

Tattooing the Temple

"What's wrong with tattoos?" the adolescents asked their seventh grade Christian school teacher. On the part of Christian youth the question indicates both a fascination with tattoos and maybe, a temptation to get one. So what's wrong, if anything, with tattoos?

As a kid, tattoos always piqued my curiosity about how those markings were inscribed on the human body. An encyclopedia defines tattooing as, "The procedure of making a mark or pattern on the skin by pricking it with a needle coated with indelible pigment." In addition to tattooing, many shops in Indianapolis now pierce ears, tongues, noses and navels as well. This package of services is called "body art." Excepting possible reversal by extensive and expensive laser treatments or skin grafts, tattoos are indelibly permanent. They can't be washed off or be made to disappear like an "etch-a-sketch."

I first remember seeing tattoos on the forearms and biceps of former service men during the late 1940s and early 50s after World War II. Sometimes the skin paintings pictured the seductive image of a woman, or perhaps that of a more snarling character with a profanity inscribed beneath it. There were also the county and state fairs which advertised people with full body tattoos, and invited customers to come in and view the spectacle, a sort of "freak show."

One summer as a teenager, a friend of mine took me on a tour of Chicago during the early 1960s. He escorted me around the neighborhood of the Pacific Garden Mission on Chicago's skid row. Although the buildings are now razed, the street was then gaudily lined with various bars, strip clubs, and tattoo parlors. For the first time, I saw men getting tattooed. I share my youthful impressions to show how tattooing was during my early life associated with the "seedy" side of life. A decade ago a news magazine bore witness to this impression by reporting that members of the *Yakuza*, the notorious Japanese crime syndicate descended from medieval bands of gamblers and peddlers, not only mutilate members' fingers, but also "are known for their striking full-body tattoos." [1]

With the publicity now given it by Dennis Rodman and other high profile athletes, actors, rock musicians and personalities, tattooing is mainstream in American culture and has become increasingly popular among America's adolescent and young adult crowd. If they have not already done so, I suppose that one day entrepreneurs will even open "Christian" tattoo parlors!

But what would Jesus do about tattoos (WWJD)? Without doubt, He would never have allowed Himself to be tattooed. If He had done so, He hypocritically would have broken God's Law, the Law He came to fulfill, not violate (Matthew 5:17-19). That Law commanded, "**You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead, nor make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the Lord**" (Emphasis mine, Leviticus 19:28, NASB). Literally, this command forbade the "writing of imprintment" on the human body. This prohibition and others in that context have reference to Canaanite religious customs including pagan mourning rites, cultic prostitution, and necromancy (i.e., consulting the departed dead through a spirit medium). [2] Along with these heathen religious and occult practices, the Israelites were to shun the tattooing associated Canaanite

religion (Leviticus 19:26-31). [3]

So is it any wonder then that as America has become increasingly pagan, body art and piercing--multilation and scarification, as my college anthropology professor called it--have become more popular? But Christians are not to be influenced by the host culture now anymore than the Israelites were to be influenced by the Canaanites then. Both then and now, God's children were and are to shun practices the "peer" culture might "pressure" them to adopt. **"Thus you are to be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy; and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine,"** the Lord God told Israel (Leviticus 20:26, NASB). **"As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy,'"** Peter instructed the apostolic church (1 Peter 1:14-16). As a matter of conscience, Christians must not conform to any pagan culture, for as Paul asked the Corinthians, **"What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God . . . 'Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,' says the Lord. 'And do not touch what is unclean . . .'"** (1 Corinthians 6:16-17; See Romans 12:1-2.).

The Christian's body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Tattoos are meant not to glorify God, but rather to draw attention to one's body, or worse with some of the images imprinted, to the occult, demons and Satan. What good reason therefore, exists for Christians to allow their bodies to be indelibly marked with images, a practice not only forbidden by the Law, but also associated with pagan, idolatrous, and occult spirituality? There is none.

ENDNOTES

[1] David E. Kaplan, "YAKUZA INC.," *U.S. News & World Report*, April 13, 1998, 41.

[2] John Edward McGee, Jr. (1969-), a.k.a. John Edward, is an American media medium best known for his TV shows *Crossing Over* with John Edward and *John Edward Cross Country*. Both programs are premised on Edward communicating with the spirits of the deceased relatives of the audience.

[3] Leviticus 19:26-31 (NASB) reads: "You shall not **eat anything with the blood**, nor practice **divination** or **soothsaying**. You shall not round off the side-growth of your heads, nor harm the edges of your beard. You shall not make any **cuts in your body for the dead**, nor **make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the Lord**. Do not profane your daughter by making her a **harlot**, so that the land may not fall to harlotry, and the land become full of lewdness. You shall keep My sabbaths and revere My sanctuary; I am the Lord. Do not turn to **mediums** or **spiritists**; do not seek them out to be defiled by them. I am the Lord your God." As is evident in this Scripture passage, tattooing is associated with bad spiritual company and practices.