

## Minister's Message – March 2013

### Tattoos

The number of young people having their bodies tattooed is on the increase. Around 25% of those under 30 in Australia have a tattoo. Why this increase? Why do people want a tattoo? Is it wrong for a Christian to get a tattoo? A tattoo is made by injecting ink into the dermis of the skin to make a permanent mark. In the times of Moses it was made by cutting the skin and rubbing in a dye.

The word 'tattoo' does not appear in older versions of the Bible, but it is found in the NKJV and ESV in Leviticus 19:28. In the KJV it is written 'nor print any marks upon you'. The word 'tattoo' came into English from Samoan '*tatau*' after Cook's Pacific expedition in 1769. Sailors adopted the practice and brought it to the Western world.

In Polynesian and other Asian cultures men and women have tattooed themselves for centuries. They did this to mark a young person's rite of passage, to ward off evil spirits, or help scare off the enemy. In the Bible it was done by pagans to honour the dead, along with shaving the hair (Leviticus 19:28, Deuteronomy 14:1). Cutting the flesh was also a religious practice among the Canaanites (I Kings 18:28). Hindus in mourning shave their heads and make an offering to the gods. Tattoos have also been used as a form of identification, as with prisoners in Nazi Germany.

Why would a Christian want to tattoo their body? Some defend the practice if they have the symbol of the cross or the name 'Jesus' in the tattoo. Others argue that the tattoo is simply cosmetic, having nothing to do with any rite or religion. They say it is simply a form of self-expression, or an expression of their love for someone.

We have noted the specific prohibition in the Bible about getting a tattoo for the dead. Some will say 'but what about the other prohibitions in the Levitical code? These no longer apply'. Nevertheless, this was a specific command not to follow a pagan practice but to be a holy people to the Lord. 'The disfiguring of the skin ... dishonoured the divine image in a person, and was forbidden because it did not reflect God's holiness' (R.K. Harrison in Tyndale commentary). Moreover, the second commandment states 'You shall not make for yourselves a carved image'. A religious symbol carved on the body must qualify as a carved image. So, just because tattoo is in the form of a cross does not make it acceptable.

When God made man, he said 'Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness' (Genesis 1:26). This may not mean physical likeness, although when God sent his Son into this world he came in a body like ours; and there is no record of either Jesus, or the apostles, or any early Christians getting tattoos. The Psalmist, speaking about his physical body wrote, 'I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made' (Psalm 139:14).

The apostle Paul writes 'Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit ... therefore honour God in your body' (I Corinthians 6:19-20). While the context of this verse is that of sexual immorality, the point remains that God made us in his image and he wants us to glorify him in our body. We must ask how tattoos and other forms of body modification, other than for medical reasons, are glorifying to God.

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