

STIGMATA

A Movie Review

By Dr. Vic Reasoner

The Plot

This movie revolves around the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas in 1945. The Vatican assigned three men to translate it. When it was discovered that the message of the book would undermine the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, the project was aborted. Two of the men refused to give it up and were excommunicated; the third became a Vatican bureaucrat.

The movie opens at the death of one of the two men in San Paulo, Brazil. Although he had died, a statue of the Virgin Mary was bleeding in the sanctuary where he had served as priest (not a Roman Catholic parish). A Vatican investigator discovered it and learned it was human blood. While his investigation is ongoing, a woman traveling in Brazil buys the rosary of the dead priest in an open market. She mails it to her daughter in America, along with other souvenirs. Almost immediately the daughter, who does not believe in God, begins to have unusual experiences.

Although she is immoral, she begins to experience bleeding in her wrists, which later include bleeding on her feet, as well. This phenomenon creates enough publicity that the Vatican sends the same investigator. He initially concludes that it cannot be a legitimate case of stigmata, because this phenomenon always happens to devout people. However, over the course of time he sees enough that it makes a believer out of him.

The girl has experiences which seem more like cases of possession. A male voice speaks through her in another language and she writes on the wall in a form of Aramaic. The investigator sends pictures of all this to the Vatican. The message is from the Gospel of Thomas.

Ultimately, the Roman Catholic Church tries to kill the girl, but the investigator rescues her. He returns back to the Brazilian church and discovers a translated copy of the Gospel of Thomas hidden in the church by the old priest before he died. The movie ends with a very obvious attempt to connect the girl to St Francis of Assisi. Then text appears on the screen informing the viewer that the Gospel of Thomas was discovered in 1945 and that the Vatican had declared it to be heresy. It was intended to raise questions in the viewers mind concerning the motives of the Roman Catholic Church in banning the Gospel of Thomas.

The Message

The message of the film is that the messenger is not important, only the message. Although the girl uses profanity, attempts to seduce the priest, and does not believe in God, her message is that the Gospel of Thomas is authentic. The reason we know her message is true is because of the stigmata associated with her. Underlying all this is the current mind set which encourages spirituality, but not through organized religion.

Since the purpose of the movie is to draw attention to the Gospel of Thomas, we must examine the message of that book. Why would Hollywood be so interested in promoting this book? The liberal Jesus Seminar treats it as the fifth gospel. This movie portrays it as the only gospel Jesus wrote and as more accurate than the other accounts. Ironically, a generation which has little knowledge of the four gospels may get excited about this new "gospel."

Liberal scholars show great excitement over this discovery for the following reasons:

1. Their faith in the Bible, and specifically in the four gospels, has been destroyed through higher criticism -- especially source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism. In the movie, one Vatican authority explained, "We're all blind men in a dark cave looking for a candle which was

lit 2000 year ago." In other words, the information in the Bible cannot be trusted to be accurate. But the priest begins praying again after being convinced of the authenticity of the Gospel of Thomas. He admitted he had not prayed for a long time. The message is clear. We can believe the Gospel of Thomas, even if we cannot accept the Bible.

2. They tend to believe that the New Testament canon of Scripture is not closed, but that God will continue to give new revelation.

3. This belief in an open canon is sometimes based upon a misunderstanding of progressive revelation. While God did reveal himself progressively, the canon is closed because the faith was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). There were no more apostles by AD 100, since an apostle had to be an eyewitness to Jesus Christ. Therefore the office of an apostle terminated along with the revelatory gift through which the Holy Spirit inspired the apostles to write the Word of God. The Church never accepted apocraphical [secret] or pseudepigraphal [falsely ascribed] books because the messenger and the message are important. A book written under a false name, usually an apostle's name to give it apostolic authority, could not be from God because it is based upon deception. There were no serious attempts to add books to the canon until the Roman Catholic Council of Trent in 1546, which had its own ulterior motives. They added the apocraphical books at the Council of Trent in 1546 because they needed some basis for their teaching on purgatory. They added 13 books which fit between the Old and New Testament. However, there are about 50 gospels which are falsely ascribed to an apostle; The Gospel of Thomas would be one of this 50.

The Gospel of Thomas was not written by the apostle Thomas, but is dated about AD 140. But part of the theme of the movie is that the messenger is not important. In other words, it is not important how this book got here; just accept it. Ironically, it has not been subjected to the same criticism that the Bible has received.

Jesus did not write The Gospel of Thomas, since he left this world in AD 30. Jesus did not write anything, but he is the Living Word of God. Everything in the written Word of God points to him. The genre of a "gospel" is defined as an eyewitness narrative written so that the reader would believe on Jesus Christ. Actually, the Gospel of Thomas cannot be called a "gospel" because it contains no narrative. It contains 114 parables, proverbs and other saying attributed to Jesus. While it contains some saying which are also found in other gospels, it does not call Jesus "Christ," "Lord," or "Savior." It does not mention his death or his resurrection. The book is considered to be gnostic literature.

While it would be good news if more information about Jesus had been discovered, we would expect any legitimate source to correspond, and not contradict what we have already been told. It would also be very important to establish who the author was. Was he an eyewitness or were these oral traditions passed on for generations and therefore subject to distortion?

But the question must also be raised, why was this information withheld from Christians for 1800 years? And why is it now coming forth? The doctrine of progressive revelation would explain why those before Christ did not have a complete understanding of the Messiah, but since our faith under the new covenant is specifically in the person and work of Jesus Christ, why would vital information be withheld after his advent? It reminds me of an unknown will suddenly produced at the time of an estate settlement.

In an age where skepticism has destroyed faith in the Jesus Christ who was revealed in the Bible, the Gospel of Thomas fits well with the modern mind set. Jesus was a teacher; nothing more. The one quote from the Gospel of Thomas that was repeated several times throughout the movie was, "The kingdom of God is within you and among you." Another translation puts it, "The kingdom is inside of you and it is outside of you." This statement could be interpreted to mean that all we have to do is recognize the kingdom. In other words, salvation is enlightenment, which is a gnostic concept. The so-called "new age" teaching is actually a recycling of ancient gnosticism. Luke 17:21 makes a statement which sounds similar. "The kingdom of God is within you." It has been debated whether should be translated "within" or "among." The emphasis is not that the

kingdom is essentially inward, but that the kingdom is among them in the person of the king. Since Jesus was speaking to unbelieving Pharisees, the kingdom could not have been within them. Insight concerning the kingdom is not based on observation (v 20) or speculation, but is based on the presence of Christ. The kingdom may not be spectacular, but its influence is visible. The interpretation given throughout the movie is that spirituality is a personal matter, not organized religion. But the kingdom of God is not within all humanity. Only those who are born again are in the kingdom of God (John 3:5).

What about the stigmata?

The authentication of the message in the movie is the stigmata. This word is used in Galatians 6:17 where Paul says he bears in his body the marks [stigmata] of Jesus. This is the only place this word is used in Scripture. Does it mean that Paul bore the nail prints, foot prints, and wound in his side, just like Christ? Or is Paul making a comparison between the sufferings of Christ and his own sufferings as an apostle for Christ? Although Paul had a thorn in the flesh (2 Cor 12:7) and did endure physical affliction (2 Cor 11:24-27), there is no record that he actually received the same wounds as did Christ.

There is no record that anyone did until the case of Francis of Assisi in the 13th century. McClintock and Strong, writing in their Cyclopedia between 1867-1887 concluded that cases of stigmatization have occurred, yet rarely outside the Roman Catholic Church. It is a stroke of genius that the screen writers use a Roman Catholic phenomenon to discredit the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Yet their previous movie credits include predominately horror and occult-type films. This hardly qualifies them as theologians. Their concept of God seems to include a mixture of both good and evil. The unnecessary violence in this film earned it an "R rating.

In this discussion it must be emphasized that the five wounds received by Christ in his passion were substitutionary. He suffered for us. In no sense can it be suggested that anyone, including Francis of Assisi, suffered on our behalf. At best, the stigmata only witness to the unique suffering of Christ. I think stigmatization tends to occur among Roman Catholic mystics because of their emphasis on his passion. The Catholic crucifix portrays Christ on the cross, but he is no longer suffering on a cross. He is reigning on a throne. Therefore, our identity with him is better portrayed as communion with him through prayer.

I am also concerned that the stigmata becomes an apologetic for the faith. Charismatics, with their emphasis on signs and wonders, also use physical manifestations as proof of spiritual realities. But the evidence of the Holy Spirit is holy living and the greatest witness to the atoning work of Christ is a transformed character, not some bleeding palm.

And yet this brings us to the greatest weakness of the film. The screen writers use the historical phenomenon of stigmata as a basis for this fictional account and the purpose of this fictional account is to prove the validity of the Gospel of Thomas. The phenomenon of stigmata and the authenticity of the Gospel of Thomas are two unrelated subjects which are only brought together in this film. Even if we accept that the phenomenon of stigmata has occurred, we have not proven anything about the Gospel of Thomas.

The dilemma of half truths

As a Protestant I do not accept the papacy nor the exclusive claim of authority made by the Roman Catholic Church. However, I can accept such Catholic mystics as Francis of Assisi as true followers of Christ. Their devotion does not validate the papal system, however.

But the message of the film seems to advocate a personal spirituality that is not connected

organizationally. This is a false dilemma. My faith need not either be reduced to the institution of Roman Catholicism or personal mysticism. The means of grace includes participation in a local assembly of Christian believers.

While the message is more important than the messenger, again this is a half truth. It does matter how the message arrived and through what channels it came. It does seem, however, in the movie that the girl is transformed into a saint through the process of bearing the message. There is an element of truth here. Handling the Word of God should transform the messenger. Yet she never repents of her sin, renounces her atheism, nor confesses faith in Jesus Christ.

Again, while this movie acknowledges the existence of God, he is a capricious god who can inflict pain because he is god. Nothing of his goodness, his grace, nor his love comes through.

A fourth dilemma is that while the Gospel of Thomas does verify the historicity of Jesus Christ, it redefines him as just a man. Ironically, many who are the most open to a new revelation from God seem to have rejected the established revelation of Scripture. According to 2 Thess 2:9-12 they are wide open to deception.

Therefore I do not accept either the authority of the Roman Catholic Church or the authenticity of the Gospel of Thomas. While the movie is actually a search for spiritual reality, it only gives two options -- the institutionalism of Roman Catholicism or the mysticism of The Gospel of Thomas.

Other options in the search for spirituality is a return to the tradition of the Orthodox Church, which split from Rome in AD 1054. My opinion is that they are as corrupt as Rome, but their saints are also worth reading. John Wesley reprinted 50 volumes of these saints and mystics called The Christian Library. He included both Catholic and Orthodox writers.

A fourth option, which I am more interested in, is the movement led by Thomas Oden to discover the consensus of Christian thought for the first 500 years. Oden is producing the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture in 27 volumes. He would not advocate adding new books to the biblical canon, but would make available the earliest Christian interpretations on the Bible. He has also produced a 3-volume theology based upon what the early Church taught. He and I would both conclude, I think, that historic Methodism was a revival of apostolic Christianity.

A spiritual revival is coming, but it must be a balance between the emotional, the intellectual, and the ethical. Most movements only have part of the equation. It must transform the head, the heart, and the hands. We must be scholars, mystics, and activists.