

The (Im)Morality of Tattoos was originally an assignment for a Contemporary Moral Issues class offered at Phoenix Seminary. After the original writing, it was modified to also address the ethicality of body piercings. The modified version was published as “Under the Needle: An Ethical Evaluation of Tattoos and Body Piercings” in *The Christian Research Journal* (Vol. 28/ No. 06/ 2005) available at <http://www.equip.org>. The author (Lorne Zelyck) reserves all editorial rights and privileges of this paper.

The (Im)Morality of Tattoos

I. A Brief Historical Timeline of Tattoos

In October 1991, a five thousand year old corpse was found frozen in a glacier between Italy and Austria. The body of this man (later called Otzi) is considered the best preserved corpse of the Bronze Age ever found, and dates to around 3300 B.C. The skin of Otzi has become of great interest because it bears several tattoos: a cross, six straight lines fifteen centimeters long, and numerous parallel lines.¹ Tattooed mummies have also been discovered. One of the best preserved is Amunet, a former priestess of the goddess Hathor at Thebes during the XI or 21st Dynasty of Egypt (2160-1994 B.C.). In approximately 1400 B.C., Levitical law (Leviticus 19:28) reveals that tattooing was a known practice in ancient Israel and amongst their Mesopotamian neighbors. Tattooing is also mentioned by a remarkable number of ancient Greek and Roman writers including Herodotus, Plutarch, Plato, Aristophanes, and Pliny the Elder.²

In the first century, the Roman historian Herodian described animal body markings of the Celts, and then described the people of northern Britain as “Picts” after the display of such images. Tattoos are also mentioned by Julius Caesar in his description of the Gallic wars.³ Throughout church history, tattoos are referred to in edicts, councils, and personal correspondence amongst clergy.

¹ Gilbert, Steve. *Tattoo History: A Source Book*. (New York: Juno Books, 2000), 11.

² *Ibid.*, 14.

³ Green, Terri. *The Tattoo Encyclopedia: A Guide to Choosing Your Tattoo*. (New York: Fireside, 2003), ix.

In 1769, James Cook coined the word tattoo after observing the “rapid rhythmic rapping” as needles were hit with a stick into the skin of Tahitians and New Zealanders. By the late nineteenth century, Charles Darwin observed in his book *The Descent of Man*, that aboriginal people within every country were tattooed.⁴ On December 8, 1891, the first electric tattoo machine was registered by its inventor, Samuel O’Reilly, at the United States Patent Office. This invention was based on an embroidering machine patented by Thomas Edison in 1875.⁵ Tattoos began to draw the attention of the public media and in 1936, Life magazine created a stir with an article that claimed one in ten Americans are tattooed.⁶

Differing numbers indicate the extent of tattoos within our society today. National Geographic News stated that 15% of all Americans are tattooed⁷ and the Alliance of Professional Tattooists estimates over 39 million Americans have tattoos. Details magazine published a poll that stated 22% of 18-25 year olds have at least one tattoo. It is also estimated that that 60% of those tattooed are women. Another study estimates that over half of all adolescents are planning on getting tattooed. Tattoos have invaded popular culture, and can be seen on celebrities, lawyers, accountants, Madison Avenue executives, and professional athletes.⁸ According to US News and World Report, tattooing is the country’s sixth fastest growing retail business and growing at the rate of one new tattoo parlor opening its doors every day. One estimate cites 30,000 tattoo artists working in the United States today.⁹ There are also at least eight major tattoo

⁴ Ibid., xiv.

⁵ Miller, Jean-Chris. *The Body Art Book*. (New York: Berkley Books, 1997), 12.

⁶ Krakow, Amy. *The Total Tattoo Book*. (New York: Warner Books, 1994), 6.

⁷ www.news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2002/10/1011_021011_taboo.html

⁸ www.tattooartist.com/history.html

⁹ Miller, 10.

magazines published regularly in the United States, and articles about tattooing appear in magazines, journals, and small town newspapers on a regular basis.¹⁰

II. The Primary Positions Regarding Tattoos

Within the first chapter of the Bible, humankind is described in an incredibly unique way. Genesis 1:26-28 states that humankind is created in the “image” of God and according to His “likeness.” The Hebrew word used for “image” is *tselem*. It occurs 17 times in the Old Testament, and comes from the root word which means “to cut or carve.”¹¹ *Tselem* is also used to describe the physical resemblance or concrete similarity of people, two dimensional objects (coins), and three dimensional objects such as idols, statues, gods, animals, and tumors.¹² The Hebrew word used for “likeness” is *demuth* which occurs 25 times in the Old Testament, and comes from the root word meaning “to be like.” *Demuth* is used to indicate abstract similarity.¹³ Therefore *tselem* and *demuth* are mutually defining, synonymous concepts which portray humankind’s likeness to God.¹⁴

From these passages, various aspects of the IOG may be implied. **1.** Structurally, humans are endowed with certain traits which make them distinct including the capacity to obtain knowledge, reason, and make moral decisions. **2.** Functionally, humans are able to operate as God’s representatives on earth, namely through ruling over nature (Genesis 1:26, 2:5; Psalm 8:5-6). **3.** Relationally, humans are able to mirror the unity within the trinity through relationships

¹⁰ DeMello, Margo. Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 13.

¹¹ Hoekema, Anthony A. Created in God’s Image. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 13.

¹² Tracy, Steve. The Creation Account of Human Origins: Genesis 1:26-28. (Class notes for Theology 502, Phoenix Seminary, 2003), 3.

¹³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴ Hoekema, 67.

with God and other humans. 4. Teleologically, humans are created to glorify God through making visible His character.¹⁵

These aspects of the IOG within humankind encompass the entire person: spiritual and physical. I agree with Herman Bavinck's affirmation of the body being included in the IOG: "Man's body also belongs to the image of God... The body is not a tomb, but a wondrous masterpiece of God, constituting the essence of man as fully as the soul."¹⁶ In his 1979 *Audiences*, Pope John Paul II began laying foundations for a theology of the body, repeatedly emphasizing the urgency of the task.¹⁷ In her book, *Toward a Theology of the Body*, Mary Prokes defines the theology of the body as, "that discipline which reflects upon a faith understanding of the lived body and the material universe."¹⁸ Therefore, the IOG and body theology are the crucial elements which need to be considered in deciphering a Christian ethic of tattooing.

A. Tattoos Are Immoral

One primary position concerning tattoos is that they are immoral because they desecrate the IOG. Proponents of this view would say:

1. Structurally, tattoos are immoral for they violate our conscience (Romans 2:15) because they violate the Law (Leviticus 19:28). In reference to his tattoo, one Christian writes, "With my depraved and back-slidden mind, I justified an abomination to God Himself, who instructs us through His divine law not to print any marks on our bodies (Leviticus 19:28)."¹⁹

2. Functionally, tattoos are immoral. As God's representatives, we are to care for creation (including our bodies) through exercising responsible dominion. Tattoos mutilate the body which is supposed to be nurtured and sustained, and make it vulnerable to infection. Victoria Pitts

¹⁵ Tracy, 3.

¹⁶ Hoekema, 68.

¹⁷ Prokes, Mary. *Toward a Theology of the Body*. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁹ www.biblebelievers.com/watkins_tattoos/regret.html

records the negative perception of tattooing in her book, *In the Flesh*: “Practices such as piercing, scarification, and branding are linked to anorexia, bulimia, and what has been called ‘delicate self-harm syndrome,’ which is an addictive, repetitive, non-decorative form of skin cutting, usually on the arm or legs. This is considered an expression of absolute hatred or anger.”²⁰

3. Relationally, tattoos are immoral because they hinder unity within the body of Christ. Tattoos could be seen as immoral by a fellow believer, and may violate their conscience (1 Corinthians 8:9-12). Steve Gilbert states: “many people – especially those belonging to non-conformist groups – get tattoos to demonstrate their defiance of traditional authority... Many studies link multiple tattoos with antisocial personality, an increased incidence of assaultive behavior, impulsivity, and difficulties in heterosexual adjustment.”²¹

4. Teleologically, tattoos are immoral because they glorify the ungodly and vulgar, instead of God’s righteous character. Tattoos may also convey vanity and arrogance; vices inappropriate for believers (1 Peter 3:3). Jean-Chris Miller verifies this point by stating that, “Death and darkness have always been a classic tattoo theme – skulls, snakes, demons, spiders, and spider webs are all conventional tattoo imagery.”²²

B. Tattoos Are Moral

The other primary position concerning tattooing is that it is moral because it is simply an expression of the IOG. Proponents of this view would say:

²⁰ Pitts, Victoria. *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 25.

²¹ Gilbert, 159.

²² Miller, 56.

1. Structurally, tattooing is moral because humankind is created with the ability to appreciate beauty and art, and decorate themselves accordingly. *The Body Art Book* identifies “aesthetics” as one of the many reasons why people get tattoos.²³

2. Functionally, tattooing is moral since humankind has free will and believers are free in Christ to do what they want with their own bodies (1 Corinthians 6:12). Jean-Chris Miller bluntly states, “It’s your body and you can do what you like with it.”²⁴

3. Relationally, tattooing is moral for it accounts for diversity amongst believers. Just as God created humans with different colored skin, so people who are tattooed with different colored skin shouldn’t be prejudiced against. Unity should not be based on outward appearance, but on spiritual matters (Philippians 2:2). Amy Krakow begs for unity amongst humankind when she exclaims that tattoos are, “Just ink; body art. Not some scarlet letter telling the world we’re wanton criminals, sexual perverts, biker scum, sailors, soldiers or just plain weird.”²⁵

4. Teleologically, tattoos are moral for they are a medium by which a believer can communicate God’s character to the external world, as well as to their own internal world. A. Gell expresses the external as well as internal communicatory nature of tattoos by saying, “The inside-facing and the outside-facing skins are... one indivisible structure, and hence the skin continually communicates the external world to the internal one, and the internal world to the external one.”²⁶

III. Key Biblical Texts

A. Old Testament

²³ Ibid., 29.

²⁴ Ibid., 31.

²⁵ Krakow, 144.

²⁶ Gustafson, Mark. “The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire and Beyond”, in Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History. Jane Caplan, ed. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 25.

The Hebrew word translated tattoo in the NASB, *qaaqa*, is only used once in the Old Testament. *Qaaqa* is defined as a “cut, incision” or “gross cutting of the skin.” While the Anchor Bible Commentary suggests that its etymology is unknown²⁷, Strong’s believes it comes from the word *koa* which has the sense of cutting off.²⁸ Yet in context, it could possibly refer to painting or scarring of the skin - both which were non-verbal signs of mourning.²⁹ I believe that this is the proper understanding of *qaaqa*. I do not think it refers to cutting or gashing oneself, for that concept is referred to earlier in the verse by using the word *sehret* which refers to an “incision.”³⁰ Strong’s suggest that its primitive root is *sarat* which can be translated “to cut in pieces.”³¹ Self mutilation of the body is clearly outlawed in numerous other passages which speak of Israelites gashing their bodies as part of their mourning rites (Deuteronomy 14:1, Jer 16:6, 41:5, 47:5, 48:37). Lacerations may have been inflicted to increase mourning, offer blood to the departed spirit, and may have been included in the rites of Baalistic fertility worship, especially when Baal appeared to be deaf to the pleas of his followers (1 Kings 18:28).

In Babylonia, it was customary to brand a slave with his owner’s name. In Egypt, captives were branded with the name of a god or Pharaoh; the former captives belonged to the priesthood, and the latter to the state. The Anchor Bible suggests that rabbis believed the owner who marks his slave so that he does not run away, is exempt from the prohibition in Leviticus 19:28.³² The Tosepta records a tradition that the rabbinic prohibition is restricted to tattooing the name of another god. Liberal bible scholars believe that Moses either instituted tattooing or

²⁷ Milgrom, Jacob, *The Anchor Bible*. Vol. 3A. *Leviticus 17-22*. (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 1694,

²⁸ Strong, J. (1996). *The exhaustive concordance of the Bible : Showing every word of the test of the common English version of the canonical books, and every occurrence of each word in regular order.* (electronic ed.) (H6970). Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship.

²⁹ Swanson, J. (1997). *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)* (electronic ed.) (HGK7882). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

³⁰ Harris, R. L., Harris, R. L., Archer, G. L., & Waltke, B. K. (1999, c1980). *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (electronic ed.) (Page 883). Chicago: Moody Press.

³¹ Strong, H8295.

³² Milgrom, 1695.

appropriated one already existing to a religious purpose. According to Thomson, the prohibition in Leviticus referred only to heathen tattooing related to idolatry and superstition, and not the Moses-approved tattoo designs.³³ Tattooing and self-mutilation in mourning for the dead, was a religious practice which Israelites participated in up to the exile ([Jeremiah 16:6, 41:5](#)), though it was originally pagan ([Jeremiah 47:5, 48:37](#)) and connected with the Canaanite fertility god.³⁴ This idolatry explains the prohibition of tattooing: Yahweh's exclusive claim is incompatible with the practices of a cult of the dead or a fertility cult.³⁵

I believe the key principle in Leviticus 19:28 is: God does not want His people to be idolatrous. The emphatic theme of Leviticus is God calling His people to holiness. This particular portion of Leviticus explains standards which Israelites were to uphold in maintaining their relationship with the one true God. Kittel portrays the idolatrous nature of tattooing in the Israelite culture by stating, "When a person was tattooed he became dedicated to the god and became its servant, as well as came under its protection, so that he should not be harmed."³⁶ Since tattooing was done by the pagans as a sign of ownership and devotion to their gods, God did not want the Israelites to be identified with this idolatry.

B. New Testament

In the NASB, the word tattoo is not found. Galatians 6:17 contains the Greek word *stigma* which the NASB translates as "brand-marks". The primary root of *stigma* is *stizo*, which means to "stick" or "prick" and leave a mark.³⁷

In the Graeco-Roman world, brand marks were carried especially by domestic animals, slaves, criminals, and later soldiers.³⁸ Later, in the imperial period, it seems the eastern practice

³³ Gilbert, 150.

³⁴Kittel, G., Bromiley, G.W. and Friedrich, G., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. Vol. 7. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 661.

³⁵Ibid., 661.

³⁶Kittel, 660.

³⁷Strong, GK 4742.

of branding each slave in the mark of ownership was adopted. A *stigma* denoting an offence was marked on an offender, either for running away, stealing, or some other transgression.³⁹ Recruits to the Roman army were marked by tattooed signs, most likely the abbreviated name of the emperor. Whereas the slave was marked on the forehead, the soldier was usually marked on the hand.⁴⁰

The meaning of Paul's *stigma* cannot be answered with complete certainty, yet I believe it refers to the abuse which he received for his devotion to Christ. Historically, tattoos were a source of imagery and exaggeration within literature. In the fifth century B.C., a slave in Aristophanes' *Wasps* effectively complains, 'I'm being tattooed to death with a stick.' The humor seems to lie within the similarity of a tattoo to the black and blue marks left by a beating.⁴¹ I believe this explains the conceptual context of Paul's metaphor. Perhaps referring to marks such as bruises and welts, the visible signs of the ill-treatment which he has received as a 'slave of Christ,' he compares them to tattoos, using the same comparison as the bruised slave in Aristophanes' *Wasps*.⁴²

Furthermore, in reference to the Old Testament, Paul may see in his *stigma* the signs of ownership showing that he, the slave of Jesus, is the property of the Lord. Therefore no one can harm him and go unpunished. It is also interesting to note that the *stigma* which Paul bears on his body is the antithesis to the circumcision of the flesh, which his Judaising opponents boasted.

Therefore, the most convincing explanation of Paul's *stigma* refers to his wounds and scars which he received for his faith in Christ (2 Corinthians 11:23-29; Acts 14:19). This was

³⁸Kittel, 658.

³⁹ Caplan refers to possible inscriptions on the forehead as "know thyself", or "Stop me, I'm a runaway." Caplan, Jane. Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8-9.

⁴⁰Kittel, 659.

⁴¹ Aristophanes. Wasps. Translated by Jeffery Henderson. Loeb Classical Library. Vol II. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), Line 1296.

⁴² Jones, C. P. "Stigma and Tattoo", in Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History. Jane Caplan, ed. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 10.

palpable proof that Paul suffered with his Lord (Rom. 8:17), bore in his body the death of Jesus (2 Cor. 4:10), and endured what is still lacking of the affliction of Christ (Col. 1:24). Therefore Paul's *stigma* serves as a sign of his devotion to and ownership by Christ.

C. Symbolism throughout the Old Testament and New Testament

There are numerous other Biblical passages which do not specify *qaaqa* or *stigma* per se, but they may symbolically represent marks and writings on the body which represent ownership or devotion to a master.

Kittel suggests, "There can be little doubt but that the mark of Cain was a tattooed sign (Genesis 4:5)."⁴³ In Genesis 17:11, God institutes circumcision as a sign of the covenant between Him and Abraham. The Feast of the Passover, Redemption of the Firstborn, and the Shema (Exodus 13:9,16; Deuteronomy 6:8, 11:18) are to be taken seriously as if they were permanently marked on the hands and between the eyes as a symbol of remembrance. When a slave was pierced in the ear, it was a symbol on the body which marked the slave as permanently belonging to the master (Exodus 21:6). Another possible example of a marking which denoted a close relationship with God, may have been borne by the man who in the battle of Aphek showed King Ahab that he was a prophet by taking away the bandage over his forehead (1 Kings 20:41). In Isaiah 44:5, the prophet proclaims that one day people will say, 'I am the LORD'S' and another will write on his hand, 'Belonging to the LORD.' Also in Isaiah 49:16, God makes a confession about Jerusalem in a similar way when He says that, "Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; Your walls are continually before Me." The prophet Ezekiel describes a mark which an angel sets on the foreheads of the faithful in his vision of judgment. This mark has the protective power to deliver them from the sword of the avenging angel (Ezekiel 9:4,6). The scars

⁴³Kittel, 661.

which the prophet had between the hands (possibly on the chest) in Zechariah 13:6 may possibly be understood to be a *stigma*.

In Acts 18:18, Paul cut his hair in the fulfillment of a vow. Revelation 13:16,17, 14:9,11, 16:2, 19:20, 20:4 all refer to the mark of the beast which the ungodly will receive on their forehead or hand as a symbol of their devotion to him. Yet those who are faithful to God will also receive a mark, the name of God or Christ (Revelation 3:12, 14:1, 19:6, 22:4). Lastly, at the return of Christ, he has a name written on His robe and thigh, "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS (Revelation 19:16)."

In conclusion, the OT, NT, and symbolic biblical references all indicate that tattoos are a symbol of ownership and devotion. These symbols further denote protection by the deity to which they refer, and the retribution punishment towards any one who harms them.

IV. A Response to Tattoos Being Immoral or Moral

1. I believe that tattoos do not inherently desecrate the structural aspect of the IOG, nor do I believe that tattoos inherently violate the conscience of a believer, since they are not bound by the Old Covenant. Leviticus 19:28 is part of the OT Law which Christ superceded (Ephesians 2:5). We are free from the Law, and are now under the Law of Christ which does not reiterate the prohibition against tattoos.⁴⁴ I further believe that the timeless principle of Leviticus 19:28 remains clear: God's people are not to be idolatrous.

Another function of the structural aspect of the IOG is that humankind is created with the ability to appreciate beauty and art. I acknowledge that the appreciation of art is very subjective, and beauty may lie in the eye of the beholder. Whatever one's personal opinion of beauty, tattoos are legally considered art. The government of California Governor, Jerry Brown officially

⁴⁴ If Christian's still need to obey the law, then the previous verse suggests that it is immoral for men to shave (Leviticus 19:27).

proclaimed that tattoos are art on November 12, 1982.⁴⁵ Also relevant, the U.S. Department of Labor classifies tattooists in the tax bracket A194 – Artists, Performers, and Related Workers.⁴⁶ While tattooing is considered a legal art form in almost all of the United States, beauty and art can still be misplaced. Constantine, the first Christian emperor seems to acknowledge that some tattoos are ill-placed and violate the IOG more than others. He issued a decree saying that hardened criminals should not be inscribed on the face but rather on the hands or calves, for “This will ensure that the face, which has been formed in the image of the divine beauty, will be defiled as little as possible.”⁴⁷

2. In general, I believe that tattoos do not inherently desecrate the functional aspect of the IOG. While tattooing permanently marks the skin of the body, I do not think it can be classified with body modification and mutilation which alters the functional structure of the body. For this exact reason, the Catholic Catechism does not prohibit tattoos.⁴⁸ With this said, I do believe that the psychological pain which motivates people to be mutilated may also motivate them to be tattooed. In this situation tattooing would be equivalent to mutilation and ‘delicate self-harm syndrome’ which is a desecration of the functional aspect of the IOG.

Also, tattoos do not desecrate the functional aspect of the IOG because they are not proven to cause disease. During the OT period, tattoo and scarification instruments were not sterile and were presumably a source of disease and infection. A common theme within the holiness code is that many of the laws were given to prevent the Israelites from experiencing illness. Therefore God’s prohibition against tattoos and mutilation in Leviticus 19:28 could have been His gracious prevention against disease. Current tattooing techniques which include one-

⁴⁵ Krakow, 14.

⁴⁶ www.bls.gov/ncs/ocs/ocsm/comA194.htm

⁴⁷ Krakow, 13.

⁴⁸ www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P80.HTM

time-use needles, individual ink pots, latex gloves and autoclave equipment have all but eliminated the spread of disease. The Center of Disease reports that no data exists in the U.S. which indicates that persons exposed to tattooing alone are at increased risk for Hepatitis C or HIV.⁴⁹

3. I believe that tattoos do hinder unity within the body of Christ by causing fellow believers with weak consciences to stumble. Christians are exhorted to take great pains to prevent violating a weaker brother's conscience in 1 Corinthians 8:1-13. In reference to this passage, Bible scholar David Lowery suggests that, "Paul did not say that a knowledgeable Christian must abandon his freedom to the ignorant prejudice of a "spiritual" bigot. The "weak brother" was one who followed the example of another Christian, not one who carped and coerced that knowledgeable Christian into a particular behavioral pattern...The "weak brother" ...was to be taught so that he too could enjoy his freedom."⁵⁰ With this in mind, I do not believe that the *stigma* of Paul mentioned in Galatians 6:17 would have caused division amongst believers, since they were involuntarily inflicted. Yet someone would only know the source of the *stigma* if Paul explained it. Therefore, I believe that tattoos within the Christian community need to be openly discussed and their meanings explained. People who believe that tattoos are immoral may have their conscience strengthened if they realized the meanings behind them, and people who believe tattoos are moral may have their conscience refocused if they realized the perception they portray.

4. I believe that tattoos may or may not communicate God's character to the external world. If a person were to be tattooed simply to look macho or vain, this would be immoral and

⁴⁹ www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis/c_training/edu/1/epidem-trans-5.htm

⁵⁰ Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (1 Co 8:13). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

would not communicate the character of God (1 Peter 3:3). Also, if tattoos portray something offensive or glorify sin, this obviously would not communicate the character of God.

Yet I believe that tattoos do have the ability to communicate the character and truths of God to an external world, as well as remind the bearer of the truth which the tattoo symbolizes. This seems to be how the Bible describes the meaning of tattoos. Throughout the OT and NT period, tattooing symbolized ownership and devotion to the god which they portrayed. It also provides a reminder to the tattooed person as to whom they belong.

Christians throughout history have been tattooed with Christian symbols as a sign of ownership and devotion to Christ. Victor of Vita writes in 480 A.D. of a Manichaean monk in North Africa named Clementianus, who was found having written on his thigh, “Mani, the disciple of Jesus Christ.” Procopius of Gaza, writing at the end of the fifth century, says that many Christians chose to be marked on their wrists or arms with the sign of the cross or the name of Christ. “Thus it is apparent that religious tattoos – as decoration, identification, indication of baptism, sign of pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and a mark of membership – were in use at the same time that institutions of political authority were using tattoos in a punitive sense.”⁵¹ In Steve Gilbert’s source book, *Tattoo History*, he quotes numerous findings by German scholar Franz Joseph Dolger who has made a diligent search of early Christian documents in an effort to discover records of religious tattooing. He writes, “An edict issued by the Council of Calcuth (Northumberland) seems to indicate a distinction between a profane tattoo, and a Christian tattoo. They wrote, ‘When an individual undergoes the ordeal of tattooing for the sake of God, he is to be greatly praised. But one who submits himself to be tattooed for superstitious reasons in the manner of the heathens will derive no benefit therefrom.’”⁵² In Late Antiquity and the

⁵¹ Gustafson, 29.

⁵² Gilbert, 150.

Middle Ages, penal tattooing was used as frequently as the classical Greeks and Romans, yet orthodox Christians had themselves tattooed with the emblems or name of Jesus.⁵³ A radical shift had occurred. Tattooing went from a penal retribution against one's will, to a voluntary, counter-cultural expression of devotion.

In conclusion, I believe that tattoos are morally neutral. Dependant on motivation, effect, culture, and devotion to which the tattoo symbolizes, it may either be immoral or moral.

V. Personal and Pastoral Implications

To prevent getting an immoral tattoo which would desecrate one of the aspects of the IOG, a person should be asked these key questions:

1. What is your motivation for getting a tattoo? If you got a tattoo, would it violate your conscience or the conscience of your family members, friends, and fellow believers in Christ? Would this tattoo be considered by others as aesthetically pleasing? Is it legal in your state and at your age to be tattooed?

2. Could this tattoo permanently harm your body? Is the tattoo parlor you go too certified? Is it clean? Have you seen other tattoos which your artist has done? How long have you thought about getting this particular symbol? Are you prepared to have this symbol marked on your body permanently? Are you addicted to tattoos? Are you able to not get the tattoo?

3. What will your parents think of your tattoo? If you are married, what would your spouse think? What would your fellow church members think? Is your tattoo auspicious? Are you able to cover it up? How will you feel about your tattoo in 10 years? 50 years? Will this tattoo hinder future relationships? Will this tattoo prevent you from getting a job in the future? Will this tattoo prevent you from accomplishing God's will for your life?

⁵³Jones, 13.

4. What is the meaning of your tattoo? Does it symbolize a Biblical truth? Would God be honored by this tattoo? Does this tattoo symbolize something which is relevant to your relationship with Christ? Would this tattoo benefit or hinder your relationship with Christ?

If the tattoo will not violate your conscience or others, if it will not cause permanent harm or disease, if it will not harm relationships which you have and if it is symbolic of a Biblical truth which will benefit your relationship with Christ – then I believe that Christians do not desecrate the IOG and are free to get tattoos.