

Maranatha Baptist Bible College

A SCRIPTURAL EVALUATION ON THE NT BELIEVER'S
USE OF TATTOOS AND BODY PIERCINGS

A Report

Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the requirements for the Course

HUPH 332 Ethics

by

Kirk Miller

October 2011

Among many other issues of contemporary culture, the believer in Christ's is confronted with the question, what will he do with tattoos and bodily piercings? As a matter of much heated discussion, this is not an ethical issue the believer can take lightly. Certainly investigation of the Biblical text is needed to answer such a question. And that is exactly what this work intends to do, examine the scriptural voice on the issue of how believers relate to tattoos and bodily piercings. As will be noted, *the scriptural principles conclude that believers must in all honesty and impartiality seek God's direction and make their decisions based on what is believed to be most pleasing to God.* The “fleshing out” of this thesis will be done throughout the remainder of this work.

The Mosaic Law

Leviticus 19:28 and Deuteronomy 14:1 clearly command not to cut one's body, tattoo oneself, or make baldness on one's forehead. Many individuals see these texts as “end-all” proofs that tattooing and piercing are unethical. However, difficulty emerges with such a view.

First, these texts appear in the Mosaic Law, the law given to the Israelites as a part of their newly inaugurated national covenant with the God who redeemed them out of slavery in Egypt. The Mosaic Law was given to a specific people at a specific time with a specific purpose. The context of the Law is national Israel's theocracy. From this evidence alone one can conclude that the Mosaic Law as a code, including these specific commands, is not binding on Gentiles (1 Cor 9:21). But further, believers under the New Covenant, not being under the old covenant (2

Cor 3) are not subject to the Mosaic Law (Rom 10:4; Gal 3:23-25; Eph 2:15). To state even one of the laws is binding on an individual (i.e., do not tattoo oneself) is to logically claim the entire Law (in its formal sense as a code), including for example not eating pig (Lev 11:7), is binding on that individual.

The second problem with this view is that the Mosaic Law itself provides exceptions to these commands. In Exodus 21:6 and Deuteronomy 15:17 God commands masters to pierce the ear of a servant who has worked his full six years but desires to permanently enlist as his master's servant as a sign of this contract. Therefore, arguing that piercings and tattoos are inherently immoral—never morally correct at anytime, in any way, or for anyone—from the commands found in Leviticus 19:28 and Deuteronomy 14:1 will prove erroneous.¹

Understanding piercings and tattoos to not be inherently wrong, one should understand Leviticus 19:28 and Deuteronomy 14:1 as spelling out a specific application of a broader principle. And seeing that the Mosaic Law is a revelation of God's character, and God's character is certainly binding on the NT believer today, the principle found in this text is binding on all. The question for applying these passages in a contemporary setting then becomes, what is the principle undergirding these commands?

In Leviticus 19:28, God's intent is for the nation of Israel to abstain from contemporaneous pagan customs. In this specific text, God prohibits partaking in pagan mourning rites specifically the custom involving physical disfigurement.² The purpose of the

1. In fact, to use these Law passages as proof texts against any and all uses of tattooing or piercing without exception rules out even women having their ears pierced—a position not many would be willing to take.

2. Wenham, Gordon J., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979), 272.

command in Deuteronomy 14:1 is spelled out in the very next verse when God says, “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth” (Deut 14:2). “The juxtaposition between the programmatic statement that Israel is the child of the Lord and the warning against cutting or shaving themselves underscores that the latter practice was typical of pagan behavior and for that reason had to be avoided.”³ In other words, God’s intent in giving this command was for His people to be distinct from all the other nations, just as He is set apart (Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7).

So, what is the principle that can be derived from these commands? God’s people are to be separate, holy, and distinct from the world. And this principle of God’s people being separate from the world, as in holy, distinct, and untainted by its sinful ways, is a principle Paul makes extremely clear in his commonly known passages on the church being the temple of the Holy Spirit—a passage undeniably immediately addresses NT believers.

The Church as the Temple of the Holy Spirit

In writing the church of Corinth, Paul commonly used the concept of a temple as an analogy for the Church (1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:19-20; 2 Cor 6:16). On the basis of this theological illustration, Paul then gave exhortations to the Corinthians which certainly finds application in regards to the ethical issue at hand.

3. Merrill, E. H., *New American Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 235.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

The context within which these two verses find themselves pertains generally speaking to the issue of sexual sin. Paul exhorts the Corinthians in verse 18 to abstain from all sexual immorality, and makes such an exhortation based on the theological truths that 1) the Corinthians were not the possessors of themselves, but were purchased for a high price—Christ’s penal substitutionary death (19-20), and 2) their physical bodies were the temple of God’s Holy Spirit who indwelt them (19). Therefore, Paul exhorts the Corinthians in light of these truths to glorify God through their *bodies* (the seventh time “body” makes its appearance in the past nine verses). Seeing that believers’ bodies are God’s temple, and the temple’s purpose is the worship of God, believers’ supreme goal with their bodies is to glorify God.⁴

2 Corinthians 6:16

Paul’s identification of believers as the temple of God appears again in 2 Corinthians 6:16. The main thrust of the passage at large is biblical separation (2 Cor 6:14-7:1).

In verse 14 Paul makes his central imperative to this passage, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.” Several understand this phrase as a command for believers not to marry unbelievers. But the context of the passage is a much broader prohibition. The idea of being unequally yoked is applied to non-believers at large. When Paul says not to be unequally yoked

Paul has in mind an alliance with spiritual opposites, and the image of harnessing oneself to someone who is spiritually incompatible evokes images of spiritual disaster. Those who bear Christ’s yoke (Matt 11:30) cannot share it with others who deny Christ. Those who harness themselves together with unbelievers will soon find themselves plowing Satan’s fields. One can only be a true yokefellow (Phil 4:3) with a fellow Christian.⁵

4. MacArthur, John, *The John MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 152.

5. Garland, D. E., *The New American Commentary: 2 Corinthians* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 331.

An unequal yoke is the idea of a donkey yoking up with an ox. This combination simply does not mix. And likewise, the alliance of believers and nonbelievers is a theological oxymoron.

Paul makes this point clear by giving several examples of things that have no partnership with each other (2 Cor 6:14-15). Afterwards, Paul states that believers are the God's temple (6:16), and therefore, believers are to be distinct (6:17), cleansing themselves "from every defilement of *body* and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God" (7:1; emphasis added).

How does this concept of believers being God's temple, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, relate to the ethical issue of tattoos and bodily piercings? The concluding principle derived from and shared by both of these texts is that believers are to be distinct and pure of all spiritual *and bodily* defilements. Paul made rather clear the relationship being God's temple has to one's physical body. In other words, being God's temple, is not just a truth pertaining to spirituality, but relates to one's physical actions and choices, of which tattoos would certainly be included.

Personal Convictions and the Submission of Freedoms

Understanding that the believers' participation with tattoos and piercings is not specifically addressed in scripture, and no direct instruction is given, this ethical issue falls into what many call the "gray area," or in another sense, personal convictions. After acknowledging this issue as being within this sphere, one would do well to consider the two key texts on personal convictions—1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14.

Many shared principles can be learned from these two passages: Associations make things rather real for some people, even though those associations are not reality (1 Cor 8:4, 7;

Rom 14:14). One should be fully convinced about his convictions (Rom 14:5, 10-12, 22-23). Practicing one's own personal convictions before weaker Christians can in some circumstances cause the weaker Christians to stumble into sin, and therefore, one ought to sacrifice his personal freedom for the sake of the weak (1 Cor 8:7-13; Rom 14:13, 15, 20-21). One should never allow his freedom to become a stumbling block to others, lest one call his convictions, which are not evil, evil (Rom 14:16). Compromises can be met, but never to the compromise of another brother's conscience (1 Cor 10:25). Believer's holding various convictions regarding "gray areas" are not permitted to judge one another (Rom 14:3-4, 10-13). Some things are permissible within Christian freedom, but do not pass the test of being beneficial and edifying (1 Cor 10:23). Personal freedom should be withheld if it may become an obstacle in Gospel ministry (1 Cor 9:12). Conforming to culture, without compromising Biblical standards (1 Cor 10:27), is advantageous for evangelism (1 Cor 9:19-23; 10:28-29).

The summarizing conclusions in regards to exercising Christian freedom should be to 1) always seek the good of others and their evangelization if they be unbelievers (1 Cor 10:24, 33; Rom 14:19), 2) do one's best to avoid offending anyone (1 Cor 10:32), and 3) seek to glorify God in every action, even through the exercise of freedom and personal convictions such as eating and drinking⁶ (1 Cor 10:31), and potentially by means of a variety of personal convictions (Rom 14:6).

Certainly believers' participation with piercings and tattoos relate to these guidelines and principles. Neglect of these scriptural instructions is disobedience to God's authority.

6. Ciampa, Roy E. and Brian S. Rosner, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 496.

Conclusions

Summarizing the proceeding study, the ethical issue of believers' participation with tattoos and piercings is not simply a deontological "yes" or "no" conclusion (first heading). Many factors certainly play a part in one's *personal* decision regarding this issue (third heading), such as potentially causing a stumbling block for others, being fully convinced in one's mind, the contemporary cultural associations regarding tattoos and piercings, and potentially the nature of the tattoo or piercing (i.e., the difference between a tattoo of a cross and a tattoo of a swastika). And of course the theological truths that a believer is 1) to be distinct from the world (first and second headings) and 2) not the owner of his own body but is God's property, and more specifically, God's holy temple (second heading) are extremely significant factors in an individual's decision. All of these principles point towards the final conclusion that *one must honestly and unbiased seek God's direction via the principles presented above and conclude in a matter that one believes honors God above all other options.*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ciampa, Roy E. and Brian S. Rosner. *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The First Letter to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010.

Garland, D. E. *The New American Commentary: 2 Corinthians*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001.

MacArthur, John. *The John MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1984.

Merrill, E. H. *New American Commentary: Deuteronomy*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001.

Wenham, Gordon J. *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Leviticus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979.