

A White Paper Brief on the subject of “Christians and Tattoos, And the Ongoing Controversy of the Modern Day Relevance of the Old Testament Prohibition.” By Cere Muscarella

Overview

There is a lot of saber rattling and collateral damage on both sides of the “should Christians have tattoos” issue. Basically, it stems from a non-scholarly approach to the Old Testament writings; An Old-Testament-*only* approach to the controversy; An ignorance of a much larger body of truth rising from the New Testament; And a lack of grace from all the people involved.

Introduction

There’s a lot of controversy in the Christian world concerning the current wave of body modification: i.e. tattoos, piercings, cuttings, mutilation, etc. Walk down any beach and you’ll see more people with tattoos and piercings than without. Walk the hallways of almost any high school in America and you’ll see an increasing number of young people with some form of body mods. Some go to the extremes of tongue splitting, needle play, scarification and even autophagy. Look around in churches across the nation and you’ll find surprisingly few of the genuine subculture in attendance, but a new emergence of tattoos and studs on the bodies of regular attendees.

[Note: In both the latter cases, there is a problem of communication between the church and these living canvasses. In the first there is a perception (and probably a reality in some mainline streams) of rejection of painted people. They feel looked down on (and shouldn’t be) and unloved (which is not the nature of God or of the true church). The church is not doing a very good job reaching these folks! In the second case of Christians emerging with ink and studs, there is the presence of self-rule, smugness toward bible scholarship, and where scripture is employed in their self justifying arguments, there is errancy. This also is a problem of the church not doing its job very well!]

Of course serious Christians should want to know God’s opinion on all aspects of their lives, including body modification. Understanding His will should be based on careful scholarship of the Word of God without imposing personal opinions and rationale for actions already taken or decisions already made. “I am a Christian... I have a tattoo... therefore God is okay with Christians and tattoos...” is hardly a sound basis for argument. “I am a Christian... I want a tattoo... I have made up my mind to get one as soon as I can find someone who agrees with my position...” isn’t either.

The problem for some Christians begins with many voices in the world, both secular and Christian. Actually, you can find ammunition for your personal perspective on both sides. There are secular people who think forms of body modification are ridiculous. They write the whole movement off as just another, albeit bloody, counter-culture. There are Christians who think body mods are cool and edgy. They want to dive into the subculture to be more “relevant to those they’ve been sent to save.” There are secularists who think more is better and so they cover as much of their body with inks, dyes, studs and cuttings as they can. And there are Christians who reject the whole movement as devilish and don’t want to dirty themselves by dealing with it. All sides seem so convinced and convincing, and it’s unsettling for all but the hardiest of Christians. The problem of rightly interpreting God’s heart compounds when you consider the varying levels of commitment to the Christian life: the interpretive and application differences between religionists, converts, disciples and followers.

The “Old” Common Denominator

On the weak side of the debate over Christians and tattoos is the warfare over the validity of the Old Testament injunction in Leviticus 19:28 against tattooing. The “Old” in Old Testament and the old world sound of “The Book of Leviticus” paints cob-webbed pictures over the ageless truths recorded there. Words like “archaic,” “conservative,” “prudish,” and “outmoded” are assigned to those who argue for keeping the OT commandments. “Edgy,” “modern,” “relative and “liberated” are the words used to describe the new wave of Christians sporting tattoos and body jewelry. The mantra goes something like this, “Don’t you know those old Levitical era rules have been done away with. How can you guys be so old fashioned in your beliefs. You have to get with it!” That is a case-in-point of superficial scholarship.

The Old Testament argument doesn’t center in chapter 19, verse 28. To be fair to the old texts you would have to go all the way back to chapter one but that would require a thesis rather than a brief. For brevity we can pick up in chapter 18, a point in an ongoing address beginning with these words, “*You will not be like the world I brought you out of* – You will do my judgments and keep my ordinances to walk in them because I am the Lord your God...” Then the chapter carries injunctions against incest, homosexuality and bestiality... all still in force today regardless of Supreme Court rulings and popular opinions.

Then chapter 19 continues with laws of mercy and righteousness, “You will be holy, because I am holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” Then the proclamations begin anew: Honor your father and mother, keep the Sabbath holy, have no idols, worship according to prescription, be benevolent in your prosperity, do not steal, do not lie, do what you say you are going to do, do not use the name of God in vain, do not withhold what is right from your friends and workers, do not curse the deaf or trip the blind (issues of cruelty and mockery), be fair, do not show favoritism among men, don’t gossip, don’t foster hate or exact revenge, love your neighbor as yourself, maintain high standards against compromise, don’t have last-minute sex with someone engaged to another, there’s a rule for farming, don’t eat blood, don’t be involved with fortune telling or magic, don’t involve yourself in ritualistic disfigurement for the dead, *don’t tattoo your body*, don’t prostitute your daughter, observe a day of holiness, don’t defile yourself entertaining witches and wizards (Hello Harry Potter!), honor the elders among you, be kind to strangers, don’t cheat in business...

How is it that many of today’s Christians feel justified lifting out the injunction against tattooing and discarding it as Old Testament refuse when it is embedded in a list like that? Where did we get the key to select certain commands for acceptance and others for rejection? Who produced it? And what does a Christian do with the “And you will observe *all my statutes and all my judgments and do them*: I am the Lord?”

The scripture is plain that there will come times when men will no longer heed the doctrine once delivered to the saints for safekeeping – that they will come under the sway of seducing spirits and find for themselves false “scholars” saying what they want to hear... Having itching ears and wandering ways they will exalt those teachers and follow them and walk far from those defending the faith as it was once delivered!

Many “modern,” self-focused, Christians and their personal theologians disregard the “don’t tattoo your body” injunction on one of two, or both, lines of defense. (Though arguments against “whole” faith are “ancient” and not modern at all...)

The first line of reasoning: “The injunction against tattooing has to do with ritual, superstitious shavings of head and beard and cuttings and marking on your flesh *for the dead*.” The smarter argument mixes the three phrases immediately preceding the tattoo phrase together and concludes that if you don’t mar, cut or

mark yourself with a skull and cross bones or the name, picture or symbol of someone dead then its okay to proceed with the chosen artistry. Though it could be left in combination with the “dead” concept (which is further expanded in Lev 21:5, Deut 14:1, Jer 16:6, 48:37) it is a stand alone issue.

Second reasoning: “There are just some things that are no longer relevant in the Leviticus era texts.” And then they argue for the obsolescence of the tattoo injunction on the presence of verbiage like the last phrase of verse 19 citing: “You will not let your animals cross breed, nor sow your fields with mixed seeds, **nor wear a garment of mingled linen and wool.**” Echoing the mantra of one of their internet theologians, they mockingly say, “See, if you can’t be tattooed, you can’t wear clothes made from wool and linen...” and further, “And you can’t shave your head or trim your beard...” If the proper interpretation of God’s Word was that a man could not shave his head or beard or wear fabric blends, then assuredly all of us who do so would be in sin *because God’s Word is eternal if nothing else*. God would still be true and every man would be made out a liar even if the whole world ignored His command and deemed it “outmoded and updated!” Thankfully, that is not what the Word of God implies. And there is a huge difference between not getting the relevance of God’s truth and discarding it because you don’t. The whole defense is straw-grabbing effort to support our exercise of independence from God. (And notice that it only takes one seemingly scholarly person saying what people want to hear to shut out the voices of hundreds of others who are genuine scholars.)

[Note: Not only are these defense strategies a travesty of “rightly dividing the word of truth,” the arguments invoke a mockery of God’s timeless wisdom and seek to intimidate a moralist position by inciting a person’s negative feelings toward being the proponent of “returning to the stone age.” It’s an old debate tactic of trying to make your opponent feel bad about the stand they have taken, to take off their edge, make them weak in their debate, to neutralize their argument and/ or defeat them completely!]

The short resolution to the Old Testament squabble would go something like this: 1. “*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.*” 2. That “man lives by *every word* that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.” 3. That Jesus “*did not come to destroy the law, or the prophets: but to fulfill it.*” He said, “I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, *one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law*, till all is fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” 4. Jesus superceded certain Old Testament *ceremonial laws* like offering the blood of bulls and goats and lambs and birds, for sin, because His blood was the once-for-all-time offering for the sins of men, but all the other laws were left in tact as minimum moral legislation. Only those who know Jesus and love Him and keep the two great commands (to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind... and to love one another as yourself – which does no wrong to God or man) are the ones not subject to the old codes, because they exceed them living His new way!

Of course, that would make it too easy. And, admittedly, it is old fashioned to believe something without challenging it just because God said it! And someone can still say, “Well, that’s your interpretation. And how do we know that you’ve interpreted the bible rightly? What makes what you say more valid than what someone else has said?” So let’s leave the Old Testament debate to the leather chairs and stodgy atmospheres of higher learning... and let’s get edgy with New Testament truths!

The New Testament Approach to Body Mods

How about Jesus and Paul? Can they play among the big dogs? Why is the whole body mod issue almost exclusively approached from the Old Testament? What about the New Testament input that every

Christian should have to consider before getting a tattoo, nose ring, lip, brow or tongue stud, or a pudenda or scrotal pin?

Rules of engagement:

1.) Self Rule! “What? Don’t you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and you are not your own? You are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s” 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20.

As a Christian, you simply do not have the right to do anything you want to with your life; spirit, soul or body. It all belongs to Him! “We, who were dead in sin, were made alive in Christ.” “You were crucified with Christ and you no longer live... except with the life He has given you to live by the faith of the Son of God.” This is contrary to the prevailing self-rule mentality of people involved in body modification. In the words of Stephen Gilbert, author of *Tattoo History: A Source Book*

“Why tattoo? There seems to be another motive beneath the surface: a primitive, profound and inexplicable fascination with the process of puncturing the skin, letting blood, and consenting to change the body for life. This mystery has been touched on by many of the authors whose work is included here, but it remains a mystery: something which is sensed intuitively, but defies rational explanation.” (Italics added)

The mystery he is recognizing has been revealed in the light of Jesus! Sinful and blind men love self more than God, independence more than surrender, darkness more than light! At the heart of every tattoo, piercing or cutting experience is the hardcore issue of self-rule, “It’s my body, I will do whatever I want with it, whenever I want!” As the author testifies, “It defies rational explanation!” And how the rationale spirals downward when people who say they know and love God and have received Jesus as their Savior refuse to yield their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to Him. They are glad to belong to “another country” as the scripture says but continue to be shaped by the world of their bondage. They embrace eternity by faith for safety sake but hold on to their rights to do whatever they want with their bodies here and now – at great risk! They refuse to turn over every part of their lives to Jesus and the questions beg answers, “What part of your life didn’t He purchase? What part of your life is worth keeping back for yourself? What is keeping you from delivering to Him all that He purchased? Should He feel privileged about getting the part of you He has?”

2.) Tagging the Temple. “We also as living stones are being built up into a spiritual house...” Most people would stand aghast at the site of a church or temple that had been defaced by graffiti. Words like “Disrespectful!” “Devilish!” “We have laws for punishing criminals who do such things” would form some of the outcry! All that for buildings made with men’s hands! How much greater then should be the Christian stand toward the “house of God” *which we are? We are His temple and at the same time stewards of it!* How do you feel, inside, about defacing the temples of God with animals and reptiles, pornography, skulls, bones, drug paraphernalia, other people’s names, mottos, slave markings (necklaces, bracelets, arm, leg and ankle bands), prideful displays of membership, etc? What “artistry” is appropriate to paint on the temple of God? What would be impressive to the God of Glory?

3.) WWJD? Can any serious follower of Christ, visualizing “What Would Jesus Do,” see Him submitting His beautiful body to the local tattoo artist? Can any serious follower of Jesus who is, “Always where He is, never where He isn’t” ever justify a walk-in for a quick stud or fresh coat of paint? Throughout history, especially in times of great persecution, some Christians have had their bodies tattooed with a cross or the name “Jesus” or some other Christian symbol. In their minds it boldly testifies to their love and allegiance and at the same time gives them an edge against the possibility of denying Him. As noble as that seems at first blush, does the reasoning of man ever accomplish the desires of God? Does having “Jesus” tattooed on your arm speak louder than His graceful words flowing from a bold heart? Does it show strength to

stand for faith because you can't deny a mark on your body, or is it raw courage to boldly declare your love when you could squeak out of your moment of trial? Forget the rhetoric, the bottom line is: Would Jesus ever submit Himself into the hands of a tattoo artist when He's so fully commended into the hands of God? What could an artist leave on Him that would give Him more beauty or self-worth? What Would Jesus Do? Whatever it is, you should be doing it. Whatever it isn't, you should flee from!

4.) The virginal experience! In the nineteenth chapter of the Book of Revelation, Jesus is previewed returning to earth and is seen with writing on His thigh that says, "King of Kings, Lord of Lords." The twenty-second Chapter tells us that in that day His name, a new name (3:12), will be written on each of us. What it is we do not know. How it will actually be accomplished, we are not told. But the fact that he will write His moniker on us is a done deal! In some fashion He will give us an eternal mark; of which tattooing here is a mere counterfeit. What a sorrow it will be for those destined to be held and touched and etched to confess, "This is real nice Jesus... but I've been here, I've done it...!" How many times, in how many ways, do we have to submit ourselves to the despoiling of the Counterfeiter? Like waiting sexually for our lifetime partner, can we not wait on our Eternal Partner for this?

5.) The force behind the counterfeit markings of the Beast! Satan says, "So God wants to write His new name on those wretched creatures, does He? I'll see to it that I get to them first! And if some defacing is good, then a lot is better for me..."

From the beginning, Satan has been obsessed with destroying every man made in God's image and if he can't destroy them, to deface the image and glory of God in them. Created for brightness and dignity, Satan wants every man bowed over with the weight of darkness and shame. From the beginning Satan has twisted God's words and intentions and has tried counterfeiting every work of God. Satan desires that every man bow down to him, and even if they are ultimately saved from his destruction by salvation in Jesus, he wants to revel in the fact that before they bowed to God in repentant submission he got them to bow down to him first. Satan knows God is going to mark His sons and daughters in heaven. Satan wants to mark them in their foreheads, arms, torsos, pudenda, anywhere and everywhere, here on earth. The scripture records that there will come a time when mankind will be required to receive a mark on our foreheads or hands if we want to continue buying and selling. Why the forehead and hands? With our technology, and where it's heading, the mark, an imprint, an implant, could be anywhere at all and be effective if it was simply a matter of money or safety! But this is preeminently a spiritual issue, orchestrated by the god of this world, Satan, who knows the places marked out for God and he simply wants to get there first. And here's a simple interrogatory addenda: "Once a young person has given up their virginity how hard is it to give themselves over to a second sexual experience?" Answer: Not hard once the first moral barrier has been breeched. So how hard will it be for a person who has been tattooed or pierced to take just "another mark" or appliance in their body when the evil time really comes?

A Personal Word.

I actually have no personal goal to stop anyone from getting a tattoo or piercing if they want one... Emerging from a subculture into Christianity almost thirty years ago I have observed that people will ultimately find the justification for, and do, whatever they want. Sad but true, change never comes from outside influences; it has to come from within. It is in the heart of man that all issues are created or crucified. *To be a truly effective Christian you have to want, and then find, the center of God's will, not the edges of it.* In thirty years of living with Jesus I have learned that God—unwilling to violate the free will He gave man, however counterproductive it can be to His desires—will ultimately let people do what they want! **Tattoos are not the issue here. There will be a lot of people in heaven having left behind marked and pierced bodies. The goal of this paper has not been to prohibit tattooing but to keep people from piercing themselves through with unnecessary sorrows by the issues of self-rule... and**

furthermore to not allow, without resistance, a manipulating of God's word to say something we want to hear. If we are going to pursue self-rule, let's be big enough to sign our name to it and not try to forge His onto it through poor or short sighted scholarship.

The End Of The Matter.

God is the beginning and the end for every true believer! From the beginning He has made known His will for us... to lovingly reconcile us to Himself and His perfect will for us! So what is God's attitude, and therefore the attitude of His people, toward those who are self-ruled and, in this case, already marked? Love! Love, forgiveness, acceptance, and enablement... Some men's sins go before them. Some follow behind. Some men's sins are evident. Others are secret. Some sin with a mind to defy Him. Others fall into snares set by another... the simple truth is that "none of us are righteous, not one. All of us fall short of His glory, all." All of us need His forgiveness and release! Jesus asks the religious and indignant, "Let the one among you without sin cast the first stones..." And none can. Then we hear Him addressing the fallen but repentant, "Where are your accusers? Are there none? I do not condemn you either, but go and sin no more."

A person, tattooed and pierced, who comes into the body of Christ, should not be shunned, but encouraged, strengthened, and loved, like anyone else coming into salvation! God forgives all of us and all of what we have done, when we come to Him... and He expects those who have received enabling grace to give enabling grace. Having studied the body modification subculture, along with the psychology of it's published leaders and adherents, churches should be filled with multitudes of tattooed and pierced people, young and old, who have been looking for definition, approval, acceptance, beauty, self-worth, self-expression, individuality, cutting edge life, etc. in all the wrong places! The congregations of every church should be peppered with every ethnicity, every socio-educational-economic group, and every traditional and *sub*-cultural group who have had their eyes opened to the grace of God in Christ Jesus!

None but the yet-unconverted should stand in a church ashamed of the past, of things done in a time of ignorance to the will and desire of God for them. Every believer being restored should know that their past becomes the basis for their current ministry. They should be hopeful knowing there are multitudes of people waiting to hear the great things God has done in them. In every case the past with its mess becomes the foundations of your unique message. Your tests are the foundation of your testimony. And it is by the "Blood of the Lamb (signifying Jesus being pierced and dying for our salvation) and the words of your testimony (of what God has done for you) that you overcome the devil (who is the one responsible for all our pain and suffering and blindness and shame)."

Because of the descriptive and graphic, sometimes pornographic, nature of the Body Modification research sites and papers the Bibliography is withheld. Sources may be available after verification of age and directive of your research. Feel free to send your comments or questions to cere@life4square.com