

# Cross Current



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## The Tattoo Taboo



Billy Joe Henry leaves a lasting impression on people. He's a tattoo artist.

With shops in Nashville, Tennessee and Terre Haute, Indiana, Billy Joe considers his work a ministry. "We don't only offer Christian designs, because then it wouldn't be a ministry for the lost," he says. "But we don't have any designs with devils, drugs or nudity and we won't do them. When people [ask why]... it's a perfect way to explain my beliefs and talk about Jesus."

Billy Joe belongs to the Christian Tattoo Association which often cites Isaiah 49:15,16 where God says to his people, "I will not forget you. See, I have engraved your name on the palms of my hands." Some members also point to Revelation 19:16 which describes the future return of Jesus, "On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: King of kings and lord of lords."

On the other side of the debate, those who say the Word is worth a thousand pictures emphasize Leviticus 19:18. "Do not cut your bodies for the dead," it says, "and do not mark your skin with tattoos. I am the Lord." But tattoo supporters argue the passage is simply saying the Jews were not to tattoo the dead with pagan religious symbols like the nations around them. Besides, they point out, Christians are not bound by Old Testament law, and they cite the way most of us routinely ignore verse 27: "Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard."

Okay, reply the critics. In the New Testament we're told our bodies are sacred, purchased by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross "Don't you realize your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who lives in you



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and was given to you by God?" writes the apostle Paul. "You don't belong to yourself for God bought you with a high price. So you must honour God with your body." (1 Corinthians 6:19,20)

Those who embrace tattoos say that's exactly what they're doing by getting ones that reflect Bible people, parables or passages. To them, explaining their tattoos is a form of testimony and they liken the art itself to an illustrated sermon. They also believe a tattoo ministry follows the example of Jesus who often reached out to those on the fringes of society.

But even Christians who take that view say a believer should never get a tattoo without taking a good, hard look at what's behind the decision. Getting a tattoo to glorify God or share the faith is one thing, but less spiritual motivations include the desire to fit in, draw attention to yourself, or needle parents.

Despite the debate, a couple of things are clear. First, tattoos are leaving an indelible mark on our culture. The American Academy of Dermatology says almost one in four people between the ages of 18 and 50 has at least one tattoo. That includes a lot of Christians.

Second, mistakes happen. In London, England, Martin Nolan spent seven hours getting the Serenity Prayer tattooed on his back. It was only when he proudly showed his tat to a friend that the 43-year-old caterer learned the prayer had two spelling mistakes! Strength was spelled "strenght" and wisdom as "nisdom".

The manager of the tattoo parlour, Andrew Daynes, blamed his customer, saying Nolan approved the outlines of the letters before they were inked in. "We always ask this because some of the international artists might not be able to spell very well," he said. "It's the same with dyslexic artists." For his part, Nolan says he can't afford to get the mistakes corrected.

Regardless of whether we have tattoos, each of us is responsible for what we allow to be engraved on our hearts. If they bear a distorted message, the effects are long-lasting and costly to correct. That situation is far more serious than what's on the flesh.

So whether you see tattoos as a work of the flesh or cutting edge ministry, it's good to remember that while we judge by what's on the outside, God looks at the inside. He wants our faith to be more than skin deep.