

**Kerala Pentecostals'
Ban on Jewellery:
A Critical Examination**

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Kerala Pentecostals' Ban on Jewellery

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Introduction

“Is it right to wear jewellery?”

This question – about a decades-old-ban on jewellery in Pentecostal churches of Kerala origin – has been flogged to death. Discussions in Pentecostal newspapers, magazines, websites, and youth camps and conferences have never been complete without a heated debate on jewellery. These discussions have yielded precious little in terms of tangible results. Neither did these discussions reform Kerala’s Pentecostal churches nor did these result in a mass exodus of dissidents to the so-called “new generation” churches. (What a pejorative way to describe the worldwide Pentecostal movement!)

Why doesn't a discussion about the ban on jewellery yield any positive result? The answer is simple: Ask the *wrong* questions and you will get the *wrong* answers! You will go around in circles forever.

We should for a while refrain from raising the question: "*Is it right to wear jewellery?*" Instead, we should ask the following questions:

1. Is it right on the part of Pentecostal churches of Kerala origin to *deny baptism* to a repentant believer just because he or she wears jewellery?

2. Is it right on the part of Pentecostal churches of Kerala origin to *deny* someone fellowship at the Lord's Table just because he or she wears jewellery?

It's a recognised fact that most Pentecostal Christians of Kerala deny water baptism and fellowship at the

Lord's Table to fellow Christians who wear jewellery. There are even extremists who keep church members or visitors away from the Lord's Table unless they are dressed in white and are clean-shaven!

After finding answers to the above questions, we may examine Biblical passages that deal with the use of jewellery with utmost care.

Denial Of Water Baptism?

First things first! Are Pentecostal churches of Kerala origin justified in denying water baptism to a believer who wears jewellery?

Baptism and Holy Communion are ordinances in the Church that were established by the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, these are the only two ordinances recognized by Pentecostal Churches. Therefore, it is all the more important that we pay great attention to the way we administer these ordinances. *An error in matters related to these ordinances is an affront to the Lord Jesus Christ and a threat to the very essence of the gospel.* It can invite the wrath of God.

Water baptism is the ordinance that officially admits a repentant believer into the Body of Christ, the Church. It is even the occasion of spiritual “new birth” or regeneration effected by the Holy Spirit (see John 3:5; Titus 3:5). No wonder the Jews referred to the flowing or “living” waters of baptism as the “womb of the world.”

Baptism inaugurates a Christian’s walk with Christ in the newness of life. The old sinful self is considered to be buried with Christ. The baptismal candidate rises from the water to live a new life in Christ just as Christ rose from the dead. The only conditions that Scripture lays down for candidates desiring baptism are genuine repentance and confession of faith in the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

When a person expresses a desire to become a Christian, he or she should be baptised at the earliest. Unless someone

in the Church offers baptism, this person cannot be baptised!

The Essenes among ancient Jews used to baptise themselves everyday. Jewish women too baptise themselves every month. However, the apostles of Christ were commanded to baptise new believers. Even if self-immersion may be technically right, Christian baptism demands the presence of a baptiser.

If repentant sinners understand the importance of water baptism, and if a Christian refuses to baptise them, their anguish at the denial of baptism is quite understandable. Therefore, first, just by considering the pain caused, it may be said that the denial of water baptism without a valid biblical reason is an abuse of a privilege. I believe God takes notice of such abuses.

Christians who deny water baptism to new converts are like watchmen who

stand at the entrance of a city to deny entrance to refugees who seek asylum. And yet, Kerala's Pentecostal churches have been like wicked watchmen. For several decades, Pentecostal and Brethren churches in Kerala denied water baptism to repentant sinners just because the candidates insisted on retaining their habit of wearing jewellery or a wedding ring!

Are these churches justified in imposing such conditions?

The New Testament is exceptionally kind to those who seek membership in the Church. In the first century, hard-line Jewish Christians had insisted that Gentile converts first embrace Judaism through circumcision before they could be admitted into the church.

In his landmark verdict at the first Jerusalem Council, apostle Peter made this principle abundantly clear to

everyone: no restrictions may be imposed on new converts (Gentiles) who seek entrance to the Church except the few restrictions mentioned in Acts 15: 28-29.

“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these requirements: You must abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or eating the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. If you do this, you will do well. Farewell.”

New converts were asked to abstain from:

1. Participation in idol worship;
2. Eating of blood or the meat of animals whose blood wasn't drained off as mentioned in Genesis 9:4 and Deut .12:24; and
3. Sexual immorality.

If the Holy Spirit and the early apostles felt that no greater “burden” be

laid on new converts, how dare we impose other burdens?

Kerala's Pentecostal Christians are like the Judaizers of the first century who told Gentile converts: "Unless you get circumcised, you cannot be a Christian." In other words, the Judaizers insisted that Gentiles had to become Jews *before* they could receive salvation from the Jewish Messiah!

Getting circumcised is one of the first steps towards becoming a Jew. Converts to Judaism had to observe the Sabbath and all the Law of Moses. Therefore, circumcision was not the only issue of that time. In all of Paul's letters and in the Judaizers' teachings, the mention of circumcision was a short way of referring to one's conversion to Judaism.

The horror of it! Those Judaizers believed that Gentiles could be saved only if they first became Jews! What will

be our reaction if someone said that to us today? We would vehemently oppose such a teaching.

That's what the apostle Paul did in his epistles to Roman and Galatian churches. He believed that Gentiles could be a part of the Church without first becoming Jews. To prove that point, he wrote at length about the importance of faith in receiving God's salvation. He even said that anyone who imposes Judaism on new converts is preaching a different gospel – a heretic act that deserved a curse!

“I marvel that you are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ to another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than that which we have preached unto you, *let him be accursed*. (Galatians 1:6-8)

And yet, Kerala's Pentecostal Christians commit a sin similar to that the Judaizers of the first century Church had committed! They say, "Unless you become like us and stop wearing jewellery, you cannot gain entrance into the Body of Christ; we will not baptise you." How outrageous!

Remember, Peter's list of restrictions to be imposed on new converts did not include a ban on jewellery or any other things that we commonly talk about. I know Pentecostal pastors who refuse to baptise new converts who sport a moustache or a beard! Are we greater than the Holy Spirit or the apostle Peter to impose new restrictions on new converts and to deny them water baptism?

I've heard all the excuses that *Malayali* Pentecostals put forward to defend their position. The most ludicrous argument goes like this: "We are

following a good tradition established by our fathers.”

Tradition? Since when did tradition become a source of authority for Pentecostal Christians? Didn't they make fun of Roman Catholics and members of other Episcopal churches for taking refuge in 'traditions' or in the 'church canon?'

And there are others who say that jewellery falls under the category of idol worship which is mentioned in Peter's list. According to them, all jewellery is rooted in idolatry. It is true that certain items of jewellery are linked to idols. We know that people wear images of their gods or goddesses on their necklaces or rings. Some jewellery is worn after the performance of idolatrous rituals. However, it is foolish to say that *all* jewellery is rooted in idol worship.

Finally, returning to our first question, is it right for Pentecostal Christians of Kerala origin to deny baptism to believers who wear jewellery? By all means, *no!* This is not only a mistake but also a sin. This denial has no biblical precedent. It distorts the simplicity of the gospel and challenges the authority of Jesus Christ. The practice of forcing on old tradition – a *mere tradition* – on new converts is a classic case of spiritual abuse and misuse of privilege.

Exclusion From The Lord's Table?

Now, to the second question: Are *Malayali* Pentecostal Churches justified in denying baptised believers their right to fellowship at the Lord's Table just because they wear jewellery or a wedding ring?

Consider this situation. A Pentecostal family – members of an international Pentecostal denomination in Bangalore – is visiting with you and are in your “Kerala” church. Your pastor lets the man partake in the Lord's Table but asks the woman to stay away from it. What might be the reason for this discrimination? The woman was denied access to the Lord's Table just because

she wore jewellery! If the woman should later question the pastor about this exclusion, he might say, “This is our age-old practice, a valued tradition.”

The situation I described is not a rarity in Kerala’s Pentecostal churches. Week after week, month after month, such instances are repeated.

Preachers from overseas are loved and respected for their excellent teaching. They are also seen as birds that lay golden eggs! But when it comes to the Lord’s Table, even they are excluded. Born-again Christians who regularly partake of the Lord’s Table in their own churches abroad are denied such fellowship in *Malayali* Pentecostal churches. This is very similar to what happened in the early church. Let me explain.

The Apostle Paul and Peter were dining with a group of Gentile Christians

in Antioch. Just then, some “staunch” Jewish Christians arrived there. In order to avoid offending these Judaizers, Peter quickly rose from the table and walked away. When he saw the Jews, he wanted them to know that he too was a strict Jew who wouldn’t eat with Gentiles. The dining table was a place that brought out the most visible and stark difference between Gentiles and Jews.

Other Jewish Christians, including Barnabas, imitated Peter and quickly distanced themselves from the Gentile brethren at the table. The Gentile Christians were suddenly lowered to the level of “untouchables” – *as if they did not belong to the Body of Christ.*

When Paul saw Peter’s double standards, he quickly confronted him in order to protect the “*truth of the gospel*” (See Galatians 2:11f).

The heart of the matter was that those Jewish Christians believed that only Jews were the “people of God.” Until and unless Gentiles had become a part of this “people of God” they couldn’t be a part of the Church. And until then, the Judaizers wouldn’t even eat with those Gentiles!

The dining table exposed their definition of the “Church.” It was made visible. Those whom *they* considered to be a part of the “Church” or “people of God” were allowed to eat with them and those whom *they* considered as aliens to the “Church” were excluded from the table fellowship.

This was nothing short of a heresy. It went against the grain of the gospel which said that God was saving Jewish sinners and Gentile sinners to create a *new body* called “the Church.”

This heresy also proclaimed that salvation was only for Jews. “First become a Jew and then become a member of the Church,” said those Jewish Christians to Gentiles. Don’t Pentecostal Christians of Kerala origin say something similar?

“First adopt our tradition, and then we’ll baptise you and welcome you into the Church.”

When one chooses to be a Jew (that is, to be circumcised in the case of males) he or she has to obey all of the Law of Moses (See Galatians 5:3). And by choosing to be under the Law, such Gentiles reject God’s free offer of grace. They reject Jesus Christ and His work on the cross (See Galatians 5:2, 4). This was what Paul described as a “fall from grace.”

When a person falls into sin, he doesn’t fall *from* grace. He continues to

receive God's grace (Rom 5:20b). However, if he relies on his Jewish religious identity to find acceptance before God (instead of coming to God as a needy sinner who has nothing to boast about), he ends up rejecting God's free grace for helpless sinners. Thus, he "falls from grace." *To reject God's grace is to reject the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

The wonderful thing about the gospel is that it creates a new body of "God's people" called the "Church". Ethnic identity, family history, traditions, gender and race do not determine whether one is a member of this "Body" of Christ. Any one who believes in Jesus Christ and is baptised in water gains an official, public entry into this Body. *The Holy Communion or the Lord's Table is one definitive way in which this group of "God's people" celebrate their relationship with Jesus and with one another.*

A person who is not a member of the Church (including someone who was excommunicated) is not permitted to partake of this sacred meal. Therefore, to know who all are considered to be “in” or “out” of the Church, just watch who all are allowed to partake of the Lord’s Table!

If a person who is a genuine member of the Church is denied fellowship at the Lord’s Table, the pastors or leaders who enforce this denial are guilty of making a false judgement. It is the *Lord’s* Table, not *their* table. *It is the Lord who should decide whether someone is “in” or “out” of his Church.*

The Church can excommunicate a member on valid grounds. Wearing jewellery is *not* a valid ground for excommunication.

Do you now realise what it means to exclude someone from the Lord’s Table?

It is equivalent to excommunicating a person from the Church, which is the “Body of Christ.”

Pentecostal churches of Kerala origin have virtually excommunicated almost all of the global Church from their fellowship! Any Christian who wears jewellery is considered a stranger to the Body of Christ. They have created a fenced territory within God’s larger territory and have called this small area “the Church.” They have excluded people whom God has included in His fold. How strange! How dangerous!

The passage that they read during the Communion clearly says that anyone who eats or drinks at the Lord’s Table in an unworthy manner – *without discerning the Lord’s body* – is eating and drinking condemnation.

What does it mean to discern the Lord’s body? It is to recognise that the

bread used in the Communion is not just another piece of bread. It is to recognise that it symbolises the body of Christ that was broken for us; it symbolises the Body of Christ, which is the Church. When we eat it, we declare that we have fellowship with Christ and are members of His Church.

Discerning the Lord's body also requires us to recognise a brother or sister in the Lord as part of the Church. If we misjudge a genuine member of the Lord's Church and deny him/her communion at the Lord's Table, *we are failing to discern the extent of the Lord's body.* We fail to recognize the Lord's body.

Pentecostal churches of Kerala origin that regularly misjudge genuine Christians and deny them access to the Lord's Table are guilty of misjudging the Lord's body. And therefore, these leaders and pastors are *eating and drinking condemnation.*

Almost all the things that Paul talks about Judaizers are applicable to these leaders and to their followers who live to please them! Look at the strong words that Paul uses to describe Judaizers:

- They are “**false brethren**” who always are uncomfortable with the liberty that Gentile Christians enjoyed (Galatians 2:4). Similarly, these *Malayali* Pentecostal Christians are uncomfortable with Christians who take full advantage of their liberty in Christ. They make fun of “new generation churches” and brand them as “necklace Pentecostals” or “golden Pentecostals.” They sit in judgement and condemn others as those who lack “holiness” and “separation” – concepts that they themselves do not understand well.

- **“They only want you to be circumcised so they can brag about it”** (Gal 6:13). Kerala Pentecostalism is all about bragging about one’s “holiness” and “separation.” Preachers brag about their success in getting a woman to renounce her jewellery than in rejoicing about a sinner who was saved by grace. They despise any Christian who wears jewellery. Even a colourful dress or a nice hairdo can raise their eyebrows and set their tongues wagging. White clothes (even those that have yellowed over the years), a clean shaven face, a shirt that is not tucked in, simple *chappals* that expose dirty toes—these are considered marks of godliness and “separation.” In the case of women, it’s worse. Untrimmed and dishevelled hair that dangle like an animal’s tail

make a *Malayali* Pentecostal woman stand out in any crowd in Metro cities. And all this, when their men walk about wearing silk ties and suits! There is no shortage of boasting about “holiness.”

Let me take the liberty to *adapt* Paul’s words to this debate (Gal 6:14-15):

As for me, God forbid that I should boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, my interest in this world died long ago, and the world’s interest in me is also long dead.

It doesn’t make any difference now whether we have *renounced jewellery* or not. What counts is whether we really have been changed into new and different people.

By focussing on their great “sacrifice” of renouncing jewellery, these Pentecostals have shifted their attention

from “boasting in the cross.” How can we boast in the “cross” if we have other things to boast about in the presence of God? Only those who do not have anything to boast about will take refuge in what Christ did for them on the cross.

Does The Bible Prohibit Jewellery?

Now that we have seen how serious an offence it is to deny water baptism or the Holy Communion to people just because they wear jewellery, we shall now examine whether the Bible prohibits the wearing of jewellery. Even if there is no blanket prohibition, does the Bible at least suggest that Christians should not wear jewellery?

Those who engage in lengthy debates quote several verses from the Bible. Many of these passages are not relevant at all to this discussion. Such misuse or abuse of scriptures is an indication of how shallow their knowledge of the Bible is.

For example, Acts 3:6 does not have anything to do with jewellery. Peter and John were just saying that they did not have any money (coins) to offer to the beggar. “*Silver and gold I do not have ...*” Instead they had something that would help the beggar stand on his own feet (literally!).

Similarly, the “gold or silver” mentioned in 1 Peter 1:18 too refers to money. God did not redeem us by paying money as ransom as was done in those days (and even today, to secure the release of hostages).

A verse from the Parable of the Prodigal Son is widely misused for defending the use of jewellery (See Luke 15:22). It’s a parable. The mention of a father asking for a ring for his son has no instructional value for Christians today. Jesus did not say: “Go and get yourself a ring because the prodigal son was given one.” Psalm 45:9 is another example.

That too is a description of Solomon's bride and her wedding attire; it is not an instruction or an exhortation.

Jacob instructed his family to get rid of all idols (Genesis 35:2). One of his wives had stolen her father's idols. Jacob wanted his entire family to get ready to worship the One true God. As a part of the preparation, he wanted them to bathe and change their clothes. His family handed over to him all their idols and earrings. Why earrings? Obviously, these too were contaminated by idolatry in some way or the other. This passage does not suggest that Jacob's family got rid of all their jewellery. Therefore it is foolish to use this passage to strengthen the Kerala Pentecostal argument to force renunciation of jewellery on all who wish to be a part of the Church.

Let me turn to the verses that have some bearing on the church today. The first of these is 1 Timothy 2:8ff which

demands a certain kind of behaviour from men *and* women.

Men are supposed avoid all anger and quarrelling in order to be able pray in a way acceptable to God. Women should *not* strive to draw attention to themselves through outward decorations such as exotic hair arrangements (braids), gold jewellery, pearls or expensive clothes.

Likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, *not* with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works (1 Tim 2:9, 10 *ESV Emphasis mine*)

This verse is not about “gold” or “pearls” or “expensive clothes.” *The point is that women should not work hard to make heads turn to themselves.* Whatever a woman does deliberately

with the intention of making heads turn towards her or to catch someone's lustful attention is sinful. (Now, for that matter, this should apply to men too!)

This instruction in Scripture does not mean that a woman should leave her hair in a dishevelled state. They have to fix their hair in a way that is suited to them. Paul does not prescribe a particular style or hairdo for Christian women. Except for the fact that he forbids braids, he gives Christian women the freedom to decide the details! He leaves it to their conscience. Each woman should ask herself, "Am I overdoing my hair to stand out in a crowd and thus to attract attention to myself?"

Similarly, the restriction on "gold or pearls" is not a ban on jewellery just as the restriction on "costly attire" is not a ban on clothes! Unfortunately, Malayali Pentecostal Christians are unable to differentiate between *gold* and *jewellery*.

They are unable to think of jewellery other than what is made of gold.

When this passage was written, that is, in the first century, people wore jewellery made of several materials – gold, silver, wood, animal bones including ivory, precious stones, pearls, etc. Of these, the costliest must have been jewellery made of gold or pearls.

Paul did not want godly women to have lopsided priorities—to spend their hard earned money on the costliest of jewellery. Instead, he advised Christian women to decorate themselves with good works. Strange enough, we do not hear much about this aspect in Kerala.

Women do not receive much encouragement to do anything let alone good works. The negative is emphasized and stretched beyond its dimensions while the positive is left out! Paul's command to Christian women to “make

themselves attractive by the good things they do” does not mean that godly women should remain outwardly unattractive.

All godly people must bring glory to God by their personal cleanliness and tasteful appearance. Dressing “up” for the glory of God is a sacred duty. Dressing “down” is certainly not a mark of godliness. In India, the land of many religions that glorify asceticism, it is easy to be caught up by teachings that glorify the practice of religious “dressing down.”

As noted above, Paul’s instruction to avoid “expensive clothes” is obviously not a ban on clothes! He just wants godly people to avoid spending a fortune on clothes. What is expensive is indeed a subjective matter. What is expensive and luxurious for an ordinary person may be an item of necessity for another. Here

too, Paul leaves a lot of room for people to decide for themselves.

It may be profitable here to mention that the cost of clothing is not the amount of money that you spend on clothes. **The actual cost of an item you wear is the amount spent on it divided by the number of times you wear it.** Thus, a cheap shirt that lasted just for three months is more expensive than a costly shirt that lasts for three years.

More than the cost of a dress, or a piece of jewellery, or a pair of shoes, it is the *owner's intention* that matters before God.

I must mention here that the Pentecostal community of Kerala is very unfair to women in many ways.

- Their men who travel abroad or appear on television spend a lot of money on expensive suits, ties and footwear especially as a part

of their career strategy. The women, on the other hand, are not allowed to look as attractive as their competitors in the job market.

- **Paul asks the men to avoid anger and quarrelling (1Timothy 2: 8). However, this is not seen as a condition for baptism or for partaking in the Lord's Table. No Malayali pastor has ever told a man, "Get rid of your anger and then I will baptise you." We see church leaders who take pride in their short temper and rush off to court to sue their brothers in Christ! However, these leaders misinterpret verse 9 and prohibit (mostly) women from taking baptism if they intend to continue wearing jewellery.**

It should also be mentioned that there are Pentecostal men and women who

crave for expensive and extravagant clothes, mansions, cars, holidays, etc., even after renouncing jewellery. There are Pentecostal leaders who wear expensive watches and still discriminate against foreigners wearing a wedding ring.

If we understand 1 Timothy 2:8-9 in the proper way, it is easy to understand 1 Peter 3:3-4.

“Do not let your adornment be *merely* outward – arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on *fine* apparel – rather *let it be* the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible *beauty* of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God.” (NKJV)

It is obvious that Peter is not instructing Christian women (whose husbands were yet to believe) to shun clothing or apparel. His focus, like Apostle Paul's, is on extravagance and overspending on outward adornment. It

is not clothes that we should avoid; we need to shun *expensive clothes*. Similarly, it is not jewellery that we should shun; we must shun the *costliest* of jewellery—whether it is gold or pearls or platinum. The most expensive jewellery of modern times is not gold or pearls; they are made of platinum and diamonds.

Peter insists that a Christian woman shouldn't be noticed for outward adornments. She should get distinguished by the overwhelming charm of her inner beauty—that of a gentle and quiet spirit. The ungodly world today does not appreciate or highlight the need for gentleness or quietness! They want women to be *loud* and *bold*. *Bold* clothes are, sadly, clothes that reveal more skin! I don't understand why people need *boldness* to be naked or scantily dressed!

Conclusion

The Bible does not prohibit the use of jewellery.

The use of jewellery is not a valid ground for the denial of baptism or for the exclusion of Christians from the Lord's Table. People who, on account of jewellery, deny water baptism to repentant believers or exclude genuine believers from the Lord's Table are guilty of desecrating the Church's ordinances. They abuse their authority.

The Bible exhorts godly men to shun arguments and fights. At the same time, the Bible exhorts godly women to be modest – in clothing, jewellery and hair arrangement. They should not strive to get undue attention from others by going for the most expensive clothes or

expensive jewellery. Godly women must focus on decorating themselves with good works of charity and in cultivating a gentle and quite spirit.

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