

Should Christians Handle Snakes?

by Mike Ford

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"And these sign will follow those who believe . . . In My name . . . they will take up serpents . . ."

— *Mark 16:17-18*

Of the gospel writers, Mark is the only one to record the following account:

Afterward [after Christ's resurrection] He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen. And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; *they will take up serpents*; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen. (Mark 16:14-20)

These verses are similar to both Matthew's and Luke's versions of Christ's commission to the apostles (Matthew 28:16-20; Luke 24:36-49). However, only Mark includes the "signs [that] will follow those who believe." Are they commands for the followers of Christ or promises? In particular, does Jesus say Christians should handle snakes, or does He promise to protect them if they are bitten?

Growing up in the rolling hills of middle Tennessee, I was vaguely aware of churches in rural areas that handled snakes as part of their church services. Personally, I have always felt that the only good snake was a dead snake; to handle one, in or out of church, would never enter my head. Even so, some people believe that handling a snake is a command from God—an act of faith—and that He promises to protect you when you do it.

In 1910, after reading Mark 16:18, former bootlegger George Went Hensley took a box with him into the church pulpit. Inside the box was a rattlesnake, which Mr. Hensley proceeded to reach in and lift out. He encouraged his congregation to do likewise. It surprises me that he even had a congregation after this, but news of what he had done spread through the Grasshopper Valley in southeastern Tennessee and others joined him in handling snakes. Another surprise is that it took ten years before someone died of snakebite.

George Hensley became somewhat famous and his following grew.

There were approximately 2,500 snake-handlers in America in the early 1940s. When deaths from snakebites became prevalent, state legislatures passed laws, which forbade the taking up of snakes in religious services. Despite the new statutes, snake-handling persisted. Between 1936-1973, 35 persons died from poisonous bites, including Hensley who died on June 24, 1955 at the age of 74.

Snake-handling continues today, mostly in small, rural areas of Tennessee and Kentucky, along with pockets in other southern states. These snake-handling churches are Pentecostal in type, with those that feel "the spirit" comes over them as they open the boxes containing the snakes, lift them high (sometimes multiple snakes) and allow them to wind around their arms and bodies. The "believers" seem to go into a trance, dancing around and speaking in tongues.

As recently as October 1998, the *Knoxville News-Sentinel* ran the following story:

One of the prominent leaders of snake-handling churches in the Southeast died October 3 after being bitten by a rattlesnake during a church service at the Rock House Holiness Church in rural northeastern Alabama. John Wayne "Punkin" Brown, Jr., of Parrottsville, Tennessee, was preaching with his own 3-foot-long timber rattler in hand when the reptile sank one fang into his finger.

Mr. Brown's wife, Melinda, had died three years earlier from a rattlesnake bite received at the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name Church in Middlesboro, Kentucky. The Browns left behind five young children. The Browns had been bitten dozens of times prior to the fatal bites.

Let us examine Mark 16:18 to see if true Christians should add snake-handling to their list of doctrinal beliefs.

A Command?

Was Christ commanding us to perform these practices or promising protection? Many in the church believe, and it may well be, that Christ was speaking only to those God has called to preach the gospel. After all, in verse 15, He had said to the *eleven remaining disciples*, "Go into all the world." Combine this with the fact that we can see examples of the apostles fulfilling these signs in the New Testament and a case can be made for this view.

A snake bit the apostle Paul while he was on the island of Malta, and no harm came to him (Acts 28:1-6). However, he did not go looking for the snake in an effort to prove his faith. The snake bit him unexpectedly, in front of others, and God protected him as promised.

Luke writes that "the seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name" (Luke 10:17). He also records in Acts 5:12, ". . . through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people." It is quite possible that this section of Mark applies to the apostles and perhaps is further limited to their lifetimes, that is, the first century. A slight problem with this conclusion is that Mark 16:17 says, ". . . these signs will follow *those who believe*." It would appear that these verses apply to all believers, all Christians, regardless of when they live.

When the former whiskey runner, George Hensley, read Mark 16:18, he lifted it out of context from the rest of the Bible. Are there any other verses that might apply to Mr. Hensley's belief that Christians should march around a church hall with slithering serpents attached to their limbs?

In Matthew 4, Satan tempts Christ in various ways. At one point, he tries to get Jesus to throw Himself off the roof of the Temple, saying, "For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge concerning you,' and, 'In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone'" (verse 6). Here Satan twists Psalm 91:11-12, which says, "For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. They shall bear you up in their hands, lest you dash your foot

against a stone." God is promising protection to His people here, telling us that He will place His angels about us. He is not telling us to attempt to hurt ourselves in a deliberate effort to see if He will come through for us.

Interestingly, the next verse tells us that we will "tread upon the lion and the cobra" and that we will "trample underfoot" the "young lion and the serpent" (verse 13). Again, within the context of Psalm 91, God is promising His protection.

When Satan attempts to persuade Christ to jump off a building to prove that He truly is the Son of God, He answers the Devil, "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God'" (Matthew 4: 7). Certainly, Jesus knew that God's angels were all about Him, but He also knew not to test God deliberately. Christ was quoting from Deuteronomy 6:16, where hundreds of years earlier, He Himself had said this very same thing to the Israelites.

A Promise

In Deuteronomy 5, through Moses, He had rehearsed to the children of Israel the Ten Commandments. Then, in chapter 6, He told them to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" (verse 5). He further told them to teach God's ways to their children, fear Him, stay away from other gods, and do "not tempt the Lord your God" (verses 7, 13-14, 16). As Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 show, God's blessings would flow to them if they were obedient—blessings that include the promise of protection.

The five children of John and Melinda Brown, mentioned earlier, did not have the Word of God diligently taught to them. The example their parents set for them was that of two people tempting God. After the parents' deaths, a custody battle between the two sets of grandparents ensued. According to the Associated Press, February 12, 1999, a judge placed the youngsters, ages 4 to 12, into the joint custody of both sets of grandparents. The kids spend the school year with grandparents in Georgia and vacations with grandparents in Tennessee. The judge warned the grandparents to keep the children away from churches where serpents are handled—a necessary precaution since the paternal grandfather is a snake-handling preacher himself!

Did these well meaning but deceived people follow God's Word? Did they speak of God and His law when sitting in their house, when walking by the way, when lying down, and when rising up (see Deuteronomy 6:7)? Or, did they—albeit sincerely—tempt God?

In Luke 10:17, the seventy that Christ had sent out returned with great joy, amazed that even the demons had been subject to them. Jesus responds:

Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven. (verses 19-20)

Protection is promised here, not a command to flaunt their God-given authority. He specifically instructs them "not [to] rejoice in this" because it was not of their doing, not a show of faith. It was God's protection pure and simple.

The prophet Isaiah pens words of God similar to these in Isaiah 43:1-3, 5:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; . . . you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. . . . Fear not, for I am with you.

Throughout His Word, God has promised us His protection. He is especially watchful over those He has commissioned to carry out His work, as well as all those whom He has called to make a witness for Him. The Bible is full of examples of His power to deliver His servants from life-threatening situations.

However, He does not guarantee to cover our foolishness when we put ourselves into potentially dangerous situations. He abhors being tempted—tested—as if He needs to prove Himself and His power to us. Psalm 78 shows His distaste for the Israelites' constant testing of Him in the wilderness. The last thing He desires is for members of His church to follow their example of unbelief (see Hebrews 3:7 through 4:2).

Trust your natural instincts on this one—snake-handling is not a Christian practice.

Inset: Is Mark 16:9-20 Inspired Scripture?
by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

A highly controversial point in religious circles is whether Mark 16:9-20 is actually part of Scripture. Although it appears in the King James and New King James versions, many other translations either label this section as an appendix or leave it in the footnotes, as does the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. The Moffatt translation, together with the Goodspeed translation and others, not only has the long ending found in the King James Version, but it also has *another* shorter ending.

In *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (1971), Bruce Metzger, a noted authority on textual matters, writes:

The last twelve verses of the commonly received text of Mark are absent from the two oldest Greek manuscripts (Aleph and B), from the Old Latin codex Bezae Cantabrigiae (itk), the Sinaitic Syriac manuscript, about one hundred Armenian manuscripts, and the two oldest Georgian manuscripts (written AD 897 and AD 913).

Yet, he also notes, "The traditional ending of Mark, so familiar through the AV and other translations of the *Textus Receptus* [Received Text], **is present in the vast number of witnesses**" (our emphasis). Despite this, he concludes that the longer ending is "secondary," meaning "that the section was excerpted from another document, dating perhaps from the first half of the second century." To bolster his conclusion, he cites "internal evidence": non-Markan vocabulary and style within the section and the "awkward" connection between verse 8 and verses 9-20.

Contrary to this, the longer ending to Mark's gospel is quoted extremely early in church history as Markan. Between AD 182 and 188, Irenaeus, a disciple of Polycarp, quotes Mark 16:19 as a part of Mark's account (*Against Heresies* iii.10.6). There are allusions to these disputed verses in even earlier writings, although not as true quotations.

Not only did Irenaeus accept it as a part of Mark's gospel when arguing with "heretics," but, says James Hastings:

No writer before Eusebius [(c. AD 260-340) court favorite and church historian in the days of the Roman emperor Constantine] is known to have rejected them, and their presence in all later MSS [manuscripts] shows that the successors of Eusebius, in spite of his great authority, did not follow his judgment in the matter.

In addition, records of the traditional liturgical calendars of several churches (for instance, the Greek, Syrian, Armenian, and Coptic churches), originating before the fourth century, include these disputed verses without reservation as part of the services. These facts point plainly to the great antiquity of the longer ending as preserved in the common English versions.

In his exhaustive study, "The Last Twelve Verses of the Gospel According to St. Mark Vindicated Against Recent Objectors and Established" (1871), Dean John William Burgon evaluates these verses on stylistic and historical grounds and comes to the exact opposite conclusion to Metzger. He finds that the claim of their non-authenticity rests on shoddy scholarship and an over-reliance on the Western texts, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, which, though early, are at variance with most other biblical manuscripts. He even asserts that Vaticanus contains a blank column where Mark 16:9-20 should be, left there by a scribe to show that it had intentionally been excluded.

If these last verses of Mark's gospel were left out, the book would not come to an orderly conclusion, as does every other book of the Bible. In fact, it would end on notes of fear and failure: "And they [the women who visited Jesus' tomb] said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mark 16:8)—hardly a fitting ending for an account of hope and salvation.

Further, no Christian doctrine rests on the authenticity of Mark 16:9-20. Every point in Mark 16:9-20—except for "if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them"—has scriptural backup elsewhere in the New Testament, and even the exception parallels the spirit of the surrounding promises to the disciples. Therefore, even if this concluding section were a later addition, no Christian doctrine is in any way affected.

As for the vocabulary and style differences, in the end they turn out to be highly inflated guesses. Several words are used for the first time in the book, and a few others are used differently than elsewhere. However, these variations are no worse than the style and vocabulary differences between, for example, Paul's Pastoral Epistles and his other letters, John's writing in Revelation and his gospel and epistles, or Peter's two epistles. Authors are not bound to what scholars assume to be the limit of their vocabularies and styles.

Even with all of this proof, the decision comes down to the faithfulness of God. Is God able to preserve His Word or not? Human writings are filled with error, but the Bible is complete, inspired, and wholly preserved through the power of God. We can trust that these verses are an inspired part of the Word of God.