Marked for life: The body's meaning should come from God

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [May 15, 2007](#) issue

The practice of tattooing has nearly always been rejected in Christian tradition. The usual proof text is Leviticus 19:28: "You shall not make any gashes in your flesh for the dead or tattoo any marks upon you: I am the Lord." That verse has been regarded as an injunction against pagan rituals, but also as a call to honor God's good creation as it is manifested in our bodies. My own theological instinct is to worry that the skyrocketing popularity of tattoos, body piercing and other kinds of body decorations reflect a misguided attempt to give meaning to the body—meaning that should come from God.

Most of the justifications for tattoos that I hear follow the logic of "as long as it's meaningful to you, then nobody else can question whether it's a good idea." As Christians, however, we need not struggle to give meaning to our own bodies, our own persons or our own lives. Meaning comes from something outside us. Christian bodies are permanently marked with the cross of Christ in baptism. That mark should be the primary thing that identifies us to the world.

Perhaps it's unfortunate that baptism doesn't make our identity in Christ visible in some obvious way. Maybe we could add some kind of indelible purple ink to our fonts, so everyone would know who the purple people are. We'd carry a visible mark all the time, not just on Ash Wednesday, and we'd be freed from our struggle to craft an identity from some other source.

Confusion about identity may explain the popularity of tattoos. Unsure about who we are, we try to mark ourselves in a way that makes us interesting, set apart or at least artsy. A tattoo is often a mark of rebellion, a kind of irrevocable snub to parents or churches or other authorities that have tried to tell someone who she has to be.

Yet for some Christians, perhaps, tattoos aren't a sign of identity confusion at all. They are ways of making one's identity in Christ visible to the world. Many Christians

choose a verse from scripture or a Christian symbol with which to emblazon an arm or an ankle. One student described to me how the experience of being tattooed was sacramental—a physical way in which he experienced grace. Other Christians, citing Paul's injunction to be all things to all people, say that their tattoos give them access to people who would turn away from the stereotypical squeaky-clean Christian.

I do not want to dismiss these claims or ignore the possibility that an aspect of popular culture might serve Christian spirituality. Still, there are no individual sacraments. The Christian body is supposed to mean *more* than anything that I, as one finite and frail person, might want to write upon it. At the end of the day, the human belongs to God, and the meaning of the body derives from God's intentions for it. And we have to think about our bodies through the corporate wisdom of the body of Christ.

The body is meant to bear witness to the grace and love and power of Christ. There are other, less individualistic ways the body can be a visible witness. Perhaps some of those corporate practices now seem old-fashioned. But Christians have always included bodily life in our witness to the transforming power of God. We've fed the hungry, tended the sick, lived in solidarity with the poor and the broken. We have fasted in order to turn the body away from ourselves and toward others and God. Christian tradition contains a wealth of corporate ways that our lives can be marked by costly, visible, countercultural discipleship.