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Notes about living as a
Christian

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Of Tattoos, Piercings and the Mind-Body Split

by Sara Tusek

Over the past decade or so, tattoos and body piercings have moved from the realm of the slightly trashy into the mainstream of American youth. Students from my very conservative and proper Christian school come back a few years after graduation, sporting a tiny ring on the lower lip or the left eyebrow, or a tattoo of three crosses (Jesus and the two thieves) on the bicep.

I am always a bit unsure how to react when I see these somewhat edgy cultural expressions. Does the student mean to shock me? Should I say anything, or just coolly overlook the body ornamentation as being *de rigueur* for this generation of hip college students?

Showing my Age

I never knew anyone who had a tattoo when I was young. The only piercing done was one hole in each ear lobe, for girls only. Pierced ears were elegant and feminine.

They made no social statement except that your pierced earrings stayed on better than those clunky clip-on types your mother wore.

It wasn't until I moved to Florida in 1993 that I saw elaborate tattoos on males and females alike. Birds, butterflies, names, people's faces—these multicolored pictures inked into the skin of

someone's back or thigh are clearly visible at the beach. Okay, I thought, it's a Florida thing. Goes with the body culture of surfing and hanging out by the water. I still had a feeling that tattoos proclaimed an anti-social attitude, maybe one that included lots of alcohol and illegal drugs (here my old-fashioned attitudes toward body art took over) although the kids wearing the tattoos didn't seem threatening, just laid-back and relaxed about life.

A n Unexpected Observation

Then I started teaching at a private school. The rule book decreed pierced ears for females only, with just one hole in the lobe on each ear and no holes on other parts of the ear (top, cartilage, etc.). Tattoos were out of the question. So imagine my surprise the first time a just-graduated senior pulled her skirt down on her hip to show me the bird-of-paradise that adorned it. Not to be outdone, her male friend pushed up his t-shirt sleeve to show me the three crosses on one bicep and the "Jesus" in a heart on the other.

I didn't know what to say. Were the images tacky? Maybe. Unchristian? That was a different question altogether.



My sister-in-law Kim's elegant pierced ears

Then a conversation with my son Noah provided another perspective on the question. Over dinner, he commented that my reasoning on some issue we were discussing seemed to show a distinct philosophical mind-body split. I was completely taken aback and said nothing.

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Of Tattoos and Piercings

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Later when I tried to understand why I was so surprised at what he'd said, I realized that I just assumed that everyone had a mind-body split. It wasn't worth commenting on. How else would a moral person think? The mind was rational, while the body was an unruly beast. Isn't that true?

A Christian Mind-Body Dichotomy

My body, I knew from many years of Puritan-influenced church teachings, was prone to error. If I listened to its cravings and impulses, I'd be in big trouble. From overeating to laziness to general slovenliness, my body was out to get me.

It is only by assiduous use of my mind's reasoning powers, so goes this argument, that I am able to avoid the tremendous temptations of the body. Through my mind, the Holy Spirit counsels me and helps me avoid the pitfalls of the flesh. Why, the very word "flesh," a word that simply means "meat" (as in the flesh of a steer), has an immoral connotation to the right-minded Christian. The flesh is death, according to St. Paul. Only the Spirit gives life, he said, and we can best apprehend the promptings of the Spirit through our mind, or intellect.

Mistrust of the Body

Everything about the body is potentially deceptive, according to the teachings in which I was trained. The emotions are mere whims of the body, easily swayed by music, colorful images, food, drink, lack of sleep, and so on. The state of the body dictates the human experience of emotion, so goes this theory. Therefore emotions are ephemeral, evanescent reactions that don't deserve serious consideration.

The mind, with its ability to organize, categorize, and seal off thoughts, is the only trustworthy human faculty for those who would follow Christ. St. Paul "pummeled" his body so he

could attain the high calling of Christ. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak—even when we want to do right, our bodies prevent us through fatigue, distraction or preoccupation with pleasure. Or so I was taught.

Must There be a Split?

By this reasoning, the body is at best untrustworthy and is in fact often shameful. How can a Christian decorate and display such a poor witness to God's grace?

Young Christians (at least the ones I know) don't seem to share my perspective that the body must be mastered. I don't know that they have a mind-body split, any more than my dog does. Do they trust their bodies more than I? Love them more? Honor them more as God's holy temple?

Or do questions like this simply not enter their minds? If that's the case, then the mind-body split may be just one way of viewing the Scriptures. Maybe the split was a hold-over of another, pre-Christian worldview that got integrated into Christian teaching as a cultural artifact, not as a true biblical principle.

If indeed our bodies are God's creation, then it may be that appreciating them and even beautifying them is acceptable to God. Until I can ask God and get His definitive response, I'm going to rethink my mental image of the relationship between mind and body. A Christian may find there is such harmony, such integrity in living for Christ that the body can be trusted. The mind can take a break from its "prison-guard" duties.

It would be a relief to relax with myself and accept this idea of mind-body integration. My body pleases God; He has redeemed all of me, and is sanctifying all of me. If I take this far enough, I might even get a tattoo—just a tiny lizard on the ankle, maybe. Or should I pierce my upper ear? Two holes or three? Maybe I'll ask the girl with the tattooed hip for advice.

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