virtuous and chaste women, or the duty of all to observe moderation. Whatever is opposed to these virtues it will be in vain to excuse. He expressly censures certain kinds of superfluity, such as curled hair, jewels, and golden rings; *not that the use of gold or of jewels is expressly forbidden, but that, wherever they are prominently displayed*, these things commonly draw along with them the other evils which I have mentioned, and arise from ambition or from want of chastity as their source.¹³

Note that, following Paul, Calvin speaks of “excessive eagerness,” “luxury,” “immoderate expense,” “the rule of moderation.” He then goes on to say that gold and jewels are only forbidden when “prominently displayed.” The absolute prohibitionist argues that Calvin is merely saying that such items can *only* be used for things like “currency” or “table instruments.” That view is a remote possibility if one assumes that Calvin in mid-sentence switches to a different unrelated topic (currency, tableware, etc.). Moreover, such a view renders the words “excessive,” “moderation,” “immoderate expense,” “certain kinds of superfluity,” “difficult...fixed limit,” “prominently displayed” as superfluous. Total abstinence and moderation are two completely different things.

In any case, where Calvin’s teaching in 1 Timothy 2:9 may be ambiguous, his comments on 1 Peter 3:3 are not. He writes,

The other part of the exhortation is, that wives are to adorn themselves *sparingly and modestly*: for we know that they are in this respect much more curious and ambitious than they ought to be. Then Peter does not without cause seek to correct in them this vanity. And though he reproves *generally sumptuous or costly adorning*, yet he points out some things in particular, — that they were not artificially to curl or wreath their hair, as it was usually done by crimping-pins, or otherwise to form it according to the fashion; nor were they to set gold around their head: for these are the things in which excesses especially appear.

It may be now asked, whether the Apostle wholly condemns the use of gold in adorning the body. Were any one to urge these words, it may be said, that he prohibits precious garments no less than gold; for he immediately adds, *the putting on of apparel*, or, of clothes. But it would be an immoderate strictness wholly to forbid neatness and elegance in clothing. If the material is said to be too sumptuous, the Lord has created it; and we know that skill in art has proceeded from him. *Then Peter did not intend to condemn every sort of ornament, but the evil of vanity,*

vanities,” etc. What this means is that denominations which forbid rich apparel and ornaments (i.e. jewelry) on *all occasions* and not only during fasting are violating the Westminster Standards.

¹³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 65-66; emphasis added.

to which women are subject. Two things are to be regarded in clothing, usefulness and decency; and what decency requires is moderation and modesty. Were, then, a woman to go forth with her hair wantonly curled and decked, and make an extravagant display, her vanity could not be excused. They who object and say, that to clothe one's-self in this or that manner is an indifferent thing, in which all are free to do as they please, may be easily confuted; for *excessive elegance* and *superfluous display*, in short, *all excesses*, arise from a corrupted mind. Besides, ambition, pride, affectation of display, and all things of this kind, are not indifferent things. Therefore they whose minds are purified from all vanity, will duly order all things, so as not to exceed moderation.¹⁴

Other New Testament Passages

The evidence from the Old Testament that the saints had a positive view of the modest use of jewelry and thus wore it, gave it as gifts, accepted it as gifts and adorned their brides with it, is so overwhelming that some total prohibitionist advocates argue that wearing jewelry was permitted under the Old Covenant administration, but in the New Covenant era is now unlawful. Such dispensational arguments not only contradict a proper understanding of 1 Timothy 2:9 and 1 Peter 3:3, but other New Testament passages as well.

Luke 15:22

Jesus Himself spoke positively about a modest use of jewelry in the parable of the lost son: “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.’” And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring out the best robe and put *it* on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on *his* feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill *it*, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Lk. 15:17-24).

The absolute prohibitionist argues against the use of this passage by saying, “that Christ is not necessarily commending to Christians the wearing of rings or festive dancing, simply because they are elements present in this parable. They are not there because they are necessarily commended, but because they are commonly present in human society.... We best take care not to allow such elements in a parable to serve as justification for behavior prohibited elsewhere in Scripture.”¹⁵ Aside from the fact that jewelry is not prohibited anywhere in the Bible, there are a number of serious problems with this argument.

First, our Lord is *not* making an illustration from society in general, but from the Jewish society of His day. The son goes into a foreign land (“journeyed to a far country,” v. 13), and

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 96-97; emphasis added. Calvin’s commentary on the epistles of Peter was dedicated in January 1551 while 1 Timothy was dedicated in July 1556. Therefore, when Calvin condemns the wearing of gold or jewels “prominently displayed” in 1 Timothy, it is likely that he had in mind what he condemns in his work on 1 Peter (e.g., gold around the head, etc.) and not every kind of jewelry.

¹⁵ J. Parnell McCarter, *On Jewelry*, 14.

becomes so destitute he ends up working among swine (an unclean animal) and even desires to eat the pig's food. This aspect of the parable is designed to show just how low the prodigal son had fallen. The fact that Jewish society is in view, indicates that Jesus did not have a problem placing a nice robe and a ring in the possession of an honorable wealthy Jew.

Second, if godly Jews regarded jewelry as inappropriate or sinful in any way, then the parable would not have conveyed the proper concept of blessing intended and would not have been well received by the Jewish audience. Would a wealthy, godly Jew honor his son by causing him to sin through the wearing of jewelry? Obviously, if Jesus regarded the placing of a ring on the finger as immodest or immoral in any way, then He would have chosen a more appropriate illustration, one that would not have offended His Jewish audience.

Third, the vast majority of commentators view this parable as a striking illustration of the Savior's love towards sinners. The repentant son illustrates a man turning to God with true faith and repentance. Some even view the robe as representative of the imputed righteousness of Christ.¹⁶ All of this raises an important question. Could a parable that is designed to teach us about the amazing grace and mercy of God; who imputes the righteousness of His dear Son to believing sinners, use something immoral or sinful to represent salvation? Clearly, the answer to this question is: no, certainly not! The Jews did not hold an absolute prohibitionist position, but rather viewed the ring in this context as a mark of honor, confidence, distinction and blessing (cf. Gen. 41:42; Esther 8:2; Jas. 2:2). Once again, the total prohibitionist must twist Scripture and abandon common sense in order to hold to his legalistic presuppositions.

James 2:1-4

Another passage that contradicts the absolute prohibitionist position is James 2:1-4:

My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, *the Lord* of glory, with partiality. For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, "You sit here in a good place," and say to the poor man, "You stand there," or, "Sit here at my footstool," have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

James mentions two different men who came into a Christian assembly or meeting. The word assembly is *synagogue* which to Jews usually refers to a public religious service. Since the purpose of this meeting is not specified, some speculate that James has in mind some kind of official judicial gathering (e.g., see Thomas Manton). The majority of commentators believe that it probably refers to a worship service. The author does not specify whether the two men are

¹⁶ This common interpretation is eloquently set forth by R. C. H. Lenski: "'The first' means the finest, the one that ranks first. Thus the sinner 'puts on Christ,' Gal. 3:27. 'He hath clothed me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels,' Isa. 61:10. This is the 'wedding garment,' Matt. 22:11, which signifies the imputation to the sinner of the merits and the righteousness of Christ.

The ring is another mark of sonship. The same truth in another form is presented in Hosea 2:19, 20: 'I will betroth thee unto me forever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness; and thou shalt know the Lord.' Slaves went barefoot, not so a son. In God's pardoning reception of the sinner he gives him shoes to honor him as a son and heir but also in the confidence that henceforth he will walk worthily as a son" (*The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel* [Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg [1946] 1961], 816.

professing Christians or simply visitors or proselytes. In either case, it does not matter because James' focus is on how believers should react to men of different social status in the assembly. The contrast is between a wealthy man who is given special attention and a poverty stricken man who is treated in a degrading manner. "In the setting of the church that James depicts, the rich man receives a warm welcome and is ushered to a good seat, perhaps somewhat elevated. The poor man can either stand in the back section of the building or sit cross-legged on the floor. In fact, the text says, 'Sit down by my footstool.'"¹⁷ Although the passage says nothing positive or negative regarding the wealthy man's jewelry, it clearly implies that professing Christians living during the apostolic era did not believe that a modest use of jewelry (e.g., a gold ring) was sinful. If they did, then why would they show favoritism to someone who was explicitly violating Scripture? Would the United Pentecostal Church or the Free Presbyterian Church be tempted to place a man wearing jewelry on a pedestal? Would people who regarded jewelry as sinful, glorify or show partiality to a person in sin? If James believed that *all uses* of jewelry were sinful and immodest, would he place a man wearing jewelry in a story designed to teach that we must all accept each other equally on the basis of faith in Christ, not social status? He would not. Total prohibitionists cannot circumvent this obvious fact.

Revelation 21:9-21

The Old Testament prophetic imagery of a loving husband who adorns his bride, as a symbol of God's covenant love toward His church, continues into the New Testament era in Revelation 21:9-21:

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, "Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. Her light *was* like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are *the names* of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west. Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And he who talked with me had a gold reed to measure the city, its gates, and its wall. The city is laid out as a square; its length is as great as its breadth. And he measured the city with the reed: twelve thousand furlongs. Its length, breadth, and height are equal. Then he measured its wall: one hundred *and* forty-four cubits, *according* to the measure of a man, that is, of an angel. The construction of its wall was *of* jasper; and the city *was* pure gold, like clear glass. The foundations of the wall of the city *were* adorned with all kinds of precious stones: the first foundation *was* jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth sardius, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates *were* twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city *was* pure gold, like transparent glass.

In this vision John is shown "the bride, the Lamb's wife" (v. 9). This means that "this great city, the holy Jerusalem" (v. 10) which descends out of heaven is the church of Christ. In 12:1 we had

¹⁷ Simon J. Kistemaker, *James and I-III John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 74.

a description of the Old Covenant church as a woman wearing a crown with twelve stars. In this description of the bride-city, the church is crowned with a double twelve: the patriarchs and the apostles. The whole people of God from both administrations; from all of human history are found within its walls. The city is described in terms of gold and jewelry to indicate the perfect consummation of the original Edenic order, the tremendous wealth and glory of the New Jerusalem and the incredible blessings of salvation. It also is designed to teach us the great value that those clothed with the righteousness of Christ have in God's sight.

This description is likely an allusion in part to Isaiah's prophecy of the coming redemption of God's people in terms of a city adorned with jewels: "Oh you afflicted one, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold, I will lay your stones with colorful gems, and lay your foundations with sapphires. I will make your pinnacles of rubies, your gates of crystal, and all your walls of precious stones" (54:11-12). "In context, the LORD Almighty is the husband who takes back his wife with deep compassion and then lavishes upon her sparkling jewels and precious stones...."¹⁸

All of this symbolic imagery raises a few questions. Does God use something (gold, jewels, pearls) as an adornment for His bride that He regards as immoral and sinful? Does Jehovah appeal to something that displeases His holy character in order to portray the bride-city as something far more beautiful to the eye than anything that man has ever been able to create? Would it be appropriate to portray the wonders of God's grace with something explicitly forbidden to God's own people? Does it make sense that the city which will not have anything in "it that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie" (Rev. 21:27) is itself adorned with something that defiles? These are questions that the absolute prohibitionist cannot adequately answer.

Obviously, this passage, which mirrors the Old Testament prophetic passages that speak of God's great love for His bride—the true church, implies a lawful, proper use of jewelry. As David Chilton points out, "We may note here that the value which men have always placed on gold and precious stones derives from the prior value which God has imputed to it. God has built into us a desire for gems, but His Word makes it clear that wealth is to be gained as a by-product of the kingdom of God, and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33). The Harlot was adorned with jewels, and she perished with them; the Bride is adorned with jewels because of her union with the Bridegroom. It is God who gives the power to get wealth, for His glory (Deut. 8:18); when we turn our God-given wealth into an idol, he takes it away from us and stores it up for the righteous, who use it for God's Kingdom and are generous to the poor (Job 27:16-17; Prov. 13:22; 28:8; Eccl. 2:26)."¹⁹ We cannot avoid the conclusion that a modest, non-ostentatious use of jewelry is lawful according to the Word of God.

Excursus on Common Proof Texts Used Against Jewelry

In order to fairly represent the anti-jewelry position we will briefly consider other common proof texts against the use of jewelry. An objective look at these passages will demonstrate that the absolute prohibitionist advocates are misusing Scripture and grasping after straw.

¹⁸ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 570.

¹⁹ David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 559-560.

Genesis 35:1-4

Then God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau your brother.” And Jacob said to his household and to all who *were* with him, “Put away the foreign gods that *are* among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments. Then let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me in the way which I have gone.” So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods which *were* in their hands, and the earrings which *were* in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree which *was* by Shechem.

Chapter 35 begins with God ordering Jacob to go up to Bethel. This command is rooted in Jacob’s previous vow (28:20-22); Jehovah now reminds him to fulfill it (note, the covenant promises to Abraham are reiterated in 35:9-13). Before he goes, however, he orders his family (including servants) to sanctify themselves in preparation for the solemn worship that will occur when they arrive at their destination. They are ordered to put away the foreign gods, purify or wash themselves and change their clothes. In verse 4 we are informed that the household handed over their gods and earrings; and these are disposed of by hiding them under a terebinth tree. This is considered proof that earrings have no place on the ears of God’s people.

This passage raises a good question. Did Jacob dispose of the earrings because God regarded jewelry as inappropriate and worldly or because these earrings were associated in some way with pagan idolatry? Given the context, it is obvious that the earrings were buried because of their connection to heathen superstitions. Note that there is no command, “to put away your jewelry, especially earrings.” The earrings were connected in some manner to the foreign gods. Therefore, to be faithful to the order to put away false gods, they also put away the trinkets or signs of superstition.

This is the interpretation of every reputable commentator. For example Calvin writes, “The earrings were doubtless badges of superstition; as at this day innumerable trifles are seen in the Papacy, by which impiety displays itself.”²⁰ Matthew Poole concurs, “Either because they had been abused to idolatry and superstition at Shechem, or elsewhere, and therefore were to be destroyed according to God’s command...the Scripture seems to insinuate, and other writers expressly affirm, that divers heathen people did wear earrings for the honor of their idols, and with the representations or ensigns of their idols engraven upon them. See Judg. Viii.24.”²¹ Matthew Henry notes, Jacob’s “family surrendered all they had that was idolatrous or superstitious.”²² Paul E. Kretzman says, “Jacob’s command was so strict that his wives and his servants readily gave up not only the images, the strange gods which they had retained until now, but also their earrings, which were used as amulets and for other superstitious purposes.”²³ Robert Jamieson points out that the earrings handed over “are universally worn in the East, and then as now [are] connected with incantation and idolatry. Some of these earrings, which are used as talismans or amulets, have figures and mystic characters engraven upon them (cf. Hos. 11.13).”²⁴ John Gill makes an excellent observation when he writes, “Not the earrings that

²⁰ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 2:237.

²¹ Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*, 1:80.

²² Matthew Henry, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1:205.

²³ Paul E. Kretzman, *Popular Commentary on the Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1923), 1:80.

²⁴ Robert Jamieson, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical on the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 1:60.

women wore in common, such as Abraham's servant gave to Rebekah, and which Jacob's wives might wear, for such were not unlawful, but either which were worn in the ears of the strange gods or idols; for such used, it seems, according to some writers, to be decorated and ornamented after that manner; or rather in the ears of the idolaters themselves, worn by them in a superstitious way, having the images of these idols on them."²⁵ H. C. Leupold notes that "earrings...must have served as amulets and tokens of some idolatrous practices."²⁶ C. F. Keil concurs when he says, "The earrings were worn as amulets and charms."²⁷ Derek Kidner connects the destruction of the earrings with "the renunciation of magic (the earrings were evidently charms; cf. perhaps Ho. 2:13)."²⁸ Gerhard von Rad agrees when he notes that the pilgrimage from Shechem to Bethel must begin with "the renunciation of everything which belonged to all the cult of strange gods...Earrings were probably credited with a magical deterrent power."²⁹ G. Ch. Aalders writes, "All of the idols, presumably also the teraphim stolen by Rachel, and the earrings that probably served as amulets, were turned over to Jacob."³⁰ Gordon Wenham suggests that "burying the earrings along with the foreign gods expressed their complete determination to dispose of their idols and also any material that could be used to replace them."³¹ He also speculates that "the false gods, jewelry and even clothing was tainted because it was part of the booty taken from the Shechemites."³² Victor P. Hamilton agrees with the standard interpretation: "It is unlikely that the reference here is to normal jewelry, but rather to ornaments that carried some kind of religious significance, possibly with iconic impressions on them. Note that Targ. Onqelos renders *nezamin* ('rings') by '*qdsy*,' 'holy objects.'"³³

With this teaching in mind, one could argue that Genesis 35:4 forbids jewelry that is associated with paganism (e.g., a Hare Krishna earring, a Masonic pendant or tie tack, a Roman Catholic rosary or Virgin Mary necklace, etc.). Also, if someone has a strong temptation to melt down their jewelry to make an idol, they should not own it. To argue that Jacob was opposed to all earrings, when his own godly mother wore them, is to interpret Scripture with blinders on. It is a mockery of biblical interpretation.

Exodus 33:3-6

Perhaps the second most quoted passage by those seeking proof texts against jewelry is Exodus 33:3-6:

"Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, lest I consume you on the way, for you *are* a stiff-necked people." And when the people heard this bad news, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. For the LORD had said to Moses, "Say to the children of Israel, 'You *are* a stiff-necked people. I could come up into your midst in one moment and consume you. Now therefore, take off your

²⁵ John Gill, *An Exposition of the Old Testament*, 1:229.

²⁶ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 916.

²⁷ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 1:316.

²⁸ Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1967), 174-175.

²⁹ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1961), 331.

³⁰ G. Ch. Alders, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 162-163.

³¹ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1994), 324.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 375; footnote 15.

ornaments, that I may know what to do to you.” So the children of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments by Mount Horeb.

Do these verses support the total abstinence position? No, not in any way! The people are told that God’s special presence in their midst will not be accompanying them into the promised land because they are an obstinate, “stiff-necked people.” They respond with a deep, profound mourning. Mourning and/or abject grief is properly accompanied by the refusal to wear festive clothing or any ornaments. In fact, a tradition will develop in Israel of mourning in sackcloth and ashes as a sign of humility and a penitent spirit. There is not one reputable Old Testament scholar who believes that this passage forbids the use of festive clothing or jewelry *in all circumstances*. In fact, every commentator that this author consulted believes the removal of ornaments was directly connected to their grief.³⁴ As Durham remarks, “As an expression of their grief, the people do not wear any ‘ornamentation’ or ‘festive dress’.... The present text is concerned only with depicting Israel’s profound mourning of the threatened loss of Yahweh’s Presence and to express that grief has utilized a tradition, no doubt quite ancient, of mourning dress.”³⁵ One should heed Brevard S. Childs who warns us of reading too much into the text: “In the end, whatever garments or ornaments were meant, the only clear point of the text is that their removal indicates a sign of mourning on the part of the people. Further than this one cannot go with any degree of certainty.”³⁶ This passage actually indicates that jewelry was lawful, for the people were wearing jewelry without any rebukes from God or Moses.

Isaiah 3:17-23

A passage that total prohibitionists appeal to as teaching that God strongly disapproves of jewelry is Isaiah 3:17-23:

³⁴ “This [removal of ‘their precious garments or jewels’] was a visible sign and profession of their inward humiliation and repentance for their sin, and of their deep sense of God’s displeasure” (Matthew Poole, 1:190). “In token of great shame and humiliation, those that were undressed did *not put on their ornaments* (v. 4), and those that were dressed *stripped themselves of their ornaments*, by the mount...When the Lord *God calls to weeping and mourning* we must comply with the call, and not only fast from pleasant bread (Dan. x:3), but lay aside our ornaments; even those that are decent enough at other times are unseasonably worn on days of humiliation or in times of public calamity, Isa. iii.18” (Matthew Henry, 1:419). “[A]nd *no man did put on his ornaments*; they used to wear at other times, their rings and jewels, which the princes and the chief among the people especially were wont to wear; and in common the people did not put on their best clothes, or what they usually wore, but clothed themselves in mournful habits, in sackcloth and ashes, or in some such-like manner” (John Gill, 1:517). “In seasons of mourning it is customary with Eastern people to lay aside all gewgaws, and divest themselves of their jewels, their gold, and everything rich and splendid in their dress.... Though it seems to have been unknown to the early Israelites, it was an established usage in the times of the monarchy for the people, divesting themselves of any gay or elegant clothing in deep humiliation, to assume sackcloth (cf. 1 Sam. xix.24; Isa. xxxii.11; Mic. i.8, 8c); and it is still common amongst Oriental mourners still to appear in dark-coloured clothes, or at least to lay aside whatever seems ornamental” (Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fauset and David Brown, 1:412). “[T]hey showed their deep sorrow by putting on the garments of mourning; and no man did put on his ornaments.... The Lord demanded this evidence of sincere repentance...” (Paul E. Kretzman, 1:173). “The people were so overwhelmed with sorrow by this evil word, that they put off their ornaments, and showed by this outward sign the trouble of their heart” (C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, 1:233). “[T]he people mourned when they heard the distressing words (Ezek. 24:17; 26:16). They humbled themselves before the Lord.... They expressed their sorrow by not putting on any ornaments” (W. H. Gispen, *Exodus* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982], 304).

³⁵ John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 437.

³⁶ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Louisville, KY: The Westminster Press, 1974), 589.

Therefore the LORD will smite with a scab the crown of the head of the daughters of Zion, and the LORD will discover their secret parts. In that day the Lord will take away the bravery of their tinkling ornaments about their feet, and their cauls, and their round tires like the moon, the chains, and the bracelets, and the mufflers, The bonnets, and the ornaments of the legs, and the headbands, and the tablets, and the earrings, The rings, and nose jewels, the changeable suits of apparel, and the mantles, and the wimples, and the crisping pins, the glasses, and the fine linen, and the hoods, and the veils.

In this prophecy of judgment the women of Jerusalem are presented as supremely arrogant (“outstretched necks,” v. 16), immoral (“wanton eyes,” v. 16) and worldly. The prophet enumerates their ornaments almost to the point of absurdity to reveal that their hearts were bound up with worldly glory, possessions, self-exaltation and luxury instead of trusting in God and living for Him. Because they forgot God, served idols and lived for their own pleasures and exaltation, Jehovah will bring them to a state of supreme humiliation. The very women who took pride in their appearance and identified themselves with the outstretched neck, the fluttering of the eyes and their dainty walk (v. 16; produced by the wearing of so many gold ankle chains), will find themselves stripped naked and their heads shaved (a universal sign of female humiliation and disgrace). These wicked women will not only be stripped of their prized possessions but also of their men (3:25-26; 4:1).

This shocking picture raises a few questions. Does this section of Scripture condemn all uses of jewelry? Is the absolute prohibition of jewelry a legitimate application of these verses? No. Such a view must be rejected for the following reasons. First, this portion of Scripture is focused on pride and the sinful abuse of possessions, not on jewelry or clothing in general. As Matthew Henry notes, “The prophet did not speak of these things as in themselves sinful (they might lawfully be had and used), but as things which they were proud of and should therefore be deprived of.”³⁷ Edward J. Young concurs:

Isaiah has already condemned the “proud, arrogant deeds” of the people and their haughty demeanor. But now he directs his attention to the women. When the women are wholly vain and self-centered, the cancer of moral decay is truly consuming the nation’s heart. Proper adornment and true beauty in women should be a reflection of the glory of God. When women cultivate and cherish beauty only for itself, they are infringing upon and detracting from the glory and beauty that belong to Him. That ordinary women of the world should be vainglorious might be expected. But the daughters of Zion, women who live in the city of God, under the very shadow of the Temple, who should have set the example of the beauty of holiness, these are haughty and walk with outstretched neck.

Is Isaiah, however, one who can see no place in life for the beauty of adornment? *Does he condemn beauty and ornament as such? That is not the case. It is not the various articles of jewelry in themselves which are reached by his condemnation.* Something more serious has gripped his attention and drawn down upon itself his condemnation. In Jerusalem there was an inner pride and corruption of the heart which manifested itself outwardly. That it was which attracted the prophet’s censure. “Wherever,” says Calvin, “dress and splendor are carried to excess, there is evidence of ambition, and many vices are usually connected with it; for whence comes luxury in men and women but from pride?” And again he remarks, “First then, he justly declares pride to be the source of the evil, and points it out by the sign, that is, by their gait.”³⁸

³⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 4:25.

³⁸ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 1:161; emphasis added.

Second, in the prophet's enumeration there are a number of items that are identified as *lawful* in other portions of Scripture (e.g., earrings, rings, apparel, fine linen). Consequently, one cannot pick and choose certain things listed and forbid them without being arbitrary and inconsistent. (Unless, of course, such items are condemned elsewhere in the Bible or the context reveals they are associated with idolatry or superstition.) While we commend a desire to be modest and reject the widespread declension and worldliness found in many churches today, we can never condone or participate in legalism or human traditions because to do so is also sinful and worldly.

Copyright 2011 © Brian Schwertley

[HOME PAGE](#)