

“What Does the Bible Say About Tattoos?”

I have a few family members who have recently gotten tattoos. I was wondering if there was any mention in the Bible about this being a good thing to do or a wrong thing to do? I thought that at one time I read something about it being wrong. And if it is wrong how can I address the issue in a decent way to people I love and care for who are not Christians?

Actually, yes the Bible does address the subject of tattoos. Lev. 19:28 says, “Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD.”

If your loved ones are not Christians, they may or may not care that God specifically addressed this issue in the Bible. If they do, knowing God said not to do it might be enough. If not, you might mention that there must be a good reason for God to forbid His people to permanently mark their bodies this way, and it turns out there are several.

1. To quote my brother-in-law, who became enamored of “body art” when he was younger and sports seven large tatoos on his body—which he now despises—“Permanent is a long, long time.” The majority of people who get tattoos regret it later.

2. Tattoos are exceedingly painful and expensive to have removed.

3. Some tattoo inks have metal in them, so if one’s health is threatened, an MRI can be complicated (and there can be some discomfort) by a tattoo.

4. On a more spiritual note, God may not want us to permanently mark our bodies because it is disrespectful to the body He fashioned and gave to us to steward. The fact that a

tattoo cannot be undone (completely) reflects the sad truth that some decisions are one-way and we box ourselves into a corner. Tattoos make a statement physically, but God intends that the purity and beauty of our LIVES make the statement, rather than "I was young (or drunk, or on drugs) and did this to myself." (Yes, I am biased, I will cheerfully admit. <grin>)

Now, the New Testament doesn't repeat this prohibition, and it's not a moral issue like sexual sin or lying or stealing which are still wrong and forever will be, so I don't think it's a sin anymore. Many people believe this is an area where we have Christian liberty, the freedom to do something that used to be prohibited.

I hope this helps.

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries
August 2001

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Several e-mails arrived shortly after this article was posted, pointing out the fact that this prohibition against tattoos was part of the Levitical code, but Christians do not live under the Old Testament laws. Otherwise, we would be sinning to:

- Shave off beards and sideburns
- Wear crew cuts
- Wear linen/wool blends
- Not take a bath after intercourse
- Circumcise baby boys on any day other than the eighth
- Attend church sooner than 33 days after the birth of a baby

I appreciate being shown the need to explain the fuller picture.

The person who wrote merely asked if the Bible said anything about tattoos, and it does, and I pointed out some good reasons for that prohibition. However, it is also true that we do not live under Old Testament laws, and most of the Levitical prohibitions and requirements no longer apply because we live under a new covenant of grace. (I hasten to add here that the *moral* prohibitions, such as those against any kind of sexual activity outside of marriage, including homosexuality, are still firmly in place.)

Thus, while the Bible did prohibit tattoos in the Old Testament, it is not a sin to get one today. Dumb, maybe, but not sinful. <grin> (That's a joke. Please don't send me e-mails if you have one and like it. You have complete freedom in Christ to do anything He gives permission for you to do.)

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. . .And then this appeared in "Dear Abby," which I thought was well worth sharing:

Dear Abby: You have printed letters about tattoos, so I thought you might get a kick out of my experience. Two summers ago, my sister "Julie" confided that her daughter, "Whitney," had decided to get a tattoo before returning to college. Julie was upset about it, but could not change her daughter's mind because Whitney is on a full scholarship and didn't need anyone's approval. Julie asked if I could talk Whitney out of it, and I racked my brain trying to think of something to say that would sway her. A few weeks later, our families got together to celebrate Julie's 50th birthday. Whitney was there with her boyfriend. After we all had enjoyed ice cream and cake, I took Whitney and her boyfriend into the living room and popped in a videotape of a party my husband and I had thrown during the disco craze of the 70s. There we were in our leisure suits, gold chains, permed hair, platform shoes and having a great time.

Whitney and her boyfriend were rolling on the floor with laughter. They couldn't believe that "look" was actually the craze at the time. "Yes," I said, "that was the style. But as times changed, styles changed, and what was once 'in' was soon 'out.'"

At that moment, Julie and her husband walked into the living room dressed in retro clothes and wigs. They were followed by Grandma and Grandpa, who had applied fake tattoos to their arms and shoulders. Whitney was stunned to see her conservative grandparents so out of character.

It was then that we reminded Whitney we had been able to buy different clothes and change our hairstyles when the fad was over, but tattoos are forever.

Disco clothes and wigs: \$85

Fake tattoos: \$30

The look on Whitney's face: priceless!

(To date, no tattoos for Whitney.)

Signed,

Creative in Las Vegas

Dear Creative: Your letter: a gem. Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words. You made your point with an object lesson that was far more effective than any lecture would have been.

June 2003

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Addendum, September 2014

I'd like to add this YouTube video addressing the question of tattoos from my wise pastor, Todd Wagner of Watermark Community Church in Dallas, Texas:

[See also "What About Body Piercing?"](#)

The Problem With Heart Bombs

In August 2012, a construction crew in Munich, Germany discovered an unexploded bomb from WWII. Munitions experts weren't able to defuse it, so they evacuated 3000 residents and detonated the 550-pound bomb.

This was just one of tens of thousands of unexploded bombs that were dropped over Germany during the war and eventually buried, all of them posing a threat.



Bomb exploded in Munich

When construction crews start building, they need to identify buried bombs and deal with them before they explode and cause all kinds of chaos, havoc and pain.

The problem, you see, is that bombs don't go away. They go off.

And that's why it's a good idea to cooperate with the Holy Spirit, inviting Him to shine His light of truth on the unexploded bombs in our hearts and minds: unresolved conflict, unexpressed grief and pain, unconfessed unforgiveness.

A couple of my friends sustained hurtful childhood traumas. No one helped them process the pain and shock of abuse, bringing it out into the light and speaking healing truth to them. Their emotional pain generated anger and frustration that

always simmered just under the surface. Triggered by situations, words, or body language that vividly reminded them of how they felt as children, they would explode in rage, destroying relationships and jobs. As they exposed their “bombs” to the Holy Spirit, He defused them with truth: It wasn’t their fault. It wasn’t right. And His tender compassion ministered grace that brought healing to their hearts.

Another friend was raised in a cult. Evil people in what she called a dark circle planted “bombs” in her young mind—threats of certain hurt and danger if she ever dared to believe in Jesus and connect with Him as a Christian. The unexploded bombs consisted of promises that they would come find her and hurt her, and lies about the true God and about the power of Satan. When she did become a Christ-follower, she dared to invite Him to deal with her bombs. He defused them with the truth that He had conquered Satan and his demons at the cross, disarming them, making a public spectacle of them, and triumphing over them (Col. 2:15).

Yet another friend was mercilessly bullied every single day of her school career. The abusive ridicule and insults she took, day after day, planted bombs in her heart: lies that she was worthless, lesser-than, unloved. When she gets overwhelmed, the bombs can explode into throwing things and even her cat. She is finally facing the need to grieve her still-buried pain and eventually forgive those who bullied her. Grieving and forgiving will defuse my friend’s bombs, but as of today, she sits on a ticking bomb every day of her life.

Some have pushed back against the idea of counseling or recovery ministry, citing Paul: “[B]ut one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead” (Phil. 3:13). But the “what lies behind” is his list of spiritual credentials, not issues of his past. Instead, consider what David wrote in Ps. 139:23-24, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the

everlasting way.”

Paraphrased, we might pray, “God, what unexploded bombs are in my heart? Please show me, so You can defuse them and heal my heart.”

[I am indebted to the wisdom of my pastor, [Todd Wagner](#), for his tweetable, quotable word of wisdom on bombs.]

This blog post originally appeared at
[blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/the_problem_with_heart_bom
bs](https://blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/the_problem_with_heart_bombs) on Jan. 28, 2014

A Holy Limp

I got polio at eight months old. Every step of my life, I have walked with a limp. It was a source of great shame to me growing up because of people’s stares. And my limp was probably the biggest reason I hated polio and hated how I saw myself, as the “ugly crippled girl.”

One day, as I studied the scriptures, God gave me a divine “lightbulb moment.” As I read in Genesis 32 about Jacob wrestling all night with God, the same Lord who touched his hip, asked me, “Do you see the souvenir I gave Jacob from his night with Me?” Jacob walked the rest of his life with a limp. He had been touched by God and it changed the way he walked.

It was a holy limp.

In that moment, I saw that there was nothing inherently shameful about a limp if God gave one to His beloved Jacob.

Certainly, this doesn’t magically transform a limp into

something beautiful and good—after all, it means something is wrong. But God can, and does, bring something beautiful and good out of the limps of our lives.

Over the past few years of walking with hurting people, I have come to see how God uses my limp to connect with those whose hearts are still scarred and limited by the wounds they've received. As I wrote to a dear friend who left behind decades of life as a gay activist when she trusted Christ, and who still has to submit her feelings to Jesus every day of her life:

"You know, it's entirely possible your attractions to women won't change and you will walk with an emotional limp the rest of your life. . . just as I will continue to walk with a physical limp the rest of my earthly life. But both of us can glorify God in our limping by honoring Him with our choices, as we look to Him to restore us to a perfect future that includes running and jumping and leaping and loving perfectly, on the other side.

"I know that may sound weird, 'glorifying God in our limping,' but I think He receives more glory through limping people who are dependent on Him, than healthy people who breeze through life independent of Him."

Connecting the dots between my physical limp and my friend's emotional limp encouraged her greatly. Just as I was deeply encouraged by the godly response of my pastor, [Todd Wagner](#) of Watermark Community Church in Dallas, to the news that he has cancer in his foot. He wrote to his church family:

"So grateful for the prayers so many of you have offered on my behalf. I covet them for both wisdom in dealing with sarcoma (the cancer affecting my body) but especially sin (the cancer constantly waging war with my soul). There is no greater kindness than your earnest prayer for me. . . . In the coming weeks I will be watching, monitoring, imaging, praying,

continually consulting with caring docs, and trusting in a good and sovereign God Who is never asleep. Having to trust my perfect Father with one more thing is no burden—it is a blessing. Anything that reminds me of His goodness and my futility is a gift. Thank you for praying with me... may my every decision honor my King and may my every step—whether with two feet or one, with cancer or without – find me running hard in His way. Pray for my health... but double down on the health of my walk with Him over my ability to walk physically. If He will allow me both I rejoice. ***If the days ahead allow for only one, I would gladly choose to limp in this life over anything that would compromise my running toward His presence in faithfulness.*** (Habakkuk 3:17-19)” (Emphasis mine)

Can you imagine how Todd’s last sentence made my heart soar?

But it doesn’t end there. Watermark’s worship pastor, [Jon Abel](#), “plays with a limp.” Several years ago, when mowing his lawn, his lawnmower blade sliced off his finger—his wedding ring finger, which he uses every day as a guitar player. The trauma of losing his finger, with the attendant threat of losing his livelihood, forced him to come face to face with the question of whether a good and loving God was in control. Jon’s godly response to this trial, which is documented in this short YouTube video, is one reason he is one of my favorite worship leaders of all time.

I recently learned from my sister—on Facebook, of all places!—that the doctors told my mother I would never walk. Mom decided they were wrong, and worked patiently with me every day, exercising my once-paralyzed leg in the bathtub as she taught me the ABCs and who knows what else.

I don’t know why my mother didn’t tell me this fact, but I do know this: *limping means I can walk!*

I am grateful for the gift of perspective. Whether it’s my

polio-caused limp, or Todd's possibility of limping from losing a foot, or Jon's limited ability to play guitar from a once-severed finger, I just know that if God can be more glorified from our limps than from physical perfection, we'll take the holy limp every time.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/a-holy-limp/ on November 15, 2013

When the Church Is More Cultural than Christian

July 7, 2011

So, I'm reading this excellent biography of Bonhoeffer right now, and I've been mulling this question. Well, I guess it's twofold, really.

Background: You probably know this already, but just in case. In Nazi Germany the German church pretty much abandoned any form of orthodox Christianity in order to fit in with the culture. Bonhoeffer, Niemoller and others formed the Confessing Church as a stand for true Christianity in the face of the cultural abdication of the wider church. Most were either imprisoned or killed for their efforts.

1 – Do you think that the American church is undergoing a similar shift to fit in with cultural norms on a broad scale that could threaten orthodox Christianity (clearly, hopefully, not to the extent of the Reich church, but still, I see some possible parallels)? What do you think are the areas in which the American church is most at risk? Why?

2 – Do you think we have leadership that is taking a stand for

orthodoxy in a counter-cultural and true way on the national scene? If so, who?

Yes. The American church acquiesces to the culture in various ways which are detrimental to the Gospel. It's tricky because it is vital to the Gospel that the Gospel (whose hands and feet are the church) be relevant. Churches which are highly separatist and never adapt to or accommodate culture do violence to the Gospel as well, so it's tricky. And we'll none of us ever get it 100% right. Ever. I keep trying to tell God humility is overrated; he never listens.

I think there are two veins in which American churches are perhaps more American than Christian. One is liberal; one is conservative. (Brilliant, I know.) The tendency is to point the finger at the other and overreact for fear of falling into the other's traps. We're so focused on not falling into *this* trap, that we don't even notice that what we think is a bunker is merely another trap of another sort.

Now to your actual question: What are these traps?

Liberal:

Of course there are the far left examples like: Employing poor hermeneutics which 1) Undercut Scripture as a text which is not historical or literal at all, and 2) justify sin, usually sexual sin such as premarital sex and homosexual sex and the sexually-related sin of abortion. And then there is the slightly more subtle trap of feeling the need to bend over backwards to kiss the keister of Science. Finally, there is the acquiescence of the (pseudo)tolerance mantra of hypermodernism: partly out of fear of being legalistic, partly because it is more comfortable, we succumb to Relativism.

Conservative:

Employing poor hermeneutics which truncate Scripture as a text which is entirely literal (it seems to me that this is a very Western thing to do, but I could be wrong; it could simply be a human thing to do... we feel more comfortable in black and

white). Such a lack of hermeneutic leads to overly hard-nosed positions about creation and “the woman issue” among other things. It also leads to, instead of justifying sin, creating an extra hedge of rules so that we can be darn sure we avoid the undignified, socially unacceptable sins, perhaps especially, sexual sin.

And then of course there’s the idea of a Christian America; or that politics can fix every(one else)thing.

Traps for all:

[Moralistic Therapeutic Deism](#) is probably a problem for both sides. So is materialism of course, privatism and spiritual professionalization—You’d better keep your hands off of my individual rights and my private life... and: spiritual things go in one compartment, which is private and has no business interfering in the public sphere: ie. faith and science and/or faith and business. Professionalization is also quite Western. I love this quote from GK Chesterton’s *Heretics*:

But if we look at the progress of our scientific civilization we see a gradual increase everywhere of the specialist over the popular function. Once men sang together round a table in chorus; now one man sings alone, for the absurd reason that he can sing better. If scientific civilization goes on (which is most improbable) only one man will laugh, because he can laugh better than the rest.

Professionalization probably also includes running our churches too much like businesses.

Finally, Q number 2: Yes. What’s tricky about this is that one must sometimes be under the radar to be counter-cultural, partly because when you’re counter-cultural, no one wants to listen to you! Eugene Peterson, Tim Keller, NT Wright, Nancy Pearcey, Os Guinness (an outside perspective is always helpful) and the [Trinity Forum](#), Jamie Smith, especially in the area of how we do church and spiritual formation... I’m sure

there are others, including my [colleagues](#) who are currently working on assessing and addressing this issue of cultural captivity: first creating an Ah-ha moment about our cultural captivity, and secondly, creating a way out of captivity and into freedom.

Good question!

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2011/07/07/when-the-church-is-more-cultural-than-christian/