The Christian And Tattoos

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Can Christians get ink?

It is sometimes claimed that all tattoos are sinful, and that Christians therefore should never get a tattoo. But the Bible is not quite so clear on this issue as such claimants sometimes pretend. Sam Storms explains in an article on tattoos;

> The fact is, the Bible is not as explicit and unyielding on this issue as some might like. If there were a specific and undeniable commandment in the NT that addressed the point, we probably wouldn't be having this conversation. So I encourage everyone to be gracious and gentle at the same time we give full consideration to the principles set forth in God's Word.

He offers some helpful cautions and suggestions. The Bible neither *commands* tattoos, nor *condemns* them as sin. But that doesn't mean the Bible has nothing to say of relevance.

I find several Bible passages at least marginally relevant. We will examine here the two "tattoo taboo" passages (Lev. 19:27-28; I Cor. 6:19-20). Then we will suggest that perhaps the Israelites were pictured as getting tattoos to declare their allegiance to God (Is. 44:5), while God may even be metaphorically pictured as writing Israel's name on his own hand (Is. 49:16). Then we note that the Song of Songs might provide some suggestive precedent for "Couples Ink" (Song 8:6), while Paul likely referred to the practice of being "branded" by a tattoo metaphorically by his persecution (Gal. 6:17). Finally, we will see that in the Apocalypse the Beast marks his own with a tattoo (Rev. 13:16), while God likewise marks his own with his own name (Rev. 3:12; 7:3; 14:1; 22:4), in accordance with OT prophecy. It might even be possible that John pictures Christ coming with his name imprinted on a thigh tattoo (Rev. 19:12-16). We will conclude with some reflections on and cautions about tattoos in the present.

To the text!

Indicting All Ink? - Lev. 19:28

Lev. 19:28 prohibits tattooing for the Israelites, and read superficially, this could seem to be an absolute condemnation of all tattoos today;

> *Ye shall not round the corners of your heads, neither shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard.*
> *28 Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you:*
> *I am the Lord.*
> (Lev. 19:27–28, KJV)

But there is likely a specific context in view. Mark Rooker explains of vs. 27-28;

> These two verses prohibit cutting the hair on the side of the head or the beard and cutting the body either for the dead or with tattoo marks. These activities were practiced by pagans especially during times of mourning for the dead. The Israelites were not to emulate pagan practices in this regard since they maintained a sacredness for life and for the human body.
> - Mark F. Rooker, Leviticus, vol. 3A, *NAC* , 262.

Some translations of the Dead Sea Scrolls seem to make this connection even more explicit (though this may be merely an assumption of the translator - I'm not sure), "You must not incise your flesh or tattoo yourselves for the dead, for you are a people holy to the Lord your God" (Wise, Abegg, and Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation, pg.* 617).

Others do not see pagan mourning practices in view in the passage, pointing out that while grammatically the prohibition about cutting the flesh is directly linked to pagan mourning, the connection of this ritual to tattoos is less explicit in the text, and finds little historical corroboration outside the Bible (see especially here). Some thus see a less specific connection with idolatry at play (perhaps inscribing the name of a pagan deity with a tattoo), while others see the "branding" of slaves that we discuss below in view, though still usually recognizing that the verse is not an absolute prohibition of tattoos today.

Regardless of *which* specific background stands behind the prohibition, the passage in Leviticus is not an absolute statement that tattoos are inherently evil. When the purpose in view (pagan mourning rituals, or identification with idolatry, etc.) is not present, it is not likely that the passage would apply, any more than its prohibition of the cutting of the body in the same verse would make all surgery sinful, or, its prohibition of shaving the hair would make all haircuts sinful.

In levitical law it's essential to recognize what is actually being opposed, often by idolatrous association, not just the specific practice in which it appears, which usually isn't inherently a problem. For example, cooking a goat in its mothers milk is not some inherent gastrointestinal sin, but is prohibited because there is an idolatrous connection. Scott McKnight lists some ten commands in Lev. 19, but points out that Christians almost universally understand instinctively that we shouldn't translate most of them literally into our own age;

> We don't keep the Sabbath [19:3] (Friday night sundown to Saturday night sundown; Sunday is not the same as Sabbath). We don't harvest only some of our crops [19:9-10] (if we even harvest). We don't worry about planting two kinds of seed [19:19] (if we plant at all). We don't worry about wearing garments made of more than one substance [19:19] —cotton and polyester blends, for example (if we even pay attention). We don't hesitate to eat medium to rare meats [19:26] (unless vegetarian). We don't have moral issues in cutting our earlocks [19:27] (at least I don't). We (most of us that is) don't think tattoos are sinful. We don't always (or ever!) stand up when older folks walk into the room [19:32].
> - McKnight, Scot. *The Blue Parakeet*, 2nd Ed., pg. 126-127.

Sometimes there are questions about a few of these, but we seem to inherently recognize that we can't just take every command from this passage without thought, when we can see no reason behind it, and assume it literally applies today with no adaptation. Yet we also instinctively realize that a command like "love your neighbor" (19:18) is inherently and timelessly binding on us all, because of its weight in the NT and on the lips of Jesus. Gordon Fee and Douglass Stuart caution us that in reading such OT laws, "Only that which is explicitly renewed from the Old Testament law can be considered part of the New Testament 'law of Christ' (cf. Gal 6:2)....No other specific Old Testament laws can be demonstrated to be binding on Christians..." (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Fourth Ed., pg. 174–175).

We must not be hermeneutically naive or ethically immature in how we bring such commands into the NT age.

Your Body as a Temple - I Cor. 6:19-20

Another verse used to condemn tattoos by some Christians is Paul's description of the believer's body as a temple;

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?
You are not your own, 20 for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.
(1 Co 6:19–20, ESV)

There *are* important principles here about valuing the body, and they should be kept in mind when considering a tattoo. But Paul's context is explicitly about fleeing from sexual immorality (6:13-18), not ink. One could hardly argue that because the body is God's temple, we should never mark it, since both the Tabernacle and the OT Temple were decorated extravagantly, quite like a palace (I Chron. 29, etc.). And NT Church buildings have a rather long history of being extravagantly adorned. (If anything, such a passage might then be an argument *for* a tattoo!)

Besides this, someone who argues that because the body is sacred it must not be marked would have a hard time allowing with any consistency reparative surgery, dental work, (braces, invisalign, or, especially, whitening), cosmetic surgery, hair dye jobs, or even the OT practice of circumcision that *permanently* marked out the OT people, directly prescribed by God!

That is, this passage surely urges *caution*, but contains no explicit *prohibition*.

Israelite Tattoos of Divine Ownership - Is. 44:5

In Is. 44:5, the prophet seems to explain that the Israelites would tattoo “I belong to YAHWEH” on their hands to identify themselves as belonging to God. This was a well established way of marking a slave, and the Israelites would want in the End to boldly proclaim that they belonged to the Lord.

This one will say, ‘I am the Lord’s,’
another will call on the name of Jacob,
and another will write on his hand, ‘The Lord’s,’
and name himself by the name of Israel.”
(Isaiah 44:5, ESV)

A handful of scholars disagree with this translation. Because there is no preposition on the word for “hand,” some older translations rendered the passage “mark *with* the hand,” but this is conjecture, and given the historical context, “on the hand” is almost surely what is meant. (Oswalt disagrees, not primarily from anything inherent in the text, but because he takes Lev. 19:28 as an absolute prohibition, and thus doesn't think it likely that this could be a reference to a tattoo. We have suggested above that this is misreading the levitical prohibition). Most modern translations agree, rendering something like the ESV here. Gary Smith in the NAC explains that this is a "sign of identification" that "connects these people to God himself." The tattoo openly proclaims their devotion to God and sparks conversation wherein that allegiance can be confessed boldly;

> In their conversations with others they will openly confess, “I belong to the Lord.” This will not be something that they will be ashamed of or something they will hide from others. This phraseology (“belonging to the Lord”) has parallelism with the writings on jars found in Palestine that claim that the content of certain clay pots “belong to the king.” In addition, it is known that some slaves had the name of their master on their skin. The title these people will have on their hand will be “belonging to the Lord.”

Shalom Paul explains;

> Another shall engrave on his hand, ’לה: “Belonging to the Lord” (again, the *lamed* denoting “belonging to”), i.e., he shall be counted as a worshiper of the Israelite God. The tattooing of the hand, arm, or other body parts to indicate ownership was common throughout the ancient world (cf. Ezek 9:4), and in Mesopotamia slaves especially were marked in this way.

See more details here.

Christians today sometimes get ink for virtually this exact same purpose, following a tradition that in some ways goes back thousands of years to Isaiah's day. They mark out their devotion to God, signifiant ways that he has worked in their lives, or personally meaningfully art that reminds them of his nature. For example, one friend, Bryce Richards, has this ink;

The Celtic Trinity Knot (Representing Father, Son, and Spirit), which Bryce drew himself, is superimposed over a Celtic Cross with "God With Us" in Hebrew Script beneath it, powerfully bringing together in a creative and beautiful piece of art the God who is Trinity, declared in the gospel of Christ's cross, who is Himself "Immanuel."

His wife Kelley recently got this beautiful piece;

"Never Lose The Wonder" is inscribed above it, in beautiful commemoration, in her beloved late father's handwriting. She explains,

> "The tattoo is a reminder to never lose the wonder of my salvation, the wonder of this life that I have because of the sacrifice Jesus made. It is written in my earthly father's handwriting to represent my heavenly Father."

Beneath this impactful script is a floral tattoo representing Romans 11:36, "For from Him, through Him, and to Him are all things." She explains that, "The triangle represents the trinity - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The flowers and leaves represent growth, fruitfulness, and all good things in life. Every good thing comes from God, is possible because of Jesus, and is ultimately for His glory."

Many other examples could be given. Just ask any friend with ink - they will gladly share its meaning!

God Gets A Tattoo? - Is. 49:16

Another passage is relevant as well. The prophet seems to refer to this same practice in a touching and more endearing context in 49:16. The normal custom was for a master to tattoo his name on the slave, to boldly proclaim ownership. But the prophet, in a twist, declares that Yahweh, metaphorically, marks Israel's name on *his* hands to remember her always;

Can a woman forget her nursing child,
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.
16 Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are continually before me.
(Isaiah 49:15–16 ESV)

Oswalt explains that this engraving is made on the palms, as a mark of intimacy and immediacy. God's love and condescension is on display;

> Here is the opposite of the normal practice. Instead of the master's name being written on the servant's hand, the servant's name is written on the master's hand. This is the divine condescension that we have come to expect throughout the book. The master does not expect the servant somehow to attain his height; rather, the master comes down to the servant's place (11:1–4; 30:18; 57:15–16; 66:2).
> - Isaiah 49:16 (NICOT Is 40–66)

"This is an expression of the same kind of passionate devotion that the Israelites will express toward God (44:5); the act of a young lover whose thoughts and feelings are solely of the beloved. Forget her? The most fascinating thing in the world, written everywhere, is her name, even on one's hands."
- John Oswalt
(Tweet This)

One would be hard pressed to claim that God represents himself metaphorically as *sinning,* as might be the case if such marks were somehow inherently sinful. And even if the reference is to cutting the flesh in an engraving rather than tattooing *per se*, one would face the same problems with Lev. 19:27-28, which again suggests that the levitical passage must be read as referring to some specific contextual element, (even if we cannot recover much historically about the connection of those practices to tattooing).

Could "Couples Ink" have a Precedent in The Song of Love? - Song of Songs 8:6

In what may be the most powerful verse of the Song of Songs, the woman makes a bold request of her lover;

Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm,
for love is strong as death,
jealousy is fierce as the grave.
(Song of Songs 8:6, ESV)

The reference is to the ancient practice of using a seal, probably here a stamp, to mark out ownership and possession. The image is pure poetry, and a literal tattoo is not in view. Tremper Longman and Dan Allender rightly point out that comparing such a powerful line to a tattoo would trivialize this potent imagery of lovers totally giving themselves to one another (c.f. I Cor. 7:4). Yet they still are willing to suggestively explain;

> The woman by asking the man to set her like a seal on his heart and arm is thus asking the man to display her ownership of him in a public way. Indeed, by specifying the heart (inside) and his arm (outside), she wants him, body and soul, to completely acknowledge their loyal love for each other. It is one of the most striking images in the poetic ensemble. First, it is radical that a woman in that culture would ask a man to publicly bear her name as the owner of his life. Second, it implies the embedding of a mark or scar that serves as a brand of loyalty. He is hers, and he is loyal to no other. It trivializes the concept to consider this a form of tattoo, but in our culture of transitory impermanence a tattoo is not far from what she is asking.
> - *God Loves Sex: An Honest Conversation about Sexual Desire and Holiness*, pg. 142.

Tattoos in Paul?

In Gal. 6:17, Paul describes himself as bearing "the marks of the Lord Jesus."

"From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus."
(Gal. 6:17, ESV)

The reference is almost surely to the wounds of persecution which he bears. He views these through the light of the OT practice of marking slaves with a tattoo, and thus sees himself as having been metaphorically "branded" as belonging to Jesus. His physical wounds are in view, but the passage hints again at the practice noted above in Is. 44:5 of marking slaves with a tattoo to denote ownership. Moo explains;

> The word occurs only once else in Biblical Greek, with uncertain meaning (Song 1:11), but it was used in the ancient world to refer to the "brand" that masters sometimes used to mark ownership of slaves and to religious tattoos worn by some devotees of various religions. Explicit reference to his "body" makes clear that Paul is referring to physical marks of some sort, but just what they were or what they signified is debated...Some have thought that the reference might be to a mark on his body deliberately made to show his allegiance to Christ (such as the cross in our day...). Most interpreters, however, think that the reference is to scars and other marks on Paul's body that are the result of his persecution on behalf of Christ....In either event, Paul probably intends these physical scars to stand in contrast to the physical mark of circumcision. As Eastman...paraphrases Paul's point, " 'You want something to brag about? You want identity markers? I'll give you identity markers! You see these scars? I'm branded for Jesus. Become like me!' "
- Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians, BECNT*, pg. 404.

Tattoos in the Apocalypse

In John's vision of the Apocalypse, several other instances of tattooing show up. I won't deal here with the complex issues of how to approach the book as a whole. I'm prone to read most all of what follows as metaphor, while others tend to treat the text more literally. But those questions matter little to our point here.

The Mark Of The Beast

First up is reference to the so-called, "Mark of the beast" in Rev. 13:16. Contrary to some exegetically absurd claims that this is a reference to a computer chip inserted under the skin, John's language rather, as we have noted before, refers explicitly to a stamp or tattoo of some kind on the *surface* of the skin which will mark out allegiance to the Beast (c.f., 17:5).

The Mark Of God's Own

But second, the corollary to this is that *God* in turn marks out his own. In Rev. 7:3, the 144,000 are "sealed" with a mark on their foreheads. 14:1 makes it explicit that what is written in this mark is "his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads." Regardless of how one interprets the 144,000, in 22:4 this same description is given of the inhabitants of the new Jerusalem, "They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads." And in fact, in 3:12, this is given as a promise all believers who persevere, in the letter to the Church in Philadelphia;

> *"The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name."*

Osborne explains;

> The second promise is the new "name" written on the believer (for background see above). This is a threefold "name" (note the repetition of ["name"], before each). To have "the name of my God" is to belong to him, to be of his essence and to be his child (compare the "adoption" theology of Rom. 8:14–17). As several point out... the OT teaches that every Israelite had the name of God placed on himself or herself (Num. 6:27; Deut. 28:10; Isa. 43:7; Dan. 9:18–19). This passage could well also contain an echo of Isa. 62:2 (the "new name bestowed" by the Lord). In Revelation itself, the saints are first sealed on their forehead (7:3) and then given the name of God (14:1; 22:4) in opposition to the name of the beast on its followers (13:17; 14:11).
- Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation, BECNT*, pg .198.

G.K. Beale makes plain that the name is inscribed on the believer himself (NIGTC, pg. 295), while Aune suggests that, "This is a metaphor for both divine ownership and the dedication of the one so inscribed to God. This is perhaps an allusion to Exod 28:36–38, where instructions are given for writing the inscription 'Holy to the Lord' on a gold plate to be mounted on the front of Aaron's high priestly headdress, on his forehead" (David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5, vol. 52A*, WBC, pg. 242–243 - see also his lengthy excursus).

Naturally, all of this is metaphor, probably harking back to the practices noted above, either of marking a slave with a tattoo for ownership, or of marking oneself with the name of a diety that is worshipped. But however you feel about tattoos now, in this metaphorical description of the coming age at least, it seems there is one waiting for you.

A Tattoo on Jesus?

One final passage is worth noting. John describes Jesus in Rev. 19 as the rider on a white horse, coming in judgement. And he is marked with a name;

...and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. 13 He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. 14 And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. 15 From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which

to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. 16 On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.
(Rev. 19:12–16)

There is some debate about how to render the phrase, "on his robe and on his thigh." It may mean that the name is written only on the thigh section of his robe, not on himself. But it may also mean that the name is written on both, party visible on his thigh beneath his robe. If this is the case, then Jesus himself is metaphorically pictured as having his own unique tattoo.

All Things in Balance

However, this is no wholesale endorsement of all tattoos. There is a trend sometimes to become obsessed with getting new ink. I've had friends like this, who have virtually covered their body, or large portions of it. I'm not sure that's always healthy. Especially not when it becomes a kind of addiction, where one *must* have new ink. Anything that controls us can be a problem for a believer. Balance is healthy.

Some ink has clearly immoral overtones, which I suspect no believer could seek in good conscience. But those who have ink they regret might still turn it redemptively to the glory of God (see Sam's article above). Surely, regretted ink should be no cause for shame or guilt in a forgiven believer, and the church must work against its cultural prejudices to always be a place where all are always welcome, and actually perceive that welcome.

At the end of the day, I have never gotten any and probably never will. But that's just me. You have total liberty to totally abstain and never get one. And you should allow the same liberty to those who *do* decide to get one, who glorify God by it. For most people they are simply a form of self expression. Their morality is tied up in what is being expressed and what the heart is behind the expression.

Tattoos In Christian History And Today

In 1999, *Christianity Today* noted, that, "For a growing number of Christians, tattoos are being used as a permanent proclamation of faith." They share an example of how Derrick Rachul uses his as a witnessing tool, then point out that,

> Sociologists have noted the trend. "For a small but growing subculture within evangelical Christianity, religious tattooing is becoming an increasingly legitimate expression of individuality, identity, and faith"... Last year, tattoo artists from almost 100 U.S. tattoo parlors joined the newly formed Christian Tattoo Association.
>
> - "North American Report," *Christianity Today* (Carol Stream, IL: *Christianity Today*, 1999), 17.

The Christian Century noted the work of several researchers, explaining that,

> Since the Emperor Constantine banned the practice in the third century because it "violated God's handiwork," attempts by religious authorities to prohibit tattoing have met with limited success. Pilgrims to Jerusalem up until modern times marked themselves with Christian symbols to commemorate their journey, the three researchers report.

In "Marked For Christ: The Sacred Symbolism Of Religious Tattoos," Anna Nussbaum Keating notes that, "According to the Pew Research Center, 40 percent of Americans between the ages of 26 and 40 have at least one tattoo." [These stats fluctuate, and some newer ones are here.] She further explains that, "The tradition of Christian tattoos goes back hundreds of years in the Egyptian Coptic church but is relatively new in the West..." Younger Christians in particular have turned ancient Christians symbols into tattoo art, connecting the ancient and modern. She concludes that, "Tattoos with religious themes remind us that there are as many different kinds of holiness as there are people and that the saints of today may look different than those of ages past. What remains the same is that the light of Christ shines through them all."

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> - Anna Nussbaum Keating
> (Tweet This)

There's a *cultural* aversion to them which obtains in some groups. But cultural norms, however helpful or important, should never be passed off as though they were biblical laws. Several of our young people have gotten tasteful and meaningful (sometimes explicitly Christian) ones, with approval of myself at times, and always with the support of their parents. Bridgett Ross, a friend, got her first one, an olive branch, pictured here;

She explains, "Olive branches symbolize peace and this is a reminder for me to walk with peace wherever I go. It's also a remainder of where I came from." She cites Rom. 11:16-19 and explains that her ink constantly reminds her of Paul's image that she has been "grafted in" to the New Covenant like a wild olive branch.

I always urge anyone considering one to think through the decision carefully. It's one thing to get a new haircut that can be changed in a few weeks or months. It's another thing to place a decoration on your body that you cannot ever take back (they can be removed, but the bigger the tattoo the bigger the mark from the removal, and it is often ungainly).

Chuckk Gerwig issues a similar caution, noting that a tattoo, "is a significant life-choice and should be only entered into with a great deal of forethought." He offers the following questions to ask before getting one;

- Am I legally of an age to get a tattoo?
- If I live with my parents, would my parents support my decision?
- Would I be defying the authority God gave my parents over me at my current age?
- Would I still want this particular image when I get older?
- What if my future mate wouldn't like having to see this image for a lifetime?
- Would this tattoo be in an area of my body that would be plainly visible? – Many people do unfairly judge people with tattoos as being "second-class."
- Would this image bring God glory?
- Do I feel fully convinced that tattoos are allowable for Christians?

His fifth question is striking, especially for young people. Regardless of how you feel about the tattoo you are thinking about getting, if you are single and hope one day to be married, how might your future partner feel? What if ink were a "deal-breaker" for him or her? Do you want it so bad that you would forfeit relationship with them for it? In a much longer document he offers a thorough analysis of the history and morality/immorality of tattoos.

> "Regardless of how you feel about the tattoo you are thinking about getting, if you are single and hope one day to be married, how might your *future partner* feel? What if ink were a 'deal-breaker' for him or her?"
> (Tweet This)

I would concur with Paul's words, which I think eminently applicable here. If you don't get one, then glorify God by your *abstinence*. If you do get one, then glorify God by your *ink*. Carefully and wisely consider any decision that affects your body in such a permeant way. But remember that the Kingdom of God is neither ink nor non-ink.

"Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God."
(1 Cor. 10:31, KJV)

The Conclusion Of The Whole Matter

In sum, tattoos can be pagan (Lev. 19:28), but aren't inherently so. Isaiah described Israel as getting them to honor God and show their allegiance to him (44:5), and may have metaphorically described God as getting one to display his love for his people (49:16). Couples Ink might in some small way manifest something of the jealous monogamous commitment of the Song of Song (8:6). Paul likely referred to the practice in describing his wounds from persecution as marking him out as beginning to Christ (Gal. 6:17). John describes both the Beast using them to mark his own (Rev. 13:16; 17:5), and probably the Father using them to mark his own (Rev. 3:12; 7:3; 14:1; 22:4), an accordance with a variety of OT prophecies. He may even have described Jesus as having one when he comes in glory (Rev. 19:12-16). Paul's general admonition stands - *Do or don't, but when you do or don't, do or don't for the purpose of glorifying God* (I Cor. 10:31).

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