

Body Modification By David Feddes

Piercing parlors are a growth industry. For a fee, you can get holes pierced in your lips, eyebrows, tongue, nose, navel, and other, more private, body parts. Then you can buy jewelry to wear in the holes. Piercing is becoming more common, especially among younger people. Tattoos are also popular. You can get just one small tattoo, if you like, but you can also get lots of tattoos that cover sizeable portions of your body. Piercing, tattoos, and other forms of body modification are increasing.

Why do so many people want body modification? For some, BodMod is a fashion choice. If your friends or favorite stars do it, you may want to do it too. It makes you feel more stylish or sexy. One young man says, "I just thought it would be cool to have. I didn't do it to be a rebel or anything like that. I could sure come up with better ideas than that to rebel." Some people choose body modification just because they feel like it, without knowing why. When a church-going woman with a husband and children was asked why she got her navel pierced, she replied, "I don't know exactly why I wanted to get it. I have this certain image as a soccer mom, going to church and going to school, and the belly ring is a way to show a different side."

Other people don't choose BodMod so casually. It means much more to them. Many use BodMod as a way to deal with inner pain and take control. One woman, Laura, says, "It's been my experience that many people into BodMod have come out of abusive childhoods. I guess, for myself, I think of my piercings and tattoo as a way of reclaiming (or marking) my body for *myself*!"

For still other people, body modification is nothing less than their way of revealing their souls and connecting with the spiritual realm. They know that piercing, tattooing, and more extreme and painful forms of body modification were common among tribal peoples and pagan religions, and they want that same tribal and religious experience for themselves. A BodMod enthusiast says,

Body piercing and Tattooing are sacred rituals. Through these mediums we can customize our bodies and proclaim publicly that we are in control of our destinies. Any spiritual quest demands sacrifice if it is to have meaning. The pain of a piercing or a tattoo is the path for transformation. If it didn't hurt and wasn't difficult it wouldn't mean anything. To me a tattoo is my embodiment of my spirit and soul, as well as an important step on my spiritual quest.

Not only is BodMod viewed as part of a personal spiritual journey, it's considered a way to save the earth. As one of the thousands of websites devoted to body modification puts it, "Through the lost tribal arts, we believe we can reclaim our forgotten respect and understanding of nature by symbolizing that the body is sacred like our planet mother earth."

There's even a group that calls itself the Church of Body Modification. It's officially recognized by the government as a religion. It has no doctrine of a Creator God. Instead, it teaches that we create a world of our own choosing. The mission statement of the Church of Body Modification declares,

Each of us is wise in our reasons. Each of us is powerful in authority over ourselves. Our bodies are the physical structure, our temple; the encasement of our own very personal dreams and experiences, our beliefs and our hopes. We

stand absolutely firm on our birthright of ownership of our individual bodies...
Together now we share a New World of our own creation.

Now, if you're sporting a ring in your eyebrow or navel just because it seems cool to you, some of these other reasons for BodMod may sound strange to you. If you're living a tame, safe life and want a little BodMod just to spice it up a bit, it may sound strange that some people see BodMod as a response to inner anguish and an abusive past. If you think getting pierced or tattooed includes pain only as an unfortunate side effect, it may sound strange that many people actually want the pain and embrace it as a sacred sacrifice. If you see no religious meaning in BodMod, it may sound odd to hear about body modification as a religion. But what if the people who make a religion out of it actually understand the meaning of BodMod better than you do?

Body Language

Body language talks loudly. Bodies communicate. The way we treat our bodies tells much about us and about what we worship. The hardcore disciples of body modification understand this. They reject the Creator God and the Lord Jesus Christ of the Bible. They choose tribal religion or self-worship instead. And they show their religion by what they do to their bodies.

Meanwhile, some of the milder practices of BodMod are becoming common among churchgoing young people. They see nothing wrong with it, and their parents aren't quite sure what to say. Many dads and moms don't really want their kids to get pierced or tattooed. They may think a kid with steel eyebrows, jeweled nostrils, studded tongue, and metallic belly button looks pretty crazy. They may fear that a tattoo which appeals to a seventeen-year-old might look pretty silly when the person is forty. But they're not sure if there's any moral or spiritual objection to body modification. Parents don't know if BodMod is really wrong or if it's just a harmless fad for a new generation.

Even most preachers remain silent about body modification. Why make a big deal about kids poking a few extra holes in their body and wearing jewelry in some strange places? Aren't there bigger issues to deal with? If a preacher criticizes body piercing or tattoos, young people might just get turned off and find it harder to accept Christ and be part of the church. As a pastor and father myself, I don't want to speak against something just because it doesn't happen to suit my taste. I know that God looks at the heart, not just on outer appearances.

But we need to ask: is body modification just a matter of fashion? Is it just a recent fad? No, it's not a new fad at all. It has very old roots, and those roots go deep into pagan religion. Throughout history, BodMod has been common in cultures that worship idols or nature or mother earth or self. Tattooing, piercing, cutting, branding, scarring, and mutilation have been part of pagan religions for thousands of years.

Whenever the message of the Bible would reach a pagan society, whenever more and more people trusted and worshiped the true God, body modification would diminish and almost disappear. People who believed the Bible and trusted Jesus Christ understood that God created their body, that Christ paid for their body with his blood, and that God's Holy Spirit lived in their body. Their body was not their own but God's. It was wrong to damage, deface, or distort it. Their body was treasured as God's handiwork and offered to God for his honor. As Christian truth replaced paganism, it moved people to abandon pagan body modification.

BodMod isn't just a new style. It's body language for a religious shift, a shift away from biblical Christianity back toward pagan religion and pagan sexual practices. The leading figures in the recent upsurge of BodMod are people who detest Christianity and delight in old pagan practices of self-inflicted pain and perverted sexuality. Other people may jump on the BodMod bandwagon without being aware of its pagan roots and the modern-day pagans who are driving it. But if we know what's really happening and what the Bible says about these things, we'll know that BodMod is not from God.

Your body sends signals. What you do to your body and what you wear (or don't wear) sends a message. A girl who dresses like Lady Gaga is sending the message, "I am a sex object who follows MTV, not the Bible." The Bible says, "I want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety" (1 Timothy 2:9). A boy with jewelry or hair like a girl is sending the message, "I don't know what I am, and I'd rather be a gender blender than obey the Bible." In the Bible, God not only opposes homosexual activity, he also opposes body language that blurs the created difference between male and female. In the Old Testament, he says, "A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the Lord detests anyone who does this" (Deuteronomy 22:5). In the New Testament, God insists that men and women honor the difference between the sexes even in their hairstyle or head covering (1 Corinthians 11:2-16).

Now, if your body sends signals by clothing and grooming, then making permanent modifications to your body sends an even stronger signal. When you do things to your body that have always marked pagans, you are sending the message that you favor paganism over Christianity. Even if you don't intend to send that message, that's what your body is saying.

The Bible teaches a different view of the body than pagans do, and God commands his people to treat their bodies differently than pagans do. In the time of Moses, God commanded, "Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:27). God's priests, especially, were not to cut their bodies (Leviticus 21:5). Pagan people did that sort of thing, and God didn't want his people to imitate idol worshipers. Moses declared, "You are the children of the Lord your God. Do not cut yourselves or shave the front of your heads for the dead, for you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession" (Deuteronomy 14:1-2).

Centuries later, the prophet Elijah had a showdown with the priests of an idol called Baal. As these pagan priests tried to get their idol's attention and bring down his power, "they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until the blood flowed" (1 Kings 18:28). But the Lord's prophet, Elijah, did no such thing. He didn't need piercing, tattooing, or slashing. Elijah prayed by simply talking to God, and the Lord answered his prayer in a mighty way.

God takes body language seriously. He doesn't want us to desecrate our bodies like idol worshipers. If you think body language doesn't matter, you're out of tune with God's Word. Some church people looking for loopholes to allow body modification might emphasize Christian freedom. But the Bible says, "Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature" (Galatians 5:13). Some might say that times change and that some parts of the Bible address different cultural issues than we face today. Maybe so. We might not always know exactly how to apply a biblical rule in a new setting. But is this issue really unclear? Are paganism and perversion really so different today than in the

ancient world? Does God now want us to imitate what pagans do to their bodies? Has God suddenly decided it's time to blur the difference between Christians and unbelievers?

No, if you belong to Christ, your body language ought to say so. The Bible says, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Your body is God's creation to celebrate, not your own private object to manipulate. If you're a Christian, your body is blood-bought by Jesus. The Holy Spirit lives in it as his temple. If your body is the Holy Spirit's temple, then shine with his light. Don't make God's temple look like a copy of Satan's temple.

Let your body language proclaim that you are a child of the Father, purchased by the Christ the Son, filled with the Holy Spirit. Don't just ask what God will let you get away with. Ask how you can best honor God with your body. If you look for loopholes in the Bible to let you do your own thing, you might say, "What's wrong with it?" But ask instead, "What's right with it?" Does body modification honor God and mark you as a holy follower of Jesus? If not, don't do it.

Now, I know that not all BodMod folks are purposely plotting to fight God or destroy themselves. Some are genuine Christians. Maybe you trust and love Jesus but haven't thought much about body language. Maybe you're basically right with God but just need some biblical teaching, correction, and training in this area of your life. Up till now, you weren't really aware of the Bible's call to honor God with your body, and you weren't aware of the pagan meaning of body modification. Well, now you know. If you love the Lord and believe the Bible, then honor God with your body from now on. Make sure your body language says that you belong to Christ and that his Spirit lives within you.

Hating Wisdom, Loving Death

Not all BodMod folks are Christians who just need a gentle correction. Many are anti-Christian who need to leave darkness and death in order to find light and life. Many trendsetters who helped re-popularize body modification hate biblical Christianity and love paganism. Some hate God's creation of male and female and prefer gender blender modification. Some even hate good health and love pain for its own sake.

The body modification movement includes a growing gallery of horrors. BodMod isn't limited to piercing and tattooing. Other, more extreme forms are also on the increase. Cutting, branding, scarring, even mutilation and amputation, are becoming more frequent. People who cut themselves say that watching themselves bleed makes them feel better. A 14-year-old boy says he wants to pierce his tongue, nose, and more private parts. "I don't really know why," he says. "In the past I have found that by inflicting pain on myself I could release a lot of anger and emotion without hurting anyone else. For about 4 months I would say that I was addicted to pain; I would slash my arms with a razor or a knife every time I became angry."

Some people have what's known as apotemnophilia—a word that literally means "love of cutting off." Such people don't feel whole or happy with both arms and legs attached, and they envy people whose limbs have been amputated. Some cut off part of a finger or their own hand. In Scotland, two people even convinced a surgeon to amputate their legs for them. Their legs were perfectly healthy, but they didn't want legs,

so they got their bodies modified by the surgeon. The surgeon's hospital stopped him before he could amputate the legs of a third person.

It may seem obvious to most of us that it's crazy to cut off healthy legs. But many journalists and intellectuals think that another radical kind of surgery on healthy bodies is okay: they portray sex-change operations in a positive light. A growing number of women wish they were men and have surgery to cut off some parts and add others. Males have the opposite procedure so that they can become females. In one case, a husband and wife both chose sex-change operations. They wanted to stay married, but the wife became the husband, and the husband became the wife. In media coverage, the "transgender community" is just another colorful, healthy part of the cultural landscape. But are surgeons who do sex-change operations any better than the surgeon who cut off healthy legs upon request?

Another form of body modification that's on the increase is self-starvation. Doctors consider anorexia an eating disorder that's dangerous, even deadly. But there's a growing subculture that praises anorexia and encourages other people with eating disorders to "stay strong" and not eat a normal, healthy diet. "Time" magazine counted more than 400 websites on the Internet that praise and promote anorexia. The creators of these websites are proud to be nothing but skin and bones. They encourage other people who worship extreme thinness and enjoy looking like skeletons to keep up their quest for "the perfect body" and not let anybody stop them—not their doctor, not their family or friends, not anybody. It's their body to control. It's their own idea of beauty that matters. The thinner the better, even if it means sickness and starvation.

From an early age, most of us are not content with our body and would like to change it. If little children have blue eyes, they wish they had brown eyes. If they're born with red hair, they wish it was black. Some boys wish they were girls or vice versa. Some kids wish they'd been born of a different race or had a different name. This childish dissatisfaction with our own body was always considered something to grow out of and get over.

But nowadays, rather than growing beyond childish fantasies, adults indulge those fantasies. They get contact lenses that change their eye color, dyes that change their hair color, tattoos that make them look more like a billboard than a human, piercings that make them look like their favorite famous pagans, plastic surgery to rearrange their face and shape. Men wear earrings as only women did a few years ago; women choose hairstyles and clothing to resemble men. Cross-dressing pop stars are adored by millions, and some people get sex-change operations to alter their gender entirely.

Part of mature wisdom is accepting the body God gave you, learning to live with it, and honoring God with it. But the spirit of rebellion says, "I am the master of my fate. I can modify my body as I see fit." Does this bring joy and freedom? No, it brings pain, slavery, chaos, and death. In the Bible, God's wisdom calls out and says, "Whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the Lord. But whoever fails to find me harms himself; all who hate me love death" (Proverbs 8:35-36).

In the horrid mystery of sin, people actually love death. Ghastly self-abuse such as anorexia, cutting, self-mutilation and amputation, sex-change surgeries, and other extremes of body modification are clearly cases of harming self and loving death. But even milder forms of BodMod, such as tattooing and piercing, point in the same

direction. That's not just my opinion. The "New York Times," hardly a fortress of Christian truth, sees a clear link: "In an age of tattoos and nose rings, self-mutilation is the latest expression of adolescent self-loathing." The "Times" recognizes the relationship between body modification and the estimated "two million people injuring [themselves] in secret."

In John Milton's epic, *Paradise Lost*, Satan says, "Evil, be thou my good... Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven." That's the battle cry of all who insist on doing their own thing, even if it destroys them. A woman says candidly, "My main attraction to body modification was initially the control aspect—exerting control over my body and making my physical body fit the mental and spiritual vision I have of it. Unfortunately, the whole aspect of using BodMod as a way of expressing control smacks incredibly of self-mutilation."

Offer Your Bodies to God

Deep within each of us is a sense of sin and unworthiness. We feel that we deserve to bleed and suffer. We feel that we somehow need to be different than we are. And it's true: we do deserve to bleed, and we need to be different. But the answer is not to mutilate ourselves or try to remake our bodies. That's the pagan answer to our need for atonement, but God's life-giving answer to our need for atonement is the blood of Jesus Christ. He was pierced for our sins (Isaiah 53:5). Jesus' blood poured out on the cross has the power to do what our own bleeding cannot do. His blood washes away sin as nothing else can. So don't count on the pain of body modification or the blood of mutilation to deal with the guilt of your sin. Count on Christ. Believe in his blood. Count on his Holy Spirit to live in you and transform you by the power of God's love.

Your body needs to be different, but not in the way that body modification makes it different. You don't need to put new holes in your body. You don't need to tattoo new designs on it. You don't need to escape the gender you were born with. You don't need to reinvent your body or take total control of your own body. How does your body need to be different? It needs to be ruled by God instead of Satan, devoted to holiness instead of wickedness. "Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness... For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:19,23).

There's a huge difference between Christian baptism and pagan body modification. Baptism is painless and bloodless. Christ has already suffered on my behalf and provided the blood for my washing. I have been baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. My Father, the Creator, gave me a body that is wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14). The Son, my Lord Jesus, paid for me, soul and body, by dying to pay for my sins. My Comforter, the Holy Spirit, lives inside me and makes my body his temple. My baptism seals these things without hurting or marring my body.

How much better are the wondrous ways of God than the cruel abuse of Satan! I want to take good care of my body and let the clean, healthy life of God shine through it. Why try to change the body my Father created for me? Why act as though my body is my own when Jesus bought and paid for it? Why deface the temple of the Holy Spirit who lives in me. Why let Satan mess me up, when I can enjoy the love and joy of Almighty God? The Bible says,

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will (Romans 12:1-2).

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