

## Snake Handling - cont.

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Yes, we believe Mark 16:17-20 is literally true, but limited to (1) certain ones like the apostles, (2) for a certain purpose, and (3) during a certain time (Luke 10:19; Mark 16:20; Acts 14:3; Hebrews 2:3-4). The only New Testament record of a snake being handled was in the story of Paul at Melita. It was unintentional, not a planned religious service and Paul survived (Acts 28:3-6).

Snake handling based upon Mark 16:17-18 is an example of isolating a passage from its immediate and remote contexts in order to introduce and maintain a modern religious practice (the same could be done with Matthew 21:2-3; 26:18; 2 Timothy 4:13; etc.) Modern-day snake handlers say that Mark 16:17-18 should be taken literally. True, but a passage may be literal in that what is spoken of is real and true. A passage may be literal, but contains figures of speech (non-literal language). A passage may be literal, but spoken to a particular audience, not to all.

It can be shown from scripture that: (1) the promise of Jesus in Mark 16:17-18 did not extend to all believers, even in the first century; (2) the promise of Jesus includes more than tongues and healing; (3) the word was preached, and the signs confirming that word followed; (4) the word, the gospel, is to be separated or distinguished from the signs; (5) the word has already been confirmed (Hebrews 2:4) and the signs have ceased (1 Corinthians 13:8-10). Consequently, no one today possesses any of these signs. Snake handling is not for today. And, it may surprise some to know that snake handling, as described above, is a violation of state law in both Tennessee and Kentucky. - Chris Reeves

## Sentence Sermons

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- Those who allow their Bible to suffer from neglect, will suffer themselves.
- Don't count time; make time count.
- Wise men learn from others' mistakes, but fools insist on learning only from their own.
- A good way to straighten out a wayward child is to bend him over.
- If you are simply living for your self, you don't have much to live for.

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# THE WARFIELD BULLETIN

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For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.  
- 2 Corinthians 10:3-4 -

# Is Snake Handling For Today?

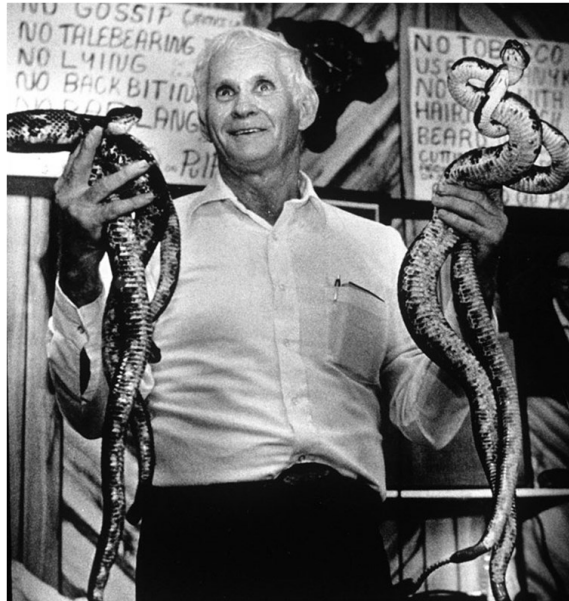
Snake handling as a part of some religious services began around 1910 among certain Pentecostal Holiness Churches in the Appalachian areas of the US. George W. Hensley is considered by many Pentecostals to be the father of modern snake handling. He introduced it into the Church of God in Southeast Tennessee and he later died in 1955 of a snake bite. Numerous Pentecostal preachers and members have died of snake bites since the early 1900's.

In 2001, about 40 small churches in the US claimed to handle snakes. In 1998, snake-handling evangelist John Wayne "Punkin" Brown died after being bitten by a timber rattler at the Rock House Holiness Church in rural northeastern Alabama. Members of his family contend that his death was probably due to a heart attack. However, his wife had died three years previously after being bitten while in Kentucky. Another snake handler died in 2006 at a church in Kentucky. In 2012, Pentecostal pastor and snake handler Mack Wolford died from a rattlesnake bite he had received while performing an outdoor service in West Virginia, as did his father in 1983.

Worship services in a snake-handling church usually include singing, praying, speaking in tongues and preaching. The front of the building is usually the designated area for handling snakes. Rattlesnakes, cottonmouths, and copperheads are the most common, but even cobras are used. During the service, believers may approach the front and pick up the snakes, usually raising them into the air and sometimes allowing the snakes to crawl on their bodies. The snakes are considered incarnations of demons and handling the snakes

demonstrates one's power over them. Members are not required to handle the snakes and some believers will also engage in drinking poison (most commonly strychnine) at this time.

Over sixty cases of death as the result of snakebites in religious worship services have been documented in the US. If a handler is bitten, it is generally interpreted as a lack of faith or failure to follow the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Bitten



believers usually do not seek medical help, but look to God for their healing.

When you question a modern-day snake handler about their practice, they respond: "Do you believe Mark 16:17-18, like the rest of the Bible, is really the inspired word of God? Do you believe all of the Bible or only parts of it?" They might further respond by saying, "You are tempting the Lord when you practice only parts of the Bible,

but not all of it. Handling snakes is a sign of the Lord for true believers today; it is a way to witness and testify for our Lord."

Now, read Mark 16:17-18 in your Bible. Here, Jesus spoke of "signs" that will accompany believers. "Signs" (Gr. *semeion*) are supernatural, miraculous powers. They are miraculous working (John 2:11; 4:54; 6:14; 11:47; Acts 4:16), faith producing (John 20:30-31; Acts 2:22), and word confirming (Acts 14:3; Romans 15:18-19; Hebrews 2:4).

Let's consider a few points about these "signs". *First*, if these signs are to be possessed by all believers today, all who do not possess them are unbelievers. *Second*, if these signs were to be possessed by all believers, but not all believers were able to do them, the promise of Jesus failed. *Third*, did Jesus promise that all who believed would be able to cast out devils, speak with new tongues, take up serpents, drink deadly liquids without harm, and heal the sick? If he did so promise, either one of two things is true: (1) one possesses these powers or else he is an unbeliever, or (2) Jesus' word was false since all believers do not possess them as he allegedly promised. *Fourth*, in the New Testament, not all the believers were able to perform these signs (Acts 2:43; 4:33; 5:12; 6:18; 8:6). These points show that the "sign" of snake-handling was for a few only and for a certain period of time only.

When snake handlers today are bitten, where are the faith healers in the service to help them "recover" (read Mark 16:18 again)? Why do some bitten ones die? Pentecostals are divided as to how many of the five gifts in Mark 16:17-18 they are to have today.