

## GUIDES TO CHRISTIAN ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

*This guide (and others in the series) is an initiative of the Office of the Bishop and the Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand. It is intended to help church members consider how they might respond to contemporary ethical issues. It is meant for use in personal reflection and is not an 'official' statement of the church on the topic. I am grateful to Nick Schwarz, Assistant to the Bishop – Public Theology, for his ongoing work on this project, and others who assisted.*

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# TATTOOS

## Learn about the matter at hand

### ***Australian attitudes towards tattoos have changed***

Not so long ago in Australia, getting a tattoo was generally seen as something sensible and respectable people didn't do. Some allowance was made for members of the armed forces, whose tattoos were often done for bonding purposes. But otherwise, tattoos were mostly seen as something done by and for people of questionable character. Apart from soldiers and sailors, the people most likely to get tattoos voluntarily were members of criminal gangs. Tattoos also brought to mind the involuntary tattooing of slaves and concentration camp inmates at Auschwitz.

Australia is now highly multicultural. Many of us have grown accustomed to seeing people of different ethnic and cultural origins with various dress styles and hairstyles, as well as different forms of body modification such as tattoos, piercings and scarification.

Australians are now also more individualistic. Getting tattoos has become a popular form of self-expression. People's bodies have become canvases on which to express their individuality. So many celebrities – both men and women – from the world of entertainment and sport are now covered in tattoos that tattoos are becoming 'mainstream'.

However, while public acceptance of tattoos might be high in fields like professional sports and creative arts, in many other parts of society, the old prejudices about tattoos are still present.

## **Are you or someone you know thinking of getting a tattoo?**

Perhaps you are reading this guide because you or someone you know is considering getting a tattoo. This first section of this guide will help anyone thinking of getting a tattoo – whether Christian or not – to think carefully and wisely before they make their decision. We will cover how tattooing is done, how old you must be to get a tattoo, tattoo design and location, motivations, financial cost, and risks, such as health risks, the risk of regret, risks associated with other people's perceptions of you, and the difficulties and expense of tattoo removal.

### **How tattooing is done**

Tattoos are created by injecting coloured ink (via needles) into the dermis layer of the skin. The ink and the damage from the needles cause an inflammatory response. White blood cells migrate into the area and consume the ink. As the skin repairs itself, the colour persists as many of the white blood cells and scar tissue cells with pigment inside them are trapped in the area. After many years, tattoos can become blurred and fade slightly as the pigment migrates deeper into the dermis.

### **Legal restrictions on who can get tattoos**

Each state or territory in Australia has its own laws governing tattooing. They are designed to protect young and immature people from permanently altering their bodies without fully understanding the consequences.

**Table 1: Australian laws regarding tattooing as they stood in January 2023**

<b>State or territory</b>	<b>Law regarding the tattooing of under 18s</b>
<b>NSW</b>	Under 18s must have their parents' written permission agreeing on the style of tattoo and where it will be located.
<b>ACT</b>	Under 18s must have their parents' written permission agreeing on the style of tattoo and where it will be located.
<b>Queensland</b>	Illegal for under 18s
<b>Victoria</b>	Illegal for under 18s
<b>Tasmania</b>	Illegal for under 18s
<b>South Australia</b>	Illegal for under 18s
<b>Western Australia</b>	Under 18s must have the written permission of their parents or guardian.
<b>NT</b>	There are no specific rules, but tattooists are required to verify that minors have the capacity to consent, so in practice usually ask teens for their parents' permission.

### **Tattoo design**

Designs can involve images, patterns, symbols, words, names, numbers, dates, single or multiple colours, and vary in size.

Designs signify different things. See the section below on motivations for more about the significance of different designs.

When talking about design, we must also talk about risks or consequences. See the section below on risks for more information.

### **Tattoo location**

Tattoos can be 'public' or 'private', ie deliberately placed so other people can see them or placed so they are usually hidden under clothing. Placing them so people can see them comes with risks. Table 2 below and the section on risks contains important counsel on the consequences of visible tattoos.

People with tattoos on skin prone to stretching or sagging, for example, because of weight gain, pregnancy or age, must be aware that stretching affects the appearance of tattoos and tends to reduce satisfaction.

### **Cost**

The price of tattoos depends on their size, level of detail and the artistic reputation of the tattooist. Larger tattoos can cost hundreds to thousands of dollars. Shopping around for the cheapest price comes with a risk of lower quality and compromised hygiene, increasing the risk of complications and regret.

In considering the cost of getting a tattoo, it is also worthwhile considering the difficulty and the costs of trying to get unwanted tattoos removed.

Tattoos are certainly in the category of discretionary or luxury expenses. People on limited incomes or have dependents must think seriously about whether getting tattoos is a responsible use of their money.

### **Motivations**

We noted earlier that tattoos have become a form of self-expression. People get tattoos because they want to 'say something'.

Visible tattoos are usually meant to draw other people's attention and convey a message of some sort. For example:

- something about the person's character
- the person's connection to a particular group or 'tribe'
- the person's love for, admiration of, or tribute to someone or something
- an achievement the person is proud of.

Hidden tattoos are more likely to carry meanings or messages that are personal or private or are intended to be shared only with a small circle of trusted family members or friends.

### **Risks**

Anyone considering a tattoo must be aware of the downsides. It is vital to remember that tattoos are permanent and take the risks of regret seriously. Table 2 below outlines major risks. If you or a friend are considering a tattoo, weigh these up carefully.

**Table 2: Downsides or risks of tattoos**

<b>Risk type</b>	<b>Details about risks</b>	<b>How to reduce risk</b>
<b>Health risks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Infections, including Hepatitis B and C and HIV, if tattooist fails to follow legally required infection control procedures</li><li>• Allergic reactions to tattoo ink dyes and pigments</li><li>• Scarring</li><li>• Difficulty in recognising early signs of skin cancer</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensure the tattooist follows legally required infection control procedures.</li><li>• Follow all aftercare instructions, and seek medical help if concerns arise.</li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complications with MRI scans due to presence of iron in dark coloured ink</li> </ul>	
<b>Social risks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Getting a tattoo, especially a sizeable one on skin that is often exposed and readily noticed, can affect how others perceive you. Even if you consider the design of your tattoo to be 100% inoffensive, some people will make judgements about your character that you might consider unfair.</li> <li>• Having visible tattoos might affect your chances of getting a job if the employer has concerns about the tattoo design and location and its potential impact on customers/clients.</li> <li>• You might think you are showing cultural appreciation if you get a tattoo design that is linked to a particular ethnic or cultural group and are not a recognised member of that group; however, you might be accused of cultural appropriation, i.e. of wrongly using someone else's property.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk with significant others (parents, friends, bosses) about what they think about your idea of getting a tattoo and take any concerns they have seriously.</li> <li>• Investigate workplace policies on visible tattoos.</li> <li>• Locate tattoos on skin that are usually covered by clothing.</li> <li>• Avoid getting 'ethnic' or tribal tattoos unless you are a recognised member of that group and have the approval to wear them.</li> </ul>
<b>Consumer risks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regret due to the tattooist's level of artistry not meeting your expectations</li> <li>• Regret with the passage of time, as what seemed like a good idea at the time seems like a mistake later</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do your homework on the tattooist.</li> <li>• Acknowledge that people's tastes and character can change over time.</li> <li>• Don't rush! Impose on yourself a moratorium so you can think it over for a few months at least.</li> <li>• Have a trial with a stick-on tattoo first to see if the novelty wears off.</li> <li>• Never make a spontaneous decision to get a tattoo or decide while under the influence of alcohol or drugs.</li> <li>• Do not allow yourself to be persuaded by others to get a tattoo.</li> <li>• Research the costs and effectiveness of tattoo removal.</li> </ul>

## A Christian perspective on tattooing

Christians look first to God for guidance in making right (or good or wise) choices. The most accessible and trustworthy source of God's guidance is the Bible.

### **What does the Bible say about God's stance on tattoos?**

The only reference in the Bible to God's stance on tattoos is found in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus. Leviticus 19:28 reads, 'Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks upon yourselves. I am the Lord' (Leviticus 19:28).

How are we to understand this apparent prohibition on tattooing? If it still applies today, does it apply to Christians? Does it rule out tattoos of every sort or only some?

Let's begin to answer these questions with a brief comment on the Book of Leviticus. Leviticus contains many detailed laws governing the behaviour of God's chosen people, the people of Israel, whom God freed from slavery in Egypt. The laws were designed to keep the people of Israel pure and holy, loyal to God alone, distinct from and set apart from neighbouring peoples like Egyptians and Canaanites. God repeatedly reminded the Israelites that he was their God and that they were to trust in him alone, pray to him alone, and worship him alone. Thus, God forbade the Israelites from copying their neighbours' religious and magical rituals like cutting their flesh to appease the spirits of the dead, tattooing their bodies to show their dedication to their gods, and tattooing women to supposedly increase their fertility and protect them during childbirth.

The purpose of the ban on tattooing was, therefore, to prevent the Israelites from wrongly placing their trust in false gods and magic instead of the one true God.

God would surely desire that Christians today continue to refrain from putting on their bodies any marks that show we are putting our trust in false gods and magic. We can't say for sure what God's stance is on tattooing our bodies with other images; however, by examining his will for us on important related topics, we show God that we take his word seriously and are more likely to make a God-pleasing decision. Here, then, are some relevant things we know about God's will for us:

- God wills us to obey the law of our land (Romans 13:1–5; 1 Peter 2:13,14). Australian laws that ban the tattooing of under 18s are sensible and responsible and should be obeyed.
- God wills us to respect our parents (Exodus 20:12; Proverbs 1:8; Colossians 3:20). If you are considering getting a tattoo, discuss it with your parents, and take their advice seriously.
- God wills us to respect and treat our bodies with care (1 Corinthians 6:19,20).
- God wills us to manage the money we earn responsibly and wisely.

God would also surely like us to honestly reflect on our motivations for getting a tattoo. Why do we want one? What would God think of our reasons?

### **What about 'Christian tattoos'?**

Some Christians choose to express their Christian identity via one or more explicitly Christian tattoos. A visible Christian tattoo is a way of witnessing their faith, an alternative to wearing a Christian-themed t-shirt or a cross, dove, fish or other recognisably Christian symbols on a necklace, brooch, or tie pin. Even having a tattoo that is usually hidden under clothing serves as a constant reminder to them that they are part of God's family now. They are confident that faith-based tattoos would meet God's approval. See Box 1 below, which explains why many Egyptian Coptic Christians have tattoos.

### **Box 1: Egyptian Coptic Christians and cross tattoos**

Many Coptic Christians in Egypt have a cross tattooed on the inside of their wrist. The origin of this practice goes right back to the fall of Egypt to Muslim forces around 640 AD. Christians who refused to convert to Islam were marked with a cross on their wrist and forced to pay *jizya*, an extra tax on non-Muslims to prevent them from being enslaved or killed.

Coptic Christians in Egypt still suffer intolerance, discrimination and persecution at the hands of Islamist groups. In many places, Islamists and criminals still try to extort a *jizya* from Coptic Christians as 'protection' against having their homes, businesses or churches destroyed.

Nowadays, many Egyptian Copts voluntarily get crosses tattooed on their wrists. They regard their cross tattoos as symbols of courage and steadfastness in the face of persecution.

In some places in Egypt, people who want to enter a church but are not recognised as part of the worshipping community are asked to show their cross tattoo to verify that they are indeed Christian. Such security checks have unfortunately become common because of Islamist attacks on worshippers in church.

## **Making a decision**

If you are over 18 and are thinking seriously about getting a tattoo, make sure you have carefully weighed up everything you have read in this guide. Please don't stop here either. Do more research so you can truly say you understand and accept all the risks involved and have made every effort to minimise them. Do not rush a decision to permanently mark your body. If you are unsure or worried, you might regret it sometime in the future. Stop and give yourself more time to think about it. Don't let others pressure you into getting a tattoo, and never decide to get a tattoo while under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

If you do decide to get a tattoo, think very carefully about its design and the possible implications of having it visible. Remember also that the appearance of tattoos can alter with the passage of time and as skin stretches or sags.

Ensure you choose a reputable tattooist to do the job so it is done safely, and follow the post-tattooing care instructions to reduce your chance of complications.

Bear in mind that it is normally considerably more expensive to remove a tattoo than it is to have one done, and the results are often imperfect.

Finally, bear in mind also that even if you don't currently consider yourself as someone that others look up to and model themselves on, at some point in your life, others will be influenced by your actions. They will see what you have chosen to do as giving permission to them to do likewise. So please choose wisely and responsibly.

## **Further information**

Victorian State Government Better Health Channel, Tattooing fact sheet,  
<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/tattoos>