



Their Blood Cries Out?

The History and Histrionics of Stigmata

by G. Richard Fisher

Skeptic Joe Nickell once said, "But just when we think we are at the limits of human credulity, we sadly witness a further extreme."¹

The phenomenon of stigmata continues to attract attention. A 1999 movie called *Stigmata* renewed focus on the topic, and *The X-Files* television show featured it in several episodes. But in real life, people do exhibit something called *mystical stigmata*. It is claimed by some to be miraculous and deeply spiritual. From the time of its first reported occurrence, it has been demonstrated by seven times as many women as men.²

One scholar describes stigmata as "eruptions on the skin that symbolize a belief held by the stigmatic."³

Robert Todd Carroll writes in his *Skeptics Dictionary*, "The stigmata are wounds believed to duplicate the wounds of Christ's crucifixion that appear on the hands and feet, and sometimes on the side and head, of a person. The fact that the stigmata appear differently on its victims is strong evidence that the wounds are not genuinely miraculous."⁴

Religious art seems to be the template for stigmata. Joe Nickell adds:

"Perhaps no miraculous power is more equated with sanctity in the popular mind than stigmata, the spontaneously duplicated wounds of Christ's crucifixion upon the body of a Christian."⁵

Stigmata have occurred almost exclusively within Roman Catholicism and have only been reported since the Middle Ages. There are also modern reports of stigmata which are primarily Roman Catholic. However, as one study reveals, "Occasional reports have been made of Moslems displaying stigmata symbolizing the battle wounds of Mohammed."⁶

One urban legend says there must be 12 people a year bearing stigmata to parallel the 12 Apostles. However, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* reports only 20 occurrences in the 19th century.⁷

The marks on the forehead, hands, and feet can appear in a variety of ways: bruises, blood from broken or unbroken skin, redness on the skin, welts, pinpricks, rashes, or blisters that ooze. In some cases stigmata are reported as blood smeared all over. Some stigmatics claim they have the pain of the wounds of Christ, but show nothing externally.

HERE WE GO AGAIN

The dramatized exorcism of Linda Blair's character in the movie *The Exorcist* produced a spate of people believing they were a new squatting ground for Satan. More recently, we have Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, with its vivid presentation of Roman crucifixion that earned the movie an "R" rating. While many are aware that Gibson adheres to a pre-Vatican II version of Roman Ca-

tholicism,⁸ one significant aspect that has passed under the radar screen of the Evangelical Church's hype of the film is that Gibson is a strong believer in stigmata.

Gibson has personally fixated on a stigmatic German nun, Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824), also known as Pious Berguine. News reports revealed that Gibson carries a relic piece from her robe.⁹ Gibson flashed the relic when interviewed by Diane Sawyer for ABC's show *20/20*.

The Internet edition of *Newsweek* magazine also reported the Emmerich-Gibson connection:

"Gibson has amalgamated the four Gospel accounts and was reportedly inspired by the visions of two nuns: Mary of Agreda (1602-1665) of Spain and Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824) of France; Emmerich experienced the stigmata on her head, hands, feet and chest — wounds imitating Jesus'. The two nuns were creatures of their time, offering mystical testimony that included allusions to the alleged blood guilt of the Jewish people."¹⁰

Mary of Agreda, who is sanctioned by Rome, is believed to have bilocated to other parts of the world through occult astral travel and is purported to have an incorruptible body. Her corpse is on display in Spain.

Apparently, Gibson believes that even fake stigmata, created by Hollywood make-up artists, have power and claimed that on the set of *The Passion* were “people being healed of diseases.”¹¹

Charisma magazine climbed aboard with the claim “people were converted and healed on the set, including a girl who was reportedly cured of epilepsy.”¹² However, the magazine provides no evidence or documentation for this claim.

Emmerich was an anorexic and self-proclaimed seer whose prophecies can be found on various web sites.¹³ She was also an admitted psychic who claimed occult powers and visions. Past, present, and future all supposedly came to her in mystic visions. She claimed she could suffer for and communicate with the souls in purgatory. She also claimed visits and conversations with Mary the mother of Jesus and said Mary was co-redeemer with Christ. She boasted visions of the baby Jesus.¹⁴ She also was bitterly anti-Semitic.

Credit for perpetuation of Emmerich’s utterances goes to poet Klemens Brentano who, at her command, recorded her revelations. She herself, being an ecstatic visionary, was somewhat of a Mary Baxter¹⁵ of her time. Because some of her discourses were so extreme, Emmerich’s modern day supporters make the suggestion that perhaps Brentano extensively embellished her writings and even go so far as to say that they cannot technically be considered her writings.

Yet none of this kept her from beatification by the Roman Catholic Church. Following an official order by Pope John Paul II, Emmerich was beatified during a ceremony last fall, which leads to canonization or sainthood among Catholics.

Pope John Paul II has beatified about 12 potential saints a year since being named to the papacy in 1978. Among those he moved toward sainthood is one named Padre Pio. Sadly, it took the American Atheist Society to blow the whistle regarding charges of Pio’s mental illness, fraud, and philandering:

“During his lifetime, Padre Pio was the subject of two official investigations conducted by Vatican authorities. There were claims that he liked the intimate company of young women who wore perfume, and had even inflicted stigmata wounds on himself using acid. ... [and as a youth] regularly fell into ‘trances’ and hallucinating states of altered consciousness.”¹⁶

It is also a matter of documentation that Pio failed a number of medical tests specifically designed to establish whether his stigmata were authentic.

This writer received a call from a former congregation member from her new home in New York because a wheelchair-bound woman in her Baptist church had begun displaying stigmata. She asked what was wrong with it biblically. Because the Bible is silent on the phenomenon, the answer may not seem to be readily evident.

The questions came fast: “Was it demonic? Medical? Fraud? Attention-getting? In any way biblical?” “After all,” the caller said, “Jesus bled on the cross from five wounds.”

As we consider stigmata, we need to examine four points: the history; the histrionics and hoaxes; the health issues; and hermeneutics and the Bible in relation to this issue.

THE HISTORY OF STIGMATA

Heresies and strange teaching were prevalent in New Testament times, as is obvious from the writings of Peter, Paul, and John. Every second epistle is a warning regarding apostasy and heresy.

Considering all of the millions of professed Christians who have lived the last 2,000 years, the purported cases of stigmata are infinitesimal by comparison with fewer than 400 being reported (300 in the past eight centuries alone and mostly devout Roman Catholics).¹⁷ Many of these reports have little or no documentation, so the number shrinks considerably. It gets reduced even further when we subtract the number of verifiably faked incidents. Rome has accepted about 64 cases.

Historically, the Roman Catholic Church encouraged self-mortification and self-inflicted pain, which developed in the monastic strain following the conversion of Emperor Constantine to Christianity. First Timothy 4:1-5 warns against such stringencies against our body, as does Colossians 2:21-23. False humility and the neglect of the body are marks of departure from the faith and are not to be commended or encouraged. We must also remember that stigmata first appeared in an age that had a “climate of morbid fascination with the physical effects of crucifixion — depicted in art, shown in miracle plays, and expressed in acts of self-mutilation.”¹⁸

The record for stigmata is empty for the first 1200 years of Church history. The first reported case of stigmata was St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226). On this all agree. Francis seemed to start the ball rolling with another 13 cases reported that century. Catherine of Siena, a century later, claimed to have stigmata “only inwardly, not in outward manifestation.”¹⁹ These bloody marks were seen as sure signs of spirituality. Historians and writers point out that two-thirds of these occurrences were reported by priests and nuns.

There were no known stigmatics before the 13th century. Stigmata are prominent by their absence in the pre- and post-Nicene Fathers. In early Church history, baptism was the only “mark” required for the Christian.

Historian Philip Schaff admits that the evidence for the purported stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi is at best ambiguous. The Dominicans called the occurrences into question and Schaff reports “a very strong argument against their genuineness is the omission of all reference to them by Gregory IX in his bull canonizing Francis, 1228. Francis’ claim to sainthood, we would think, could have had no better authentication and the omission is inexplicable.”²⁰

Not all within the Roman Catholic Church were buying stigmata. Ignatius Loyola, when consulted, quipped, “the marks ... might just as well have been the work of the devil as of God.” He affirmed that the marks were no

safe indicator of “supernatural action.”²¹ Even though Rome emphasized the “imitation of Christ” during that period, Loyola did not accept stigmata as evidence of spirituality. There had to be better, more biblical ways to imitate Christ.

HALL OF SHAME

The extent to which some of the medieval mystics took stigmata is heresy to an extreme. B.B. Warfield reveals, “They experience under the cross, under the crown, under the nails, under the lance the same sufferings as Jesus; they really languish and die with Him.”²² Warfield also noted that “they are admitted by a kind of divine grace to perpetuate the sacrifice of their God, to expiate like Him sins of which they are personally innocent.”²³ Suffering *as* Christ is a far cry from suffering *for* Christ.

During later centuries, we find, “More recent cases are those of Anna Katherina Emmerich (1774-1824), who became a nun at Agnetenberg; ‘L’Ecstatica’ Maria von Morl of Caldaro (1839); Louis Lateau (1850-83, in 1868), whose stigmata were stated to bleed every Friday; and Mrs. Girling (1827-86, about Christmas 1864), of the New Forest Shaker community.”²⁴ Then, from 1889 through 1901, Gemma Galgani of Lucca claimed stigmata, but further claimed to remove it through prayer.²⁵

Some were crazed and into torture and self-mutilations like “the 19th century stigmatic Teresa Higginson, who slept on an old sack studded with knitting needles and sharpened sticks.”²⁶ Higginson had many encounters with the law and had what we know today as a rap sheet.

The first systematic study which numbered, cataloged, and analyzed stigmatic reports was prepared in 1895 by Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre. Jesuit priest Herbert Thurston’s *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* was another helpful addition in 1950.²⁷

In 1973, Robert M. Goldenson had his book, *Mysteries of the Mind*, published by Doubleday in which he reported a stigmata incident from 1940. Mrs. Donald McIssac, a Roman Catholic housewife from Toronto, is

said to have lapsed into a trance bleeding from feet, hands, back, and side.

The year 1972 birthed reports of the first stigmatic out of the Baptist tradition. She was a 10-year-old girl from Oakland, Calif., named Cloretta Starks. Young Cloretta said, “It’s weird,” after bleeding from her hands, feet, and side for 10 days.²⁸ We will have more to say about Starks below.

WE LOVE LUCY — IF SHE’S CHARISMATIC

One of the more bizarre stigmata episodes took place in 1988 when the Pentecostals had an intense, but brief infatuation with a woman named Lucy Rael. Rael, who was Roman Catholic, was floated as a walking miracle. Introduced to the public by T.L. Osborn,²⁹ Rael brought stigmata for the first time to the Pentecostal community and with the endorsement of one of their superstars. Osborn is no stranger to sensationalism and marketing. Now in his mid-70s, he still appears on the Trinity Broadcasting Network.

Osborn, an exponent of the “health and wealth gospel,” tried to sell Rael as “a sister in Christ who brings a message of healing.”³⁰

Those who closely and personally witnessed Rael testified that her hand wounds looked like razor cuts and the “scourge” marks which were on her waist, not her back, looked like rope burns or abrasions after a rope had been tied too tightly. The only conclusion was that they were self-inflicted.

Osborn and others would not be deterred, and Rael was invited to be mistress of ceremonies at an event called “The Church Reunion” at the Mabee Center at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa. However, the end was near. It had earlier been reported that “no one has actually seen Lucy’s stigmata appear. Rather, they have already been in manifestation by the time she has taken the stage. Not even her own secretary has seen them manifest from clear skin. When she takes the stage without the stigmata it doesn’t manifest later in her appearance.”³¹

Osborn did not demur. He went forward with Rael’s appearance at “The Church Reunion.” Rael did not manifest stigmata that night, but pushed the envelope and began dropping palmed feathers, which she claimed was the Dove — The Holy Spirit. The feathers were examined and found to be goose feathers or down.³² Osborn continued to defend Rael. Others at the “reunion,” including Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Fred Price, and Lester Sumrall quietly tried to forget it, though never openly denounced it. Lucy Rael faded off into the sunset. Even rabid fans of Osborn and Roberts will probably ask, “Lucy who?” A now-60ish Rael “pastors” quietly today in New England.

ROLLER COASTERS AND “MIRACLES”

In the 1990s, attention was focused on bleeder Father James Bruse of Lake Ridge, Va. He probably sought and loved the attention. He has the distinction of having had his name placed into the *Guinness Book of World Records* in 1978 for taking the longest roller-coaster ride in history (five days straight). Another “miracle” claimed by Bruse includes statues that weep when in his presence.³³ To date, his stigmata have ceased.

Even New Agers are getting into the act. In the late 1990s, Georgio Bongiovanni was claiming stigmata and hosting a web site with photographs of his “wounds.” He also lectured about extraterrestrials and told of their impending return to earth.³⁴

THE HISTORICAL AND HOAXES OF STIGMATA

Dr. Sharon Farber studies the history of self-harm. Writing on sado-masochism and how it became attached to Christianity in the Middle Ages, she documents that the female mystics of that period involved themselves in high-risk behavior such as binge-eating, purging, self-starvation, and self-mutilation. She clearly documents that some of the stigmata were self-created and that those attached to it would today be sent to psychiatric

hospitals, not coddled and then beatified.³⁵

Lucy Rael is far from being the only hoaxer in the stigmata circus. Some of the other ancient and modern self-mutilators are well-known and well-documented. Attention-getting is a mania for some and fear of being exposed keeps the con man or woman trying even harder. Fear of exposure can be a fierce motivator. Some have even used their own sharpened fingernails to dig into their palms. Blood packs and red dye are easily available.

Few stigmatics manifest while being watched or studied. It is interesting to observe professional wrestlers who, after falling to the mat, stand up with foreheads bleeding. What makes this incident curious is that the blow taken before falling is many times not to the forehead. The mystery is revealed in a brief article in which a professional wrestler divulged that the cutting was done while on the mat, face in hands, with a tiny blade taped into the finger tape they often wore. Another case of "stigmata" cleared up.

Quoting from Michael Freze's book, *They Bore the Wounds of Christ*, Joe Nickell discusses false stigmata:

"...there have been cases where some overly fanatic souls have so desired the Sacred Stigmata that they have intentionally wounded themselves with knives, picks, etc., in order to produce false impressions to others that they were extraordinary saints!"³⁶

Nickell cites documentation regarding Magdalena de la Cruz (1487-1560) who, after becoming seriously ill, feared "she would die a sinner ... suddenly confessed, admitting that for many years she had been practicing deceptions."³⁷

Another interesting case was Maria de la Visitacion, who used red paint on her hands. Her inquisitors "scrubbed away the 'wounds' to reveal unblemished flesh."³⁸ Two Friars had put her up to trying to trick the world with artificial wounds. With so much chicanery it is easy to see why Nickell concludes, "Indeed, I feel that hoaxing — the proven explanation in

numerous cases — provides the most credible overall solution to the mystery of stigmata."³⁹ However, there may well be a little more to it than just hoaxing. It is hoaxing-plus.

If we believe that God imposes bloody stigmata and pain on people, it is only a step further to believe in bleeding statues and effigies.

In the 1800s, Rose Tamisier demonstrated stigmata and then caused a picture of Jesus to bleed. In November 1850, she was "tried at Nimes on a charge of imposture, and — 'after a long and patient investigation' — was found guilty and sentenced to six months' imprisonment, in addition to being fined 500 francs and costs."⁴⁰

In Italy in the late 1950s, Sister Elana Aiello, who claimed stigmata in her hands, also claimed "the blood splashed onto the wall next to her bed, and the blood formed an image of Jesus' face."⁴¹ People who saw the image laughed because it looked like a child's drawing.

Bolivian bleeder Katya Rivas has been labeled a pious fraud by many. The secret to her demonstrations may be the sharp ring she wears and that she is often in bed under sheets before manifesting.

HOAX OR DISEASE

As we return and take a closer look at the story of 10-year-old Cloretta Starks, our study will show a puzzle with missing pieces. The historical reference branch of the Oakland Library was extremely helpful in turning up news items regarding Starks. Kathleen Digiovani ferreted out clips from the *Oakland Tribune* and *Oakland Register*. The newspaper articles helped correct all types of misinformation — including Starks' name and age — which other reports generated. Starks' bleeding supposedly began on Good Friday in 1972, but was only first seen after the fact, when it was already in place. A doctor "examined the hand, wiped the blood away, and could find no sign of a wound."⁴²

The Rev. L.L. Hester of New Light Baptist Church claimed to be a believer in stigmata and allowed Starks to come to the front of the church on

occasion to display her "wounds." Pictures in the newspaper show her displaying the blood spot above her left palm.

Hester again displayed Starks and her stigmata in subsequent years at Easter Sunday church services. On one occasion, the church went into a minor hysteria during an Easter service, taking 15 minutes to restore calm. Her mother invited the news media to her home to observe. The "bleeding girl" became a regular feature at Easter services for at least five years after the original manifestation. Starks became a kind of local heroine and was featured at a "'Youth Supernatural End-time Revival' at the East Oakland Faith Deliverance Center," in which Hester said "miracle healings were claimed almost every night."⁴³

THE FUND THAT CAN'T BE FOUND

Hester showcased Starks at various meetings and set up a college fund for the girl. Starks' mother had to escort her daughter to school to keep her from being mobbed by fans. There is an account from 1977, when Starks was 15 years old, of her again being showcased and honored by Hester on Easter Sunday. Yet by then it may have been "old hat," as there were apparently no news reports that year.

The sad aftermath of the story was revealed in a phone conversation with Starks' mother.⁴⁴ Alice Robertson still lives in Oakland at the same address. She sounded believing and almost naive as she slowly and thoughtfully said Starks still manifests stigmata at times throughout the year. She said her daughter prefers to be silent about it because crowds had always let her down. They were there for the show, but never after. So since the late 1970s, Starks has not sought public attention.

Sadly, Robertson said Starks never went to college and never saw any of the money raised for her fund. As far as she knows, no one ever knew the amount raised. It has left very hard feelings. Robertson no longer attends L.L. Hester's church, choosing to attend elsewhere. Starks, who is single, does not live with her mother. Robert-

son says the doctor who followed them for a while said Starks "had the wounds of Christ." If something is still occurring, it is now private. Robertson said Starks calls every week or so and they just talk in generalities. She did not know if her daughter still attends church.

Starks' manifestations might have had another motive. Sharon Farber writes of the medieval, female stigmatics:

"...their extreme suffering provided of [sic] them with a degree of visibility, influence, and power that was unheard of for women at that time."⁴⁵

Veronica Lueken of Bayside (Queens), N.Y., claimed that her own "stigmata were presumably carved into her feet by the legendary Italian mystic Padre Pio while she was at home sitting on her toilet."⁴⁶ Lueken and her Marian Apparition cult, with its doctored photos, misuse of money, wild claims and plagiarized messages, were exposed by numerous investigators.⁴⁷ Lueken's material came from Mary Ann Van Hoof who, along with Lueken, is not recognized by the Catholic Church.

Returning to the call received from a former parishioner now in New York and the bleeding event in the American Baptist Church, it appears that after a talk initiated by the church's pastor, the "stigmata" ceased.

HEALTH PROFESSIONALS' VIEW OF STIGMATA

Stigmata have never been looked at too kindly by the medical community. Mario Martinez, a clinical psychologist who investigates stigmata, makes this general judgment:

"Usually it turns out to be self-mutilation or something else science can explain."⁴⁸

A number of them believe those that are not outright hoaxes are psychologically or psychosomatically based. Others believe it may be a number of improperly diagnosed (by the Church), but verifiable medical conditions.

Health professionals also wonder if some rare cases of stigmata could be from auto suggestion or somehow mentally induced. Stress stimuli for some can trigger severe hives and skin eruptions, indicating the power of mind over body.

One researcher expresses it this way:

"Apart altogether from the question of the value of the evidence offered, we may reasonably conclude that some kind of stigmatization is a pathological condition of occasional occurrence. The Roman Catholic Church is extremely cautious in giving credence to cases of stigmatization as genuinely supernatural and Theodor Schwann, a professed Catholic professor at Louvain and a noted biologist, who carefully looked into the subject, refused to admit for stigmatization other than a perfectly natural character."⁴⁹

Leonard George points to some specific medical causes:

"A skin disorder called dermographia, most often found among dissociative sufferers and persons who have undergone extreme stress, renders the skin so sensitive that a mere gentle touch can cause discoloration or even welts."⁵⁰

So perhaps someone with dermographia might knowingly or unknowingly help the process along. George further offers:

"Dermatology journals have recorded a phenomenon known as psychogenic purpura, in which skin inflammation and the hemorrhage of blood from capillaries occurs in response to stress."⁵¹

As already stated there are also many psychologists who point to stress-induced causes and various kinds of pathology creating psychosomatic forms of stigmata.

There is also haemathidrosis — also called bloody sweats — and it is "not unknown in medical history."⁵² Extreme stress can cause bloodlike serum to exude from the pores. Christ's

Gethsemane experience is an example of this and a demonstration of His full humanity.

The only offer of a medical diagnosis for Cloretta Starks was proffered by Dr. Loretta Early, who said "the bleeding was caused by red blood cells passing through the walls of tiny capillaries and through the skin. There were no open wounds."⁵³ If that diagnosis was accurate, then a medical phenomenon was exaggerated by the exploitation of preacher L.L. Hester. What did not click with Hester was that Easter was not Good Friday, but he knew Easter was the time when most people would be there for the display. The sad outcome of the deception of the missing college fund shows that God was not in it.

STIGMATA FROM A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

John Calvin spoke of heresies as "a magnet to attract the unsound and unsettled mind."⁵⁴

The Bible does not address everything, but it does speak to absolutely everything believers will need for growth in grace and godly living (2 Timothy 3:15-17, 2 Peter 1:3). Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God (Romans 10:17), so everything necessary for spiritual growth will be in the Word of God. Stigmata are not addressed by the Bible, so one can conclude it is neither necessary nor godly. The Bible does not tell us what color to paint our garage, but it does tell us how to get along with our spouse as we paint it. The Bible does not say what kind of car to buy, but reminds us to be a testimony to the car salesman and to use good stewardship in our purchase.

There are many biblical objections to stigmata, especially the lack for any command to seek it. Jesus said we are to do all He taught and commanded (Matthew 28:18-20). He never taught or commanded stigmata for the Christian life or its advancement. He was "wounded for our transgressions." There is no good that could come from Christ wounding us in this fashion. Stigmata certainly calls into question the finality of the atonement

and the character of Christ. Because Roman Catholicism calls for the ongoing suffering of Christ in the Mass, it seems to make sense to the average Catholic to perpetuate His suffering through themselves. Poor theology leads to very poor practice and habits.

A MARKED MAN

The Roman Catholic Church has offered a weak apologetic by bending Galatians 6:17 beyond recognition. Paul said, "From now on let no one trouble me, for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ." The Roman Catholic interpretation is crushed under the weight of historical evidence because neither anyone in the New Testament, nor Roman Catholics for centuries, took Paul's words as stigmata. The justification, now offered, was invented after the fact to support something untenable.

If anything, the early post-Apostolic Church took the verse in an entirely different direction as "Christians had the sign of the cross or the name of Christ tattooed on their wrists or arms."⁵⁵ This kind of pagan practice was never directed by the Bible, but the point is that the early Church did not have a mental framework to understand "marks" as the later distortion called stigmata.

In an even more bizarre and demented twist, the occult mystic Madame Guyon "wrote the name *Jesus* on pieces of paper and sewed them to her skin so that they would always be a painful reminder to be repentant and obedient to the Lord."⁵⁶

Even if we would say for the sake of argument that Paul was speaking of stigmata, he is not saying others should seek it or have it. Whatever it is, he is claiming it only for himself. He insists he has it, but nothing indicates he is commending it or commanding it for others. Paul was also a Pharisee, but we shouldn't seek that for ourselves. He spent time in jail and was beheaded, yet that does not mean all believers must consider those fates to be a requirement for themselves.

What then are the "marks" talked about by Paul? True, the Greek word Paul uses for mark is *stigma*. How-

ever, it was only centuries later that a meaning of re-enactment of the wounds of Jesus on Calvary would be imposed. That meaning was foreign to Paul and the hearers of the first century.

We must further note that Paul does not use the word for "wound" or "puncture wound" (*trauma*). The word *stigma* was used in a few specific ways. One application was its use as branding, as in branding a slave. Paul certainly could be talking of his scars from stonings and beatings as being his slave marks for Christ. Note also that Paul did not locate the scars specifically in his hands or feet, but simply says in his body.

In the Graeco-Roman World, "Branded marks were carried especially by domestic animals, slaves, criminals, and later soldiers."⁵⁷

The *New Geneva Study Bible* elaborates:

"The Greek word denotes brands used to mark a slave as the property of a certain master. The word was also used to refer to the mark that pagan priests carried to identify the god they served. Paul uses the word to refer to the scars he received during his missionary activity (2 Cor. 11:23-25). These scars branded him as a slave of Christ (Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1)."⁵⁸

There is another possible complementary view, given the context of Galatians. Remember Paul is fighting the idea of requiring Gentiles to be circumcised, as the Judaizers insisted. The latter demanded this body mark even for non-Jews. Paul may be saying that when it comes to marks, cuttings, or scars, he already had paid his dues with the marks and scars from his beatings for Christ. Given the setting, it is plausible he could have been heard that way.

Otto Betz allows for this understanding, stating:

"The [*stigmata tou 'Iesou*] which Paul bears in his body are the antithesis to the circumcision in your flesh of which his Judaising

opponents boast."⁵⁹

Dr. Harry Ironside blends both of the above ideas nicely:

"Now that these Judaizers have made so much of a distinguishing mark upon the body through an ordinance and have said that a man that did not bear that mark was unclean and unfit for Christian fellowship, Paul says, I have a better mark than anything you may talk about. ... His very body had been wounded many times for Jesus' sake, when those cruel stones fell on him at Lystra, when beaten with stripes his body was branded; but he glories in these things and says, 'I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.'"⁶⁰

We will go into error every time if we seek to impose 21st-century understandings and word usage on first-century terms.

The only other Scripture that might be appealed to would be a misreading of Colossians 1:24 where Paul says, "I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for the sake of His body which is the Church."

We can be certain of two things as we approach this verse. First, stigmata are not mentioned and could not be applied because no one in the first century would have had any knowledge of the later meaning of the word and therefore have no desire to read it that way. And second, whatever Paul meant by "lacking in the afflictions of Christ," it could not refer to adding to Christ's atoning work on the cross because the first chapter of Colossians makes it clear that Christ's work on the cross was sufficient and that man could not do the work of atonement in any way. Nothing was lacking in Christ's cross work. That we know and are certain of.

Knowing from the entire New Testament that nothing is lacking in Christ's work and that nothing needs to be added to a perfect atonement (Jesus having to die only once), it is obvious that Paul could only be referring to two other periods of Christ's afflictions. Before the cross,

while on earth, Jesus suffered temptation, rejection, slander, and in His humanity was afflicted. After the cross, Jesus knows and feels the sufferings of His people (Hebrews 4:15). He shares the sorrows of the Church. Those are the only two options open to us: afflictions pre-cross or post-resurrection. In either case, the cross is not in view and could not be. Our afflictions for the Gospel continue on and fill up or fulfill what Jesus came to do: build a Church.

W.H. Griffith Thomas unties the knot:

“The phrase ‘the afflictions of Christ’ is unique in the New Testament, and can only mean the afflictions which He Himself endured — His own afflictions. The apostle says that he supplied what was lacking in these, but to what afflictions of Christ can he refer? Certainly not to His expiatory sufferings on the cross, which were, as we know, perfect and complete (cf. v. 20; Heb. 9:25-28; I Peter 3:18). These need no supplement whatsoever; they are not only complete but they are unique, and they are eternal in their significance and their efficacy. But surely the apostle’s reference is to those individual, personal afflictions in which Christ lived on our behalf during His earthly ministry (cf. Isa. 53:4; Matt. 8:17).”⁶¹

Thomas relies on English scholar and textual critic Joseph Lightfoot and goes on:

“...the sufferings of Christ must be considered from two standpoints, either as atoning or as exemplary, the one possessing sacrificial efficacy, the other ministerial utility. In the former case, he agrees, the sufferings are perfect and complete, since our Lord’s work is both unique in purpose and different in kind from that of His servants. There is no reference here to atonement since, as we have noted, the word ‘affliction’ is not found elsewhere in reference to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. From the latter standpoint the

afflictions of every saint and martyr may rightly be said to supplement the afflictions of Christ, and the Christian Church is built up by acts of self-denial that continue those begun by Him. Indeed, that which is lacking, says Lightfoot, will never be fully supplemented until the struggle with sin and unbelief is brought to a close. Thus the idea of expiation is wholly absent from the passage, and when this is understood we are free to give every word of the apostle’s striking statement its full meaning, and yet avoid all suggestion of vicarious satisfaction, which is entirely foreign to the context. ... We can have fellowship with His afflictions and also imitate His patience and courage in suffering.”⁶²

The point of going into this detail in Colossians 1:24 is to show that anyone going in that direction to try to justify modern day stigmata is wrong. In fact, they have no direction at all because nothing in the Bible is viable for them as they try to prop up an unbiblical sideshow.

OTHER POSSIBILITIES

As we consider the Bible, we must seriously ask if there are demonic elements to stigmata. There are definitely paranormal and occultic phenomena in evidence with *some* stigmatics:

- In this century, Heather Woods claimed “mystical writing and drawing.”⁶³

- Ethel Chapman proclaimed “a vision in which she saw herself walking on water with Christ ... a gift of clairvoyance and could foresee the deaths of people close to her.”⁶⁴

- Jane Hunt reported “seeing the face of Jesus on her pillow and that night had a vision of him standing by her bed. ... She often spoke of sometimes feeling as if she was inside of Christ. In another vision, she tells of the feeling of being transported to Bethlehem and being allowed to hold the Christ child. Another time, she saw Mary in her own house.”⁶⁵

- George Scotland said “he heard a voice speaking to him and mocking him from a tape of music which he had put on his cassette player.”⁶⁶

- It is reported of Father Bruse that “Statues began weeping after he touched them” and “He describes a time when, after blessing a statue of Our Lady of Fatima during confession, the colors started moving on it.”⁶⁷

- Even Cloretta Starks, the young Baptist stigmatist, “talked of voices telling her to go and pray with certain people.”⁶⁸

- Canadian stigmatist Georgette Faniel told doctors, “God and I are two in one same flesh” and that “Satan spoke to her.”⁶⁹

It is hard to deny the presence of Satan and demons at different levels when it comes to the already mentioned Teresa Higginson, “whose claims included ecstasies, mortifications, and stigmata — was once dismissed from school for ‘apparent poltergeist phenomena’ and later accused of theft, drunkenness, and unseemly conduct: accusations that led to her dismissal as a teacher.”⁷⁰

Catherine of Siena, mentioned earlier, “practiced flagellation, thought herself tortured by demons, experienced visions, and showed other symptoms of severe mental disturbance. She believed she wore a ‘mystical ring’ that was placed on her finger by Jesus himself. Adding to this vainglory, as shown by contemporary paintings, she permitted her hand to be kissed by devotees. Catherine supposedly became stigmatized at the age of twenty-eight, but the marks disappeared so that she was left only with the pain of her five ‘invisible’ wounds.”⁷¹ In the end, this pathetic creature literally starved herself to death.

Stigmata are nothing more than human mutilations from some source with God being called the mutilator. It certainly calls into question the character of God until one notes what the Bible says about the origins of mutilations and the power behind them:

“And when He had come out of the boat, immediately there met Him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no one could bind him not even with chains, because he had often been bound with shackles and chains, and the chains had been pulled apart by him, neither could anyone tame him. And always, night and day, he was in the mountains and in the tombs *cutting himself* with stones” (Mark 5:1-5).

Satan, not God, orchestrates people cutting and mutilating themselves. God forbids such practices on one’s flesh (Leviticus 19:28; 21:5; Deuteronomy 14:1).

ONE OTHER REALLY BIG PROBLEM

One major issue for the stigmatic is the location of the blood smears on most all that have manifested it. The placement of the blood seems to indicate that the occurrence is self-orchestrated. Stigmata seems to always show on the tops of the feet and palms which may give away the ignorance of the “bleeder.” We all know that the early and later paintings of Jesus, showing blood or scars on the tops of the feet and palms, are simply an artist’s conception. Most stigmatics have simply mimicked placement of wounds as directed by art work.

For many years, scholars and scientists have reasoned that someone hanging by nails in their palms and feet was an impossibility because the hands and feet could not bear the weight of the body. Some tried to suggest ropes around the arms, but the New Testament statements agree that Jesus was nailed to the cross with no reference to ropes or lashing.

Many questions were answered and the above clarified when portions of the skeletal remains of a crucified man were discovered in 1968 on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem. For this one, it appeared that his legs had been side-saddled to the cross since the nail marks were through the ankles, completely throwing off the

artists’ conceptions of nails through the tops of the feet.

The supporters of this practice cannot fall back on saying it makes no difference where the marks are, because they are the ones claiming the placement proves these are the marks of Jesus. Someone bleeding from the knee could not claim to be a stigmatic, as the location has been the primary apologetic for the stigmatic.

Further, the Greek word *cheir* does not just mean hand, but can mean the whole arm (including the wrist). Eduard Lohse confirms that “Since the power of the arm is exerted through the hand *cheir* can also denote a man’s arm.”⁷²

We cannot be certain that the Romans nailed the palms. Researchers have long thought the wrists were more likely. Because we are governed by Scripture, not artists’ renditions and tradition, we acknowledge that Jesus said to Thomas, “Reach your finger here and look at My *cheir*.” The exact spot on Jesus arm is undesignated and *cheir* most certainly could be the wrists. Still, because the stigmatic did not know the ankle, we would not trust them to know anything else with precision.

The stigmatic might try to convince us that God is keeping up with the times. Perhaps it is that they are getting a bit smarter in that “newer archaeological research shows that nails were more likely driven into the wrists of the crucified, where the arms’ bone structure would better support the weight of the body. ... More recent stigmatics have had wounds in their wrists instead of in their hands.”⁷³

GETTING WITH THE TIMES

Stigmata are unnecessary for the Christian and are, in fact, impossible to be anything that could be called genuinely Christian. Jesus said that His sufferings were “finished,” over, absolutely paid in full (John 19:30). Everything that needed to be accomplished for our redemption was accomplished once for all, forever. It is an affront to the Savior to claim otherwise. Hebrews 9:26-28 affirms that Jesus died *once*. In the book of

Acts, the early Apostles preached the past, completed death of Christ for sin, and the emphasis was always on the living resurrected Jesus. Jesus no longer needs to languish and suffer — *it is finished!*

Any outward identification with the death of Jesus is only in biblically commanded symbols of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. With the former, however, we do not stay down under the water emphasizing death, but rise up to walk with the risen Savior in newness of life.

HOW FAR WE HAVE FALLEN

The biblical burden of proof is really up to those who would try to justify stigmata as being desirable. They are the ones who have to defend and prove their position. They need to produce a verse (or verses) in the Bible that clearly shows:

- The practice of stigmata in the Book of Acts or the epistles.
- It is commanded or endorsed for believers in Scripture.
- It is to be desired or sought.
- It is a sign of spirituality.
- It is a part of the fruit of the Spirit.
- It is a part of spiritual warfare and spiritual equipping.
- It is a higher state of spirituality.
- That Jesus is still bleeding.
- That Jesus wants to be perceived as a suffering being and not a victorious Savior.
- That we could perpetuate Jesus’ sufferings.
- That His sufferings are not over and His cross agonies go on.
- That the devil could not bring stigmata, since he uses false signs and wonders (Matthew 24:24).
- That we are to preach stigmata rather than the Gospel or along with the Gospel.
- That there would be any kind of distinction between spontaneous and self-inflicted stigmata.
- That we should expect other kinds of torture and wounds to be visited upon us.

As we consider the silence of Scripture on these points, we can conclude that stigmata are not of God as it is unbiblical and can be faked — or may be demonic or a medical condition.

If it is faked or demonic, then deep and profound repentance is the answer (Mark 5:6-13). If it is a health issue, then medical attention and counseling are the answer. There are no other answers.

The Apostle Thomas saw something better than stigmata. He saw the very wounds of Jesus that he could touch. Yet Jesus said, “blessed are those who have not seen (His wounds), yet have believed” (John 20:29). We do not need His literal wounds simply because we have the spiritual riches those wounds provided.

Endnotes:

1. Joe Nickell, *Looking for a Miracle*. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1998, pg. 62.
2. Leonard George, *Alternative Realities*. New York: Facts on File, 1995, pg. 270.
3. *Ibid.*, pg. 268.
4. Robert Todd Carroll, *Skeptics Dictionary*, “Stigmata.” Document available at: www.skepdic.com/stigmata.html.
5. *Looking for a Miracle*, op. cit., pg. 219.
6. *Alternative Realities*, op. cit., pg. 268.
7. See further, *Catholic Encyclopedia*, “Mystical Stigmata.” Document available at: www.newadvent.org/cathen/14294b.htm.
8. Adherents to this version of ultra-conservative Catholicism reject the ecumenical reforms of Vatican II (1962-1965) up through the present. *Christianity Today* magazine noted that Gibson “prefers the Tridentine Latin mass and calls Mary co-redemptrix.”
9. Austin Cline, “Does Mel Gibson Profess Antisemitism?,” About, Inc. web site, Sept. 11, 2003. Document available at: <http://atheism.about.com/b/a/024802.htm>.
10. Jon Meacham, “Who Killed Jesus?,” *Newsweek Entertainment*, Feb. 16, 2004. Document available at: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4212741>.
11. “Paul Harvey Comments on ‘The Passion,’” *Christian News*, Feb. 2, 2004, pg. 27.
12. Erika Larson, “Screen Savior,” *Charisma*, March 2004, pg. 40.
13. See for example, “Prophecies of Sr. Anna-Katarina Emmerick.” Document available at: <http://nostradamus.freehomepages.com/emmerick.htm>.
14. See further, G. Richard Fisher, “Mel Takes Anne to Hollywood — The Rediscovery of Anne Catherine Emmerich,” *The Quarterly Journal*, July-September 2004, pp. 4, 7-14. Also see Anne Catherine Emmerich, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. Rockford, Ill.: TAN Books and Publishers, Inc., 1983.
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17. See *Alternative Realities*, op. cit., pg. 268.
18. *Looking for a Miracle*, op. cit., pg. 220.
19. B.B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*. Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1972, pg. 84.
20. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William Eerdmans Publishing, 1991, Vol. 5, pg. 405.
21. *Counterfeit Miracles*, op. cit., pg. 85.
22. *Ibid.*, pg. 88.
23. *Ibid.*, pg. 89.
24. *The Encyclopedia Americana*. New York: American Book-Stratford Press, 1952, Vol. 25, pg. 647.
25. *Counterfeit Miracles*, op. cit., pp. 84-85.
26. *Alternative Realities*, op. cit., pg. 269.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Ralph Rath, “‘It’s Weird,’ Girl Says of ‘Stigmata,’” *Oakland Tribune*, March 23, 1972.
29. Osborn regularly appeared with heretic William Branham. For more information, see Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee, Editors, *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988, pp. 655-656.
30. Albert James Dager, “Stigmata – Is Lucy for Real?,” *Media Spotlight*, Special Report 1989, pg. 3.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*, pg. 4.
33. *Looking for a Miracle*, op. cit., pg. 55.
34. See further, “Stigmata.” Document available at: www.crystalinks.com/stigmata.html.
35. See Sharon Klayman Farber, “Ecstatic Stigmatics and Holy Anorexics: Medieval and Contemporary.” Originally published in the *Journal of Psychohistory* (31:2, pp. 182-204). Document available at: www.psychematters.com/papers/farber2.htm.
36. *Looking for a Miracle*, op. cit., pg. 221.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*, pg. 225.
40. *Ibid.*, pg. 59.
41. *Ibid.*, pg. 62.
42. “‘It’s Weird,’ Girl Says of ‘Stigmata,’” op. cit.
43. “Cloretta Gets Back to Normal,” *Oakland Register*, April 4, 1975.
44. Phone conversation with Alice Robertson and author, Feb. 12, 2004.
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62. *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.
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64. *Ibid.*
65. *Ibid.* Author’s note: Translocation (mystical transport to another place) or bilocation (supposedly being in two places at once) is something claimed in occultic and new age practices.
66. *Ibid.*
67. *Ibid.*
68. *Ibid.*
69. *Ibid.*
70. *Looking for a Miracle*, op. cit., pg. 223.
71. *Ibid.*, pg. 226.
72. Eduard Lohse in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, op. cit., Vol. IX, pg. 424.
73. “Psychologist studies mystery of stigmata,” op. cit. 