

Tattoos, Branding,

and the Christian Perspective

From ancient rituals to modern self-expression, the practice of marking the human body has a long, complex, and often controversial history. While the Bible forbids it, and although they used to be symbols of criminals, tribal allegiance, and devotion to false gods, tattoos and branding have become accepted forms of rebellion or personal art.

For those of us who take the Bible as our ultimate authority, however, permanently altering one's body is viewed as a direct violation of God's Word. The history of tattooing is found in the early Bible times. The conversation around tattoos and branding runs deep in Scripture, and within our Anabaptist traditions, lived out in simplicity, modesty, and discipleship. It is understood that we should refrain from cutting or marking the flesh. Leviticus 19:28 says: *"Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the Lord."*

Today, tattoos are everywhere: crosses and portraits of Jesus stand alongside satanic symbols, memorial dates, and countless personal designs. When asked about their tattoos, most people can share a reason for getting them; others admit they did it on impulse. Some later live with deep regret over these permanent marks. Throughout history, many have tried to justify tattoos or branding as spiritual acts. But when we encounter heavily tattooed individuals, what is our response? And do we truly know the origins of these practices?

The discovery of *Ötzi the Iceman*, an ancient mummy found in the Alps, revealed over 60 tattoos, possibly for symbolic or medicinal purposes. Ancient Egyptians adorned their bodies with intricate designs, while in Polynesian cultures, tattoos (tatau) signified lineage and social status. In Japan, tattooing evolved into a refined art form, and among many Native American tribes, tattoos held their own deep spiritual significance.

Yet history also reveals a darker side. Branding, the act of searing a mark into the skin, has often been used as a tool of punishment and ownership. In the Roman Empire, slaves and criminals were branded for identification. During the transatlantic slave trade, human beings were marked like livestock, a cruel sign of their dehumanization.

Tattoos have been used for identification and control. Roman soldiers bore permanent dots marking them with "SPQR" (*Senatus Populusque Romanus*). In later centuries, tattoos were common in the

military. During the Civil War and World War I, soldiers sometimes tattooed themselves for identification in case of injury or death. Many carried patriotic designs, such as the American flag.

Not all body markings are permanent. Temporary tattoos, such as *henna*, called *mehndi* in Hindi and Urdu, have been practiced for over 5,000 years in Pakistan, India, Africa, and the Middle East. Originally, henna was valued for its natural cooling properties in hot climates, where people soaked their palms and soles in the paste. It also had medicinal uses, treating ailments from burns to headaches. Over time, people discovered that henna's reddish-orange dye stained the skin, and its use shifted toward decoration, accessible to everyone. These marks are treated as temporary forms of art. It is tempting for some to receive the tattoo knowing it will come off in a few weeks. The exact duration can vary based on factors like skin type, the location of the tattoo on the body, and how well the tattoo is cared for after application

From a biblical perspective, the Apostle Paul reminds believers in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20: *"What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."* shows that the body is holy and that believers should honor God with it. From this perspective, marking the body with tattoos or brands is dishonoring God.

The principle of nonconformity to the world, as seen in Romans 12:2: *"And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God"* also leads many of us to question whether popular trends like tattooing or henna align with a Christ-centered life. While society increasingly accepts these markings, believers are called to a higher standard of discernment.

The modern-day Christian interpretation of this matter varies. Many can see the command in Leviticus as specific to ancient pagan rituals and not binding today. Others believe tattoos with Christian imagery can be a legitimate form of witness. Yet, many of us believe that an unmarked body can itself be a powerful testimony of a life set apart for God. There may be some believers who come to the Cross marked with a tattoo. Can that mark be forgiven? When the Word of God is clear on a matter, the converted man must seek forgiveness and enter Heaven spotless from sin. Does that mean a marked man must have a tattoo removed? We should be careful which tattoos stay and which ones we allow to remain. Evil, demonic tattoos should be removed.

Scripture also speaks of a different kind of "mark." While the Bible warns against earthly tattoos, it promises that God Himself places His seal upon His people, not with ink, but with His Spirit. Ephesians 1:13 declares that believers are "sealed with that holy Spirit of promise," a divine mark of ownership and a guarantee of eternal inheritance, "the seal of God in their foreheads." Revelation 22:4: "And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads." looks ahead to the day when God's faithful will have His name written on their foreheads, an eternal sign of belonging. This will be the only "tattoo" worth bearing forever: a mark not made by human hands, but by the Savior Himself, declaring to all creation, "Thou art mine".

-Will Taylor