

If You Know Everything There Is to Know About Timbuktu: Faith and the Integrative Nature of Culture

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At the end of that mind boggling day—where Joseph went from being a mere slave to prime minister of Egypt, a *nobody* nobody knew to a *somebody* everybody knew and honored—we find Joseph wearing a magnificent ring, an elegant necklace of gold, some of Egypt’s finest linen clothes, and driving around in an ornate chariot. “Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand, and put it on Joseph’s hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen, and put the gold necklace around his neck. And he had him ride in his second chariot; and they proclaimed before him, ‘Bow the knee!’ And he set him over all the land of Egypt” (Gen 41:42, 43).¹

Do you think Joseph took that stuff off the next day? Gave it back to Pharaoh, saying, “I can’t wear this. I’m a servant of the living God of heaven.” Absolutely not! Each of those items were functional symbols of Joseph’s new status and power in Egypt. But those functional symbols—very tangible things indeed—raise the ever burning question of faith and cultural assimilation. Joseph’s meteoric rise to power completely encapsulated him in Egyptian reality. In one day he soared to the very top of what it meant to live in Egyptian life and culture. As a follower of the Living God of heaven, how far should he go? Was it alright for him to wear jewelry or participate in other tangible Egyptian cultural idioms? How far can God’s people go in following the tangible cultural expressions of their day and remain distinct, pure, a living witness?

How did Joseph wend his way through the reality of encapsulating Egyptian culture without becoming assimilated into it? How was he able to maintain

¹Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural citations are from the *New American Standard Bible*.

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both his faith and his witness and remain distinct—yet be a part of his real world?

Not surprisingly, some have appealed to Joseph as an example of jewelry usage in particular.² He's an example, they say, that the Bible never prohibits adornment in itself, only the promiscuous use of adornment. They will add that our official Seventh-day Adventist position advocating the non-usage of jewelry is both unbiblical and cultural. That the Bible teaches moderation, not non-usage. In the process, they appeal to the cultural and sociological dynamics of lifestyle.

Do you get it? If Joseph with his impeccable moral and spiritual character could wear jewelry, why can't we? If we put on Joseph's colorful robe and dream of being a people as faithful as he, why can't rings and necklaces be part of that glorious vision? Doesn't Joseph's very example prove that character, not externals, is what is really important? If you got the character, can you put on the hardware? Does participation in tangible cultural idioms of our day really make a difference, if we have faith?

There's no doubt but what we're living in a time when many are struggling with the rationale for our Adventist positions on jewelry and other lifestyle issues. The Adventist Church today faces a real dilemma in the area of lifestyle standards. There seems to be confusion as to what the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy are really saying on lifestyle issues and what we call Christian standards. There's an inconsistency in application of biblical principles and values. And there is both legalism and the fear of legalism.

When our positions are perceived as inconsistent and unreasonable—not applicable to life in the late twentieth century—young people in particular leave the church and turn elsewhere. Eugene Peterson notes that the trend today is for the values and living styles of the youth to be pushed upward to the adult world:

Each generation is, in poet John Berryman's words, "unwell in a new way." The way in which the present generation is unwell—that is, the forms under which it experiences sin—is through episodes of adolescence. There was a time when ideas and living styles were initiated in the adult world and filtered down to youth. Now the movement goes the other way: lifestyles are generated at the youth level and pushed upward. Dress fashions, hair styles, music, and morals that are adopted by youth are evangelically pushed on an adult world, which in turn seems eager to be converted. Youth culture began as kind of a fad and then grew into a movement. Today it is nearly fascist in its influence, forc-

²Dennis H. Braun, "A Seminar on Adventists, Adornment, and Jewelry" (D.Min proj., Andrews University Theological Seminary, June, 1996), 17; Madelyn Jones-Haldeman, "Adorning the Temple of God," *Spectrum* (December, 1989): 50.

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ing its perceptions and styles on everyone whether he likes it or not.³

Communicating biblical values and positions to young people in a meaningful way is particularly challenging. One of the arguments that never goes away is the question of *culture*. It seems that all the significant passages of Scripture on life style issues are being downplayed as being either cultural or not saying all we have thought they have said. That goes for the Spirit of Prophecy as well. The writings of Ellen White are projected as cultural, dated, incomplete, legalistic. People are looking for Christ-centered standards that are based on sound biblical principles (something I affirm). Unfortunately, for many, any appeal to Scripture for concrete injunctions and specific commands on lifestyle issues seems more like legalistic rules.⁴ That leaves the question of application open, cultural, elusive.

Since some have used Joseph as an example of jewelry usage, and because jewelry is viewed so much as a cultural issue, I want to use jewelry as an example of how Joseph likely related to the varied cultural pressures of his day. As I do, I want us to keep in mind a broader spectrum of Seventh-day Adventist Christian lifestyle issues. I'm not just talking about jewelry or ornamentation per se, but raising the question of how tangible does Christian living get in contemporary culture? How Egyptian did Joseph look? We will never know. No doubt his brothers saw no difference between Joseph and the Egyptians. "They did not recognize him," we're told (Gen 42:8). Joseph likely looked pretty Egyptian to them. But while he may have appeared quite Egyptian to his brothers (who really didn't know that much about being Egyptian, anyway), how authentically Egyptian did Joseph really appear to those who knew him or knew the subtle differences expressed in his personal lifestyle and choices? Again, we will never know for certain, but we can catch some significant hints that point in a clear direction. No matter what we can know for sure, it is clear that Joseph does present an example of a consecrated people where external cultural forms make a difference.

Understanding Culture

Before continuing with Joseph, though, we must first understand a bit about culture. According to Charles C. Case, "Everyone is convinced that he knows what culture is. It has become a commonplace metaphor to which anyone can attach his inadequate thoughts or clever opinions."⁵ Culture is only one of several factors involved in shaping human existence. Setting, situation, people,

³Eugene H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* (Dallas: Word, 1989), 128, 129.

⁴Steve Case, ed. *Shall We Dance* (Riverside, CA: La Sierra UP, 1996); Gary Land, "Adventist in Plain Dress," *Spectrum* (December, 1989): 42-48; Jones-Haldeman, 49-55; Charles Scriven, "I Didn't Recognize Your With Your Ring On," *Spectrum* (December, 1989): 56-59; Braun, 6-87.

⁵Charles C. Case, *Culture, the Human Plan* (Washington, D.C.: UP of America, 1977), 9, 10.

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and communication are also important. But culture is like glue. It is the element that ties these factors together.⁶ Culture also “encompasses those aspects of being that are learned, those regularities that are acquired, those things that are gained through association with other humans.”⁷ In this sense, culture is in a fundamental way the most human part of man’s existence. In fact, behind the customs and the tools, the social habits and behavior, of human existence, lies the framework of a plan. It’s a human plan. The plan of culture. “Culture is the construct behind overt behavior. Like a blueprint or work schedule it is prior, basic, and necessary to every action. Like plays and rules of football or the recipe of a cake, it determines the final result.”⁸ Putting it differently, culture is a script one follows to create behavior. Like a theatrical play where actors with a script are given direction and allowed to improvise, and yet the play must follow the plot.⁹ In other words, “culture is placed not at the descriptive end of the behavioral episode but rather at the beginning.”¹⁰ In this way, then, culture shapes behavior more than it reflects behavior. Case puts it this way:

If culture is to be accepted as a dynamic functioning factor in behavior then it must be seen as immediate, participating, and invariably present as a prerequisite to behavior. Culture is not the description abstracted from the observation of human activity; it is not norms, or statistical averages, but the cognitive plans that are present before activity occurs. Culture is not the result of behavior, but determines behavior.¹¹

All this still eludes clear definition. But while we cannot always define the “essence” of culture, it is inextricably bound up with human life in society. Culture at bottom is social.¹² The world of culture is a world of values concerned with what is good for human beings.¹³ In all its forms and varieties culture is a concerned with the temporal and material realization of those values.¹⁴ Culture always expresses itself in tangible ways. Even the immaterial dynamics of culture are realized in temporal and material forms. As H. Richard Niebuhr correctly notes:

Human effort presses on to employ in concrete, tangible, visible, and audible forms what has been imaginatively discerned. The harmony and proportion, the form, order and rhythm, the meaning and ideas that men intuit and trace out as they confront nature, social events, and the world of dreams, these by infinite labor

⁶Ibid., 16.

⁷Ibid., 16, 17.

⁸Ibid., 18.

⁹Ibid., 21, 22.

¹⁰Ibid., 18.

¹¹Ibid., 22.

¹²H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 32.

¹³Ibid., 34, 35.

¹⁴Ibid., 36.

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they must paint on wall or canvas, print on paper as systems of philosophy and science, outline in carved stone or cast in bronze, sing in a ballad, ode or symphony. Visions of order and justice, hopes of glory, must at the cost of much suffering be embodied in written laws, dramatic rites, structures of government, empires, ascetic lives.¹⁵

This puts meaning into the Apostle Paul's exhortation, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mold, but let God remold your mind from within" (Rom 12:2, Phillips). Culture, at bottom, is a paradigmatic story in and of itself. Like most paradigms, culture is comprised of multiple supporting stories. Each of the tangible expressions of contemporary culture (our world), no matter the milieu of time or specific context, have a way of capturing our interest. Holding our attention. Stirring our emotions. Whether the arts, music, architecture, customs and lifestyle, fashions, habits, values, beliefs, or ways of looking at things—each in their own way tell a story, create a world view. They have an uncanny way of slipping past our conscious mind. Circumventing our defenses. Impacting us in subtle ways. Not all this is bad, but culture can sidetrack us to where we forget who we are and what we are supposed to be doing for God in the word—both individually and as an end-time people.

All About Timbuktu

In her book *Wrestling With Angels* Naomi Rosenblatt tells of her struggle to maintain her identity when she first came to the US from Israel in the fifties. She landed in New York with all its affluent consumerism and she struggled to maintain the Spartan values she was raised with. Passing by the seductive display windows of Saks, Tiffany's, and Bergdorf's was a constant lure to embrace the culture around her. As she walked down Fifth Avenue, stealing an occasional glance at the marvelous storefront offerings, she used to hum her old school songs with their Hebrew lyrics about ploughing and protecting the land. With each passing window, she hummed louder and hurried faster down the street. "No matter what our roots are," she writes, "if we develop an authentic personal identity early on, it will anchor us throughout our life."¹⁶ Her mother used to tell her, "Even if you come from Timbuktu, if you know everything there is to know about Timbuktu, you can travel anywhere in the world and never lose your way."¹⁷ Timbuktu, you remember, is the proverbial word for nowhere. If you remember your humble roots, and everything there is to know about them, you can go anywhere in the world and never lose your way.

¹⁵Ibid., 36, 37.

¹⁶Naomi H. Rosenblatt, *Wrestling With Angels: What the First Family of Genesis Teaches Us About Our Spiritual Identity, Sexuality, and Personal Relationships* (New York: Delacorte, 1995), 351.

¹⁷Ibid.

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One reason why Joseph bore the test of prosperity in Egypt is because he knew everything there was to know about Timbuktu—his humble roots. As long as he remembered certain things about his past—who he was—the lure of prosperity would never have power over him. The same would be true with the integrative nature of Egyptian culture and the pressure of cultural assimilation. As long as Joseph remembered everything there was to know about Timbuktu he could not lose his way in a pagan culture.

But what was Joseph's Timbuktu? What did he know about Timbuktu that kept him from losing his way amidst Egyptian culture? When Joseph harked back into his past, what were the values that carried him amidst Egyptian moral and spiritual values? Part of Timbuktu for Joseph was a solemn moment of family spiritual revival and consecration. We read about it in Genesis 35:

Then God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel, and live there; and make an altar there to God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau." So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him. "Put away the foreign God's which are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your garments; and 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 wherever I have gone." So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods which they had, and the rings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem. (Gen 35:1-4)

One gets the sense that this was no ordinary moment in the life of Jacob and his family. Jacob's only daughter Dinah had gone off to visit the daughters of the land (check out a little of contemporary culture of her day) and was raped by Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite (Gen 34:1, 2). That all ended with Simeon and Levi vengefully slaughtering and looting an entire city (Gen 34:25-29). Jacob's family was on a fast track toward moral and spiritual ruin. But God intervened! He called Jacob's family to an experience of worship. "Arise, go to Bethel, and live there; and make an altar there to God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau" (Gen 35:1).

In his heart Jacob knew that he and his family could not come before God in worship while their lives were so filled with pagan influences, moral compromises, and spiritual indifference. In *Patriarchs and Prophets* Ellen White illumines the biblical record:

With deep emotion Jacob repeated the story of his first visit to Bethel, when he left his father's tent a lonely wanderer, fleeing for his life, and how the Lord had appeared to him in the night vision. As he reviewed the wonderful dealings of God with him, his own heart was softened, *his children also were touched by a subduing power*; he had taken the most effectual way to prepare them to join in the worship of God when they should arrive in Bethel. "And he gave unto Jacob all the strange gods which were in their

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hand, and all their earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was by Shechem.”¹⁸

A moment of family spiritual renewal. Heartfelt moments of consecration and worship. Joseph was there. Just a lad. Young. Impressionable. Touched by that same subduing power. What did he learn that day as he witnessed first hand his father’s moving testimony and then his big brothers and aunts and mother and step-mothers—each removing certain garments and idols and pieces of jewelry from their lives in an act of consecration and worship? Two things!

First, Joseph’s young mind was impressed with the reality that the artistic expressions of culture that people are so inclined to wear and adorn themselves with are *value laden*. They express moral or spiritual value which the wearer wittingly or unwittingly identifies with. Their sense of self, value system, and view of God is somehow locked up in these concrete expressions.

Second, Joseph learned that *genuine consecration to God finds tangible expression in shedding those cultural idioms that might convey ungodly values. Consecration to God includes external forms*. While you can have the external forms in your life without consecration, you cannot have consecration without it affecting the external forms that in one way or another compete with that very consecration. Doing and being are inseparably linked. This was the Timbuktu that kept Joseph from losing his way in the Egyptian world of incredible artistic cultural expression. Egypt was a civilization filled with tangible cultural expressions that were laden with pagan values and ideals.

The 1998 Andrews University Alumni weekend featured the unveiling of Alan Collins’ bronze sculpture depicting the dauntless Andrews family, Adventism’s first missionaries, standing dockside in Boston in 1874 as they prepare to depart for Switzerland. “Legacy of Leadership,” it’s called. There J. N. Andrews and his two children, Charles and Mary, peer out at their incoming ship. The sculpture captures both the eagerness and apprehension this missionary family must have felt at this important moment in their lives. Many have sensed how it whispers mission, commitment, and sacrifice for a people whom God intends to touch the world for Him. “My heart is wholly bound up in this work, I have no desire but to live in the service of God,” Andrews said. I cannot describe it, but from the moment I first saw photos of the proposed bronze sculpture, I was moved. Moved with a desire for the same kind of commitment to God. One sunny afternoon I stood before this artistic expression of leadership and mission. Tears welled up in my eyes as I thought of that dauntless family and all they experienced together for the Lord. There I thanked the Lord for this powerful legacy and recommitted my own life to being a faithful servant to come and go at the Lord’s bidding.

¹⁸Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1958), 205-206. Italics supplied.

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Such tangible artistic expressions reflect the world view of its author or culture and powerfully convey the moral and spiritual values and ideals of that world view. Anyone who has visited Egypt or museums featuring Egyptology cannot help but be impressed with the sheer power of Egyptian artistic expression. Magnificent architecture. Grand sculptures. Impressive pyramids. Graphic reliefs and murals. Stunning color. A culture steeped in artistic expression. You could not live in Egypt without being touched or influenced by the incredible power of its integrated cultural message.

Now it's one thing for the power of a given culture and its tangible expressions to be everywhere around us and all pervasive in its influence. But it's another thing for us to bring to our body or bring to our life or bring to our lifestyle those very objects, behaviors, experiences, or icons. The moment we do, we identify with them. Their moral spiritual values somehow attach to our inner private world. Culture is no longer objective. Out there. Now it is internal. We are being shaped by it within. We experience and come to own culture by participating in its forms. Not all that culture brings to our inner psyche is bad, certainly, nevertheless, it is spiritually and morally formative in its impact.

Again, *Patriarchs and Prophets* makes some interesting observations with regard to Joseph, this time while in Egypt as a mere servant:

He [Joseph] was here exposed to temptations of no ordinary character. He was in the midst of idolatry. The worship of false gods was surrounded by all the pomp of royalty, *supported by the wealth and culture* of the most highly civilized nation then in existence. Yet Joseph *preserved his simplicity* and his fidelity to God. . . . The desire to gain favor of the Egyptians *could not cause him to conceal* his principles. Had he attempted to do this, he would have been overcome by temptation; but he was not ashamed of the religion of his fathers, and *he made no effort to hide* the fact that he was a worshiper of Jehovah.¹⁹

In an environment where culture supported false worship, Joseph preserved his *simplicity*. He made no effort to hide the fact that he was a worshiper of Jehovah. Obviously, this means Joseph's character, life, and lifestyle did not follow the cultural norms of Egyptian society. One could tell where Joseph stood by his lifestyle.

There's more. In Psalm 105 we're told that when Pharaoh promoted Joseph, Joseph was placed in command over all Pharaoh's princes and officials. According to the psalm, "*he taught the leaders how to use wisdom*" (Psalm 105:22 CEV). The Living Bible reads, "*At his pleasure he could imprison the king's aides and teach the king's advisors*" (LB). The Jerusalem Bible's way of putting it expresses the point well: Joseph was "*to train his officials as he thought fit and convert his elders into sages.*"

¹⁹Ibid., 214. Italics supplied.

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Joseph taught Pharaoh's leaders wisdom. According to Genesis 41, Joseph became Egypt's prime shaker and mover. A trend-setter. Together with his wife Asenath (the daughter of Potiphara, the prestigious priest of On) he was a compelling spiritual moral icon in a culture where religious moral values were encapsulated in all the arts and sciences and every day life, including its leaders. Joseph was looked up to as possessing something different. Did he just go along for the ride or did Joseph preserve and promote a radically different life-style?

Patriarchs and Prophets picks up this very biblical theme suggested in Psalm 105:22:

Through Joseph the attention of the king and great men of Egypt was directed to the true God; and though they adhered to their idolatry, they learned to respect the principles revealed in the life and character of the worshiper of Jehovah.²⁰

Character has to do with heart, demeanor, attitude, personal ethos, and temperament. Life has to do with concrete external expressions of what is in the heart. Life is what tangibly flows out from one's inner private world of moral and spiritual *being*. Not only were godly principles being expressed via Joseph's character, but they were tangibly expressed in what Joseph said, what Joseph ate, how he dressed, and what he did. *Being* and *doing* together wonderfully expressed truth about God and what it means to be His servant in a comprehensive integrating pagan culture that molded minds and hearts in an entirely different direction.

Let me suggest something here about one aspect at least of what it meant for Joseph to teach Egypt's leaders wisdom. There is a tendency in the Old Testament to devalue the significance of jewelry as a symbol of ultimate value.²¹ Wisdom literature like Proverbs, Job, and the Psalms create a contrast between wise instruction on the one hand, and silver and gold and precious jewels on the other:

How blessed is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding. For its profit is better than the profit of silver, and its gain than fine gold. She is more precious than jewels and nothing you desire compares with her (Prov 3:13-15)

Take my instruction, and not silver, and knowledge rather than choicest gold. For wisdom is better than jewels; and all desirable things cannot compare with her (Prov 8:10, 11)

There is gold, and abundance of jewels; but lips of knowledge are a more precious thing (Prov 20:15)

²⁰Ibid., 222.

²¹Angel Manuel Rodriguez, "Jewelry in the Old Testament: A Description of Its Functions" (unpublished manuscript for the Biblical Research Institute, 1998), 20.

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This is no speculative connection! Egyptian civilization was a culture steeped in artistic expression. Jewelry and personal adornment was at the heart of its very religious moral life. In his book *Jewels of the Pharaohs*, Cyril Aldred writes how personal adornments were worn by men and women alike and that even the gods had their jewelry, too. The occupation of jeweler was one of the most flourishing businesses in ancient Egypt throughout its long history.²² Egyptian ornamentation was used for the expression of its cultural, social, religious, and magical practices and convictions. My own visit to Egypt startled me with this realization. You cannot miss it! Bracelets and pendants. Ear-rings and necklaces. Ring and ear-plugs. Amulets and headbands and anklets. The list goes on and on. Each a work of incredible artistic expression with brilliant color and aesthetic appeal. Each an iconic depiction of some Egyptian god, or vulture, scarab beetle, falcon, or jackal. The use of gold in adornment was particularly abundant. As gold never lost its luster, but seemed to retain within itself all the fire and glory of the sun, it was felt that the flesh of the very gods was made of this eternally shining material.²³

I can just see Joseph—knowing all there was to know about his Timbuktu experience—teaching Pharaoh’s leaders true wisdom. In one way or another, day after day, devaluing what was at the very heart of their religious moral experience and expression. You see, adornment was a concrete expression of the individual Egyptians’ interests. Their values, their concerns and fears. Concrete expressions of their standing in society and before the gods. Have you ever had people tell you they feel naked without certain forms of adornment, cosmetics, or garments on—whether male or female? That’s how the Egyptian people would have felt. Completely vulnerable and naked without their ornaments. But Joseph’s life and character and convictions and wise instruction would steadily devalue these very things in their eyes. As they watched his life they would always be confronted by something vastly better. Somehow more real. Right.

What happens when things are devalued? They become less important. Set aside. Something else becomes more important. In the process they lose their charm and drop off.

When Debbie came to church for the first time she was wearing a white mink coat and decked to the hilt with jewelry, colorful cosmetics, and all that goes with it—shoes, purse, dress, hair style. Debbie was a jet-set-yuppie real-estate agent whose wild parties featured coke served in tiny silver cups and snorted through \$100 bills. She drove fancy cars and lived in a big house. She had it all. Studying the Bible with Debbie and her husband Rick was a real experience, to say the least. But here she was, her first Sabbath in a Seventh-day Adventist Church and in my pastor’s class. My congregation at that time was a

²²Cyril Aldred, *Jewels of the Pharaohs: Egyptian Jewellery of the Dynastic Period* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971): 14. See also Adriana Calinescu, ed., *Ancient Jewelry and Archeology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1996).

²³Aldred, 15.

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friendly bunch who knew how to make people feel at home, and so in time Debbie merged right into our church life, where she laughed and fellowshiped and worshiped. No one to my knowledge ever spoke to her about her adornment and extravagant lifestyle. I know I didn't.

I'll never forget the day she asked me for baptism. "She needs some more time," I thought to myself as she stood there with as much adornment on her as ever. But I said, "Sure! When would you like to plan it?" "This Sabbath," she replied. "O.K." I said with a bit of hesitation. "When can we meet to review a couple of things?"

The only time that week Debbie had free was an hour before Sabbath School started, the day of her baptism. I knew she was up on all the things we had studied, so I wasn't too worried. Except, that is, for my chosen style of relating to certain lifestyle issues—let the Spirit lead in His way and in His time. Through the years I have learned that we need to give people space to grow at their own pace. Lifestyle issues need incubation time in each person's heart. You can't expect everyone to always read of the same page. Especially new folk. They make a decision on an issue, then fall back to where they previously were. They go up and down. It happens with long-time members as well. The only place the line needs to be clearly drawn is for leadership. Leaders in the body of Christ must set the pace toward that biblical ideal of a truly Christ-centered standard where Spirit filled hearts and a passionate love for Jesus compels obedience in unequivocal tangible ways. No leader in the body of Christ has the right to interpret or project lifestyle issues from their own perspective. Theirs is the responsibility to engender the lifestyle our world community has envisioned together.

I'll always remember that Sabbath morning meeting with Debbie on her baptism day. When Debbie arrived she was dressed smartly, but gone were the colorful cosmetics and fancy jewels that I had been accustomed to seeing her with. I was startled, to say the least. She still looked lovely, but considerably different. I wanted to say something about it right off, but bit my tongue. When the appropriate moment came in our sharing together, I asked her about her thoughts on adornment. Here was a woman who had been abused, gone through divorce, used drugs, saw her brother carted off to jail for selling drugs. You name it. She was there. And she says, "Pastor Larry, I don't need those things anymore. What I want and what I need most is in that water."

What happens when the love and claims of the living God become all absorbing? Tangible cultural expressions that compete with that vision are devalued, become less important, drop off. Whether personal adornment, questionable styles of music, media experiences, the kind of things we read or watch, recreational pursuits, whatever. There are many tangible things representing the negative dynamics of our contemporary culture that will lose their hold on us when a relationship with God becomes our consuming passion. It

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happens when we love Him supremely, spend time in His Word, and fill our hearts with the guidance He has given us in the Spirit of Prophecy.

But Joseph wore jewelry! It's an undeniable fact that shouldn't really bother us much. The ornaments he wore were functional symbols of his status and power in Egypt. He was Pharaoh's deputy with Pharaoh's signet ring, symbolic gold necklace, and the power to legislate.

Scripture affirms the difference between the ornaments Joseph wears as prime minister and those he could have worn for personal ornamentation. Did you know that the only persons the Lord ever prescribed jewelry for was the high priest, and perhaps the crown on Israel's king (Exodus 28:1-43). Even then the jewels were on the high priest's clothing rather than on himself. When he removed his garments he removed the jewelry. A fine distinction, but an important one in distinguishing the difference between ornamentation used for communicating moral and spiritual truth and that worn for personal adornment.

In Scripture jewelry is used for personal adornment,²⁴ as a form of currency,²⁵ for offerings,²⁶ as evidence of wealth,²⁷ to designate social status,²⁸ as symbols of power and authority,²⁹ as imagery for God's gracious redemption and our value in His sight,³⁰ for religious purposes,³¹ and possibly to ward off evil powers and dangers, i.e., magic.³² Scripture does not reject the use of jewelry altogether. But it does devalue and call into question its use for personal adornment and for religious and magical purposes.³³ Scripture draws a direct connection between luxury in adornment and dress and idolatry.³⁴

When we understand the difference that exists between the contemporary culture of biblical times (the lifestyle, customs, and values expressed by the nations and peoples of the then known world), the culture of biblical characters

²⁴Isa 3:16-23; Ezek 16:11-15; 23:40; Jer 2:32; 4:30; Hosea 2:2, 13; 1 Tim 2:9; 1 Pet 3:3; 2 Kgs 9:30; Song of Solomon 1:10, 11; Rev 17:4, 5.

²⁵Gen 24:22.

²⁶Ex 35:22; 30:11-16; Num 31:50, 51.

²⁷Gen 24:35, 10, 22, 53; 15:14; Exod 11:2; 12:36; 3:22; 32:2-5; 35:20-22; Rev 18:12; Job 42:11.

²⁸James 2:2-4; 2 Sam 1:10; 2 Kgs 11:12; Psalm 89:39; 132:18; 45:13, 14; Ezek 28:11-19; 16:10-13; Isa 3:16-26; Rev 17:4.

²⁹Gen 41:42; Dan 5:29; Esther 3:10, 12; 8:2, 8, 10, 15; Zech 6:11-13; 2 Kgs 11:12.

³⁰Isa 61:10; Mal 3:16-18.

³¹Ezek 16:17; Exod 28:1-43; Hosea 2:13; Gen 35:2-4.

³²This use of jewelry and adornment may be somewhat inseparable from its use for religious purposes, but it does appear that some forms of personal adornment worn by biblical characters had magical connotations. See reference to "amulets" in Isa 3:20 and the "skillful enchanter" in Isa 3:3. "The presence of religious and magic jewelry in the catalog of Isa 3 indicates that the pride of the 'daughters of Zion' was not just based on their financial security and their beauty or on their social position but specially on the psychological security that religious and magical pieces of jewelry provided for them" (Rodriquez, 17, 18).

³³Gen 35:2-4; Hosea 2:13; Exod 32 and 33. See Rodriquez, "Jewelry in the Old Testament."

³⁴Rev 17:4; Isa 3; Gen 35:2-4; Exod 32 and 33.

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(the lifestyle, customs, and values expressed in the lives of individuals knowing or representing God), and heavenly culture (the values and lifestyle Scripture projects as the ideal and true and which has been expressed most fully in the life of Jesus Christ), we can put much of what Scripture says on the subject in context. We can read between the lines better and understand that not everything God's people did represents what God would have had them do. We need to grasp the principles and the values God's Word illuminates and carefully observe the concrete ways God calls for application. While always minimums, such concrete tangible expressions of obedience point the direction we are to go in developing a distinct ethos from that of our contemporary culture.

Since the story of Joseph occurs in the Book of Genesis, and in the Genesis narratives, Joseph is presented as one who is faithful in ways Adam was not, I cannot help but wonder if Joseph understood the truth that God didn't create man wearing adornment. Man and woman's adornment was that he and she were together made in the image of God. Wow!

Where's Grace?

Whenever one touches on lifestyle issues and the reality of concrete application of biblical principles and commands they raise the question of legalism and grace. In preparing this topic I could not help but ask the question, "Where's grace?" When you stop to view the incredible moral and spiritual quality of Joseph's life and faithfulness, it becomes clear that the question of adornment has nothing to do with the basis of salvation. If anything, it has to do with spiritual boundaries, or perhaps witness. If Joseph had compromised in one small area (as Daniel later would be tempted to—Dan 1:8), if he had not clearly shown where he really stood on certain issues, he would have been overcome immediately. In the end it came down to faith. Only faith in God and the world view He casts enables one to resist the integrative nature of culture. Paul tells us that resisting the molding influence of the world calls for a transformed mind where we come to understand what is morally good, what is acceptable to God, and what is pleasing to Him as well (Rom 12:2).

Where's grace in this part of his story? Grace is found in the principles of life Joseph came to understand. Grace is found in the way that concrete injunctions (rules) illustrate how principles apply. Grace is found in the clarity of values expressed in tangible ways. Grace is found in divine empowerment through faithfulness even in little things. No! This is not a question of salvation, but of witness, of influence, of perseverance. It has to do with standing out for God in a confused, dying world.

In the end, Joseph is not an example of how someone looked. He is an example of the concreteness of his values and how the concreteness of his values affected and sustained his moral life and witness in a culture that would have encapsulated him into itself. *From Joseph's experience we learn that external forms can express genuine consecration to God. External forms can help main-*

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tain unique identity in a world that would squeeze us into its mold. Externals can create boundaries that protect us from experiences that would blur our understanding of what is good and steal away our innocence of evil (Rom 16:19). Externals can bring a living witness to the true God and a vision of better, more abundant way. Egypt experienced and saw something different in and through Joseph. Should it not be so with God's people again?

We must be careful, though. Externals are always minimums. Tangible expressions of culture or of counter-culture are just that—expressions. The *doing* because of *being*. Faith demonstrated by works (James 2:17, 18). Genuine Christ-centered principled living will always call for ever-deepening and even more tangible expressions—reaching toward applications we never dreamed of until a consistency flavors our whole character and life. As Oswald Chambers writes in his celebrated *My Utmost for His Highest*, “God always educates us down to the scruple.”³⁵ Ellen White would agree, “We must come nearer to God, place ourselves in closer connection with heaven, and carry out the principles of the law in the minutest actions of our everyday lives in order to be spiritually whole.”³⁶ We must never forget, though, that externals must always be linked with a genuine experience of the heart in order for them to be what they were for Joseph. In all our *doing* there must be authentic *being*.

Samuel Bacchiocchi states clearly one final caveat on this topic. In his book *Christian Dress and Adornment* he writes, “To believe that our outward appearance is an index to our character does not give us the right to judge others by their outwards appearance.”³⁷ The paradox of Christian lifestyle, he notes, is that “We dare not judge others by their appearance, yet we dare not become a stumbling block to others by our appearance. Though others cannot read our heart, they can read our clothes, hairstyle, makeup. Our outward appearance makes a powerful statement for Christ.”³⁸

That is true for any lifestyle issue we approach as an Adventist people. We can never move beyond this paradox.

The Inevitable

The external expressions of culture which human beings naturally bring to themselves and into their lives are all *value laden* in one way or another. Some of the moral or spiritual values conveyed are good. They are true to what it means to be human. True to the larger biblical perspective of human beings in relation to God. Others are neutral. And of course, some things that culture communicates, including the idioms or the vehicles for that expression, are unquestionably evil. *You cannot have consecration to God without it affecting*

³⁵Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, May 13.

³⁶Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 4:75.

³⁷Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Christian Dress & Adornment* (Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1995), 176.

³⁸Bacchiocchi, 177.

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your relationship to the external forms that culture takes. They either nurture or compete with the very consecration we seek. We will always be pressed with decision. It is inevitable. In our journey with God some things are brought to us, put on us, received within. Other things drop away or must be shunned. Doing and being will always be inseparably linked in Christian moral and spiritual reality. That's something Joseph learned well. It's a personal journey. But "If you know everything there is to know about Timbuktu, you can travel anywhere in the world and never lose your way."

And that's our task. Like Joseph, knowing everything there is to know about Timbuktu. Coming to know everything there is to know about life from God's perspective and letting it make the difference.³⁹

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³⁹This of course assumes moral and spiritual formation via God's Word and illuminating Spirit. Wending our way through the culture maze demands a full view of the biblical witness on both the theoretical and concrete dimensions of cultural values, priorities, perspectives, and world view. See my "Living Under the Word," *Perspective Digest* (1999) for a survey of the comprehensive way Scripture communicates moral vision, i.e., on the levels of principles, rules, stories, world view, God's paradigmatic acts, values, and moral direction.