

## Bio:

### Andy Robinson

Andy is a full time Lead Elder of Kings Church Horsham where he is a regular speaker.

Andy is passionate about seeing people come to know Jesus for themselves. He loves reading the bible and is committed to faithfully preaching the "whole council of God" even when it is unpopular in today's politically correct



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## *Christians & Tattoos?*

*Is it ever right to have a tattoo as a Christian?*

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# Is it ever right to have a tattoo as a Christian?

## Introduction

As a pastor of a large(ish) church and previously as a youth pastor for over 10 years the subject of tattoos, and piercings for that matter, is rarely far away. In fairness it goes in fits & starts as it becomes culturally fashionable but today, in our culture, tattoos are very in vogue and so are not only culturally relevant in society but also in the church. So what do I think the bible says about this, if anything, and if it does how can we apply it to our lives?

## Fundamental Assumptions

There are some basic assumptions that I am making about you the reader and your beliefs.

### Assumption 1 – You love Jesus

My fundamental assumption is that you love Jesus with all your heart, mind, soul and strength<sup>1</sup> and that it is your greatest desire to live your life for Him, to please Him by living a life worthy of His name, to fulfil His commands to you – To love God<sup>2</sup> & love people<sup>3</sup> and to go and share Jesus with everyone<sup>4</sup> you can either in word or deed.

### Assumption 2 – You believe in the inerrancy of the bible

I assume too that you believe that the bible is the inspired word of God and that it is, in its entirety, for our good, for our instruction, to help us live great lives for God<sup>5</sup>.

These assumptions allow us to read the bible and form our decisions on the basis of scripture. We can then avoid offence as we are simply professing the teaching of the bible and thus the word of God however “unpopular” that may be. We can avoid including our own personal preferences where the bible has clear instruction on what we must do even when that seems contrary to what we, or society and our culture, want.

## Initial statements and positioning of this document

I am writing this in answer to a question from someone who is already a Christian and seeking to get a tattoo. I am not making any comment regarding people who have tattoos already and have since come to faith in Jesus.

Regardless of the outcome of this investigation and study I am not looking to condemn anyone who has a tattoo or anyone who does not want one. I know that there is grace from God for any and all things. Many people come to

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 10:27

<sup>2</sup> Mark 12:30

<sup>3</sup> Mark 12:31

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 28:19

<sup>5</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16

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faith in Jesus later on in life and as a result have lived life ignorant of the things of God and the instruction of the bible and so, as Romans 8:1 says "There is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus". So this study is in no way intending to condemn anyone. Nor is it intending to promote tattoos or suggest that, if you don't have one, that you should get one. It is simply answering the question for someone who is a Christian and would like to get a tattoo – "Can I go ahead with a clear conscience and get one?"

## Is it OK for a Christian to Get a Tattoo?

As always let us begin by examining any biblical texts regarding tattoos. When the question of tattoos comes up, particularly parents, are quick to quote **Leviticus 19:28** (ESV) "*You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD*". It would be unwise first of all to simply accept the translators definition of these Hebrew words. The two key words are:

**k<sup>o</sup>thôbeth | keth-o'-beth** | From The Strong reference H3789; a letter or other *mark* branded on the skin: - X any [mark] and **qa'ăqa'** | **kah-ak-ah'** | From the same as [H6970](#); an *incision* or gash: - + mark.

Several of the translations render the verse as:

**English Standard Version (ESV): Leviticus 19:28** "You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or **tattoo** yourselves: I am the LORD"

**King James Version (KJV): Leviticus 19:28** "Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor **print any marks** upon you: I am the LORD".

**Literal Translation (LITV): Leviticus 19:28** And you shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead; and you shall not put on yourself any **etched mark**; I am Jehovah.

**New International Version (NIV): Leviticus 19:28** "Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put **tattoo marks** on yourselves. I am the LORD".

It seems to me that this verse is clearly talking about what we understand today as a "Tattoo" there seems little doubt about that. So now the question is "Does this passage prohibit us and the new Israel from having a tattoo?" because this passage, at first glance at least, seems to say so.

## The overall context

This verse cannot be simply dealt with in isolation. We have to look at it in the broader context of the chapter, and maybe even the book of Leviticus. The verses we read in Chapter 19 of Leviticus are concerned with "respect for God". Particularly Leviticus 19:26-28, Leviticus 19:30-31 and Leviticus 19:37. They are predominantly focussing on pagan worship and sorcery which are clearly prohibited by God.

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It seems to me that the context of these verses is concerned with methods of discerning or understanding the future other than going directly to God or to those appointed to speak on God's behalf. These verses prohibit the practices of their day that reflected the pagan ritual and satanic practice of the godless people around them.

So let's look at our verse in the full context of the verses surrounding it. Leviticus 19:26-28 says ...

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*Leviticus 19:26-28 NIV* *"Do not eat any meat with the blood still in it. "Do not practice divination or sorcery. 27 "Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard. 28 "Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD.*

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So here we see the whole issues of divination and sorcery being introduced in Lev 19:26 and then some explanation as to what that might look like in Lev 19:27-28. I believe these verses are to do with God calling his people to holiness (Being set apart for God) and so he is looking for them to demonstrate a different way of living; In this case not looking to mediums, the dead or spiritualists to determine their future. In this ancient culture that would be the pagan process of shaving off part of your hair and trimming your beard. In the Jewish culture as I am sure you would have seen they keep very long ringlets of head on the side of their faces and long beards too! Included in this (Lev:19:28) would be the ritual slashing of one's bodies and marking them (Tattoos).

So it seems to me that the verses of Leviticus 19:26-28 are concerned with respect for God as the only true and valid means of security for the future and the holiness of the people in that they are set apart for God and not conformed to the pattern of the cultures around them.

## Bad Hair Cuts and Beards

Given that verses in the bible were only introduced about A.D. 1227 by Archbishop of Canterbury - Stephen Langton, and in the original Hebrew there was no punctuation, not to mention the fact that the Hebrew bible has different divisions to those we use, so it is hard to say that these verses are not one sentence which leaves us with a problem. The problem being that in using this verse to prohibit tattoos for Christians today forces me to then prohibit bad hair cuts and clean shaven men!

So we have two options here. One is to implement all of these prohibitions, which would include eating a steak with blood in it as well as no tattoos, no hair cuts or shaving. The other option is to agree that these laws were cultural and timely for the people of God in that time and place and agree that the principle of respect for God and our holiness is what is in view for us. We do not have the option of simply taking part of the sentence, namely the tattoo part and implementing it as a prohibition and then discard the haircuts and beards elements. This would be hermeneutically wrong and we are unable to do that and remain true to the text particularly as Leviticus 19:37 explicitly states you must *"observe all my statutes and all my rules, and do them: I am the Lord"*

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## Principles not Process

What we are seeing here is that I believe that the Godly principles here of “respect for God” and of “Holiness” for us still hold true today and should be followed and upheld in our culture. So today many people, Christians included would read their horoscope in the paper. This is exactly what Leviticus 19:26-28 is concerned with – the people of God looking to false gods and pagan sorcery for security in their future. This is what the shaving of hair, bodily mutilation and tattooing demonstrated back in Old Testament times.

So we cannot conclude from this passage that tattoos are ok, but that the verse in Leviticus 19:28 does not in my opinion prohibit them as artwork in and of themselves, but does do so if they are part of pagan worship or ritual.

It is my experience that every parent that has ever asked me to tell their children that tattoos are unbiblical also want their sons, and future sons-in-law, to have short hair cuts and be clean shaven – you can't have both! Either these verses promote long hair and beards and no tattoos or they demonstrate a principle for us to follow and apply, which, in my opinion does not prohibit tattoos, any more than it does short hair or no beards!

## W.W.J.D. – What Would Jesus Do?

Again, the trite answer I hear when others are asked if tattoos are ok is “What would Jesus do?” Not that I want to cause controversy for the sake of it, but whilst Leviticus 19:28 is the only explicit reference to tattoos in the bible, there is another indirect reference and it involves Jesus. It is in Revelation 19:16

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*Revelation 19:16 ESV On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.*

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So what does this word “Written” mean.

graphō | graf'-o | Strongs G1125 | A primary verb; to “grave”, especially to *write*; figuratively to *describe*: - describe, write (-ing, -ten).

My thoughts are that to grave and write onto ones thigh might, or could, be assumed to be some kind of tattoo with the words “King of kings and Lord of lords”. This is far from conclusive, but does hint towards something etched, graven and written onto the thigh of Jesus. No I am not a Greek scholar and am open to correction on this, but it seems to me that whilst this is far from conclusive, it is a possibility.

## Conclusion

So what are my thoughts in conclusion? Well, I have a few thoughts.

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## No biblical case for not having a tattoo

My conclusion is that there is not an explicit biblical case to prohibit someone having a tattoo.

## If tattoos are not wrong are they right?

I want to be very clear here. The case I have presented simply concludes that the bible has little to say about tattoos as we use them in our culture and therefore I do not find a biblical case to prohibit them. This conclusion does not suggest that they are a good idea, or that everyone should have one. I am simply concluding that there is no case biblically for someone telling a Christian that the bible clearly states that you are not allowed to have a tattoo – it does not.

## Don't speak too loud when the bible is silent or quiet

One thing I think is a common error in Christianity is often we can be very vocal, prescriptive and legalistic over things the bible has little to say. The bible, I think, has little to say specifically about tattoos yet many Christians are very vocal and directive about it. They are quite entitled to express their opinion but in my experience it is rarely expressed as “opinion” but as doctrine. My view is that the bible has little to say directly about tattoos and so we should be cautious when speaking strongly for, or against.

## Open Hand Issues

I use the terms open and closed handed issues to describe the types of doctrine and values that one would fight for, closed handed issues, and those that are free to be discussed, debated and disagreed over, open handed issues. I would personally consider tattoos to be an “Open Handed Issue” and therefore open to discussion and disagreement because as I have demonstrated, the bible is reasonably silent. If someone felt that tattoos were wrong, I would disagree, but not fall out with them over it.

St Augustine is reputed as saying "*in necessary things unity; in uncertain things freedom; in everything compassion*" and I would consider this as “Uncertain” and so would leave it to one's conscience as to the rights and wrongs – but I would hope for grace (compassion) being expressed from both camps towards the other.

## When your Parents say No

If you are a young person and before you go racing to your parents saying “*Andy Robinson says the bible does not say I can't have a tattoo*” remember this – The bible also says very explicitly that you are to honour your father and mother<sup>6</sup> and if they say “no” to a tattoo, then it's NO! They don't have to present you with a biblical case for their decision. They are entrusted by God to make wise decisions and lead, guide and protect you and they can, do and

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<sup>6</sup> Ex 20:12

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should make additional house rules as they see fit. This is the biblical mandate to parents and if they feel that it is unwise for you to get a tattoo for whatever reason then as a Christian you are to submit to their biblical authority over you and you are to show them honour in it. Sorry folks – if your parents say “no” then it’s “NO”.

## When your Church Leaders Say No

Again you are to honour your leaders. Recognise that it is the Holy Spirit who anoints Godly leaders and places them over us for our protection.

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*Hebrews 13:17 ESV Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*

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So allow them to lead you with joy, don't make it difficult for them by saying “*there's this guy and he has written this paper and he says you're wrong and it is ok for me to get a tattoo*”. Submit to them as the bible says you should, obey them and pray for them and make their leadership of you a joy and not a burden. Having a tattoo is not a matter of life and death, just preference. Submit to them, honour them and support them because they have a hard enough job as it is.

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*The thoughts, opinions and conclusions expressed in this paper are my own. As an open handed issue other elders within Kings Church Horsham may not necessarily hold the same view.*

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I will add to this paper a Frequently Asked Questions section (FAQ) should I get asked the same question via my blog at <http://radicallife.org.uk/?s=tattoos>