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Tattoos and the People of God

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It is quite popular these days to have a tattoo. It is not unusual even for people professing faith in Christ to have tattoos. Some Christians, however, have a problem with this. The issue came up recently at a Bible study my daughter attends, so I decided that a Fact Sheet on the subject was timely. Do the Scriptures prohibit tattoos for Christians?

In a word, “No.” I realize that many fundamentalist and legalistic groups professing Christ will disagree with me on this (what else is new?), but the fact is, the Scriptures do not forbid Christians to have tattoos. Those disagreeing with me on this will no doubt cite various Scriptures to support their point of view, so let’s have a look at some of the Bible verses they use as proof texts of their position.

You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor tattoo [KJV, “print”] any marks upon you: I *am* the LORD. [Leviticus 19:28, NKJV]

“There it is,” brethren opposed to tattooing would say, pointing to this verse as the primary weapon in their arsenal. “A clear cut prohibition of tattooing in the Scriptures.” It might seem that way to some, if the verse is just casually read without much attention to what is actually being said here and to whom this command applies.

The reason behind the prohibition in this verse against tattooing had to do with ancient pagan practices in mourning the dead. As the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* puts it, “Here the practice [of tattooing] is associated with mourning rites for the dead and is forbidden as a heathen practice.” [ISBE Vol. IV, page739] The ancient occupants of Canaan would make marks in their skin, either by incision or by burning the flesh to appease their “gods,” or, as Matthew Henry puts it, “to pacify the infernal deities they dreamt of, and to render them propitious to their deceased friends.” The Good News Bible in Today’s English Version even renders this verse to show that both cutting the flesh and tattooing here apply to mourning rituals: “or tattoo yourselves or cut gashes in your body to mourn for the dead.”

Those of the opposing view may say, “Granted, but a prohibition is still a prohibition. Regardless of the historical/cultural reason behind it, this verse commands Christians not to get tattoos.” Actually, that’s not true. This verse does not command Christians to reject tattoos as unacceptable. This verse was a part of the Old Covenant given by God through Moses to the Israelites. It applied only to a specific period of Jewish history: from the time of the giving of this covenant at Mount Sinai (Deuteronomy 5:2-3) until the covenant was “made obsolete” and “taken away” by the sacrifice of Christ (Hebrew 8:13; 10:9-10). The commands of the Hebrew Scriptures, therefore, are stipulations of covenant requirements, a covenant Gentiles were never under, a covenant that has been set aside as “old” for the sake of the “new” covenant in Christ (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:7-13). If an Old Covenant command is not repeated in the New, then it is not binding upon the Christian.

The verse in Leviticus is the only place in most English versions where the word “tattoo” appears. However, those wishing to condemn the practice cite other passages to buttress their weak position. To my knowledge, the only other verses they use are found in the Revelation, which refer to the mark of the beast (Revelation 13:16, 17; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). These verses, it is claimed, refer to tattoos, which are marks of ownership or allegiance.

These verses could indeed refer to tattoos. However, the aspect of having this mark that is condemned is not that it is a tattoo upon one’s flesh, but that those possessing the mark are showing their allegiance to the beast, that they “worship the beast and his image” (Revelation 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). Once again, it is the purpose behind the mark or tattoo that is condemned in the Scriptures, and not the tattoo in and of itself.

Within the book of Revelation there are nearly as many references to the mark of God on believers as there are references to the mark of the beast. Several times the Apocalypse refers to the Lord writing the name of Christ and God upon His servants (Revelation 3:12; 14:1; 22:4). Twice (ch. 7:3; 9:4) the phrase “the seal of God” upon the “foreheads” of His servants is mentioned (see Isaiah 44:5 and especially Ezekiel 9:4 for the OT background on this). When these verses regarding the “seal of God on their foreheads” are compared with ch. 14:1 and 22:4, it becomes clear that the seal of God is His written name.

And what of Christ Himself? Twice in chapter 19, our Lord is depicted as having a name written on Him (verses 12 and 16). As unthinkable as it may be for some to picture our Lord Jesus as having a tattoo, the author of the Apocalypse had no problem with it.

Some may argue that the seal of God/written name of God upon the foreheads of believers does not constitute a “tattoo,” and that the name “King of kings and Lord of lords” written on the thigh of Jesus certainly does not constitute a tattoo. If writing on the flesh here cannot refer to tattoos, then neither can the writing of the number of the beast (“the mark of the beast”) upon those who follow the beast. If not, why not?

In conclusion, the Scriptures do not condemn having a tattoo per se. “Tattoos” are spoken of both positively and negatively in the Scriptures, and the message of or purpose behind the tattoo is what determines whether or not such a mark is good or bad. Those who would judge the salvation or Christian walk of others on the basis of outward appearance and Old Covenant commands should be reminded of two things. One, “man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7, NKJV) Two, the basis of our covenant relationship to God in Christ is based, not upon rules and regulations or dress codes, but upon God’s grace, which is received by faith (Ephesians 2:8f.; Titus 3:4-5).