

# Snake Handling 101

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It's the song we just heard, it said there is no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey. Tonight as we come to the word of God, we're going to deal with a subject matter that we have to ask ourselves are we to obey in this area. I want to encourage you this evening to open your Bibles to the book of Acts 28.

Now I know most of you, not all of you, are familiar with the fact that we as a family of faith are on about a three year journey of walking through the Scriptures, sometimes a chapter a day or today, for example, is two chapters on this particular day. One of the reasons that I personally like walking through books of the Bible or sections of the Bible, particularly when it comes to what we know as preaching or public proclamation is twofold: one, the Lord has an amazing hand of providence. In other words, anytime that we have major events that are happening in our culture, our communities or such, it just seems like the passage we're in is the perfect passage for that time so that we, the body of believers, we're not reacting to the news, we're simply just saying our Lord knew that we were going to have to deal with this in this specific timing. The other thing I like about walking through the Bible expositionally, to use a big fancy word, is simply this: it forces you to deal with passages that you would not normally choose to deal with such as this evening's passage from Acts 28.

Now before we read this passage, allow me to share a couple of introductory remarks. The first one is this: beginning this evening when I go back to the house and after I eat dinner, and I'll be honest, watch a little football, I will begin the process of truly beginning to dig deeper toward next week's messages. I may have had them laid out for weeks and months in advance as far as the text and the subjects are concerned but I really start digging in to the concepts and the ideas thereof. There are several means and mechanisms by which I research, whether it's commentaries online or whether it's sermons and such, and one of my favorite resources is a website that has over a million sermons that have been downloaded from all over the globe, all a variety of denominations, and one of the reasons I like it, it just gives you a good perspective on different passages of Scripture. Typically when I type in a specific passage, when I type that passage in, it will say over 500 sermons and then I kind of go begin and get deeper and deeper and deeper. I'm proud to say that this week when I typed in the passage, there were three and none of them dealt with the subject matter that we're going to deal with. When we read this story in just a moment about Paul being bitten by the poisonous snake,

all of the sermons that were alluded to on the site were utilizing this metaphorically, you know, based on the idea of 1 John 5:4 that greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world; the allusion of Satan as the serpent and the foundation we have in Jesus Christ, and rightfully so. So tonight, we're going to break ground, at least on that website, with the very first snake handling sermon that hopefully one day will be posted.

The second introductory remark is hopefully somewhat humorous as well. You may have heard a version of this story somehow throughout the years of your life but the story that I heard goes a little something like this. There was a traveling itinerant evangelist. His ministry was going from church to church and town to town, crusades, revivals, Bible conferences and such, and so he was in a variety of denominational backgrounds, all types of churches in sizes and such, and he found himself in one of those remote places of our country where the church was small in stature but it was energetic on the inside, and as they began the service, the music began to get louder and louder, and the people began to kind of somewhat get the rhythm in their steps and such, there was a man who came out of the back with a wooden box. He asked the pastor what was in that box and he said, "Oh, don't worry." He said, "Before you get up and preach, we're going to handle snakes." To which this young evangelist turned to the pastor and said, "Pastor, where is the back door to this church?" And he said, "I'm sorry, we don't have one." He said, "Where would you like it?" Somewhat of a humorous account.

I want to read Acts 28 and I'm actually going to read verses 1 through 9, and then we're going to deal with the subject matter that though oftentimes we find it humorous, there is a segment of our culture that takes this very very seriously. Acts 28, beginning in verse 1, "And when they were escaped." Let me stop there for just a moment. Remember Acts 27, the Apostle Paul is on the way to Rome and the ship had been wrecked, they didn't pay attention, they didn't listen, all the lives were spared and saved? It says,

1 And when they were escaped, then they knew that the island was called Melita. 2 And the barbarous people shewed us no little kindness: for they kindled a fire, and received us every one, because of the present rain, and because of the cold. 3 And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand. 4 And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live. 5 And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm. 6 Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly: but after they had looked a great while, and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds, and said that he was a god. 7 In the same quarters were possessions of the chief man of the island, whose name was Publius; who received us, and lodged us three days courteously. 8 And it came to pass, that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and of a bloody flux: to whom Paul entered in, and prayed, and laid his hands on him, and healed him. 9 So when this was done, others also, which had diseases in the island, came, and were healed:

As you study what we know as the book of Acts, this is a history, this is a chronology of the church of Jesus Christ from our early infant days when we were just 120 folks in the Upper Room scared for our own physical life. We have the outpouring of the Holy Spirit with what we know as Pentecost. By the time we get to Acts 28, not only is Paul headed to Rome but the Gospel is going to the four corners of the earth and yet here we are with this strange passage. Of all the things the Lord would share with us in the last chapter of the history of the early church, why is it the story of a venomous snake biting Paul and him not being harmed?

As I mentioned earlier, we mentioned the idea of snake handling and we mentioned that typically sarcastically or with cynicism, but there is a significant number of people in our culture who do believe that the handling of and the displaying of venomous snakes during a worship service is an example of their faith. Tonight I'm going to show you a very brief clip of a church that practices this. I want you to hear me clearly: though we're about to study the Scriptures about the biblical-ness of this, please understand I'm not questioning their sincerity. These individuals that you're about to see believe with their whole heart based on this passage and others that they are truly displaying their walk with the Lord. This is just a brief clip of a church a little bit north of here and then we'll return to Scripture.

Video:

Narrator. In this small church in eastern Kentucky, Pastor Jamie Coots and his family are maintaining and over 100 year old tradition of the handling of deadly snakes in the name of God.

Pastor Jamie Coots. I'm pastor of Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus' Name church in Middlesboro, Kentucky. I've been pastor since 1994. The church was built and founded, my grandpa built it. To me it's as much a commandment from God when he said, "They shall take up serpents," as it was the 10 Commandments when he said, "Thou shalt not commit adultery."

Narrator. Snake handlers belong to a subset of Pentecostalism, sometimes called the Holiness Faith. Followers like the Coots family believe that once they feel God's anointment overtaking them, they are protected from venomous snakes.

Woman. When you handle a serpent, it's one of the best feelings I've ever felt in my life. It's like a peace and a calm and a happiness, it's such a happiness and a joy. You can just feel the joy in your soul that you just don't feel all the time every day.

Narrator. So strong is Pastor Jamie's faith in God's protection, he won't seek medical attention if bitten, instead he prays.

Jamie. I lost this finger to a serpent bite. You know, I mean, the finger rotted, probably a quarter inch of bone that was exposed. My finger actually broke off. Linda ends up telling me that, you know, she wants to keep it. I said, "Why?" She said, "Well, I'll always have a piece of you no matter where you go." That's been 14 years ago. Never sought medical attention because when I first started in church, I said if I ever went to a hospital or a doctor over a snakebite, I would quit the church.

For those of you who have kept up with the news lately, Pastor Coots died of a snakebite just a couple of months ago, much like members of his family.

Tonight, I want to encourage you not only to Acts 28 but also I want to encourage you to turn to the book of Mark 16. Pastor Coots and others who practice what we know as snake handling will quote this passage of Scripture and so tonight I want to deal with a variety of points in regards to snake handling. I've called it "Snake Handling 101" because this is probably the first and only message you'll ever hear about snake handling in this church. I'm not planning on snake handling 201 next week.

First we've got to get the context. As I mentioned, Acts 28, the Apostle Paul is on his way to Rome, they're on a remote island. Do you notice that what happened in Acts 28 is very different than what you saw on that video? The Apostle Paul did not go looking for a snake. He did not have one in a prepared box in the back of a church service waiting to bring it before a congregation. He was just going about his life, he happened to be kindling a fire among a barbarous people, and a venomous snake happened to bite him. He was not seeking out nor was he soliciting.

There are two other passages in your New Testament that specifically speak of what we know as snakes and our faith and the first one I want to read begins in Mark 16:9. Now as you turn in your Bible to Mark 16:9, many of you may have some parentheses, you may have a footnote there in regards to the textual concerns here, I'm actually going to deal with that in just a few moments but I just want to read beginning in verse 9 of Mark 16. It says,

9 Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils. 10 And she went and told them that had been with him, as they mourned and wept. 11 And they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not. 12 After that he appeared in another form unto two of them, as they walked, and went into the country. 13 And they went and told it unto the residue: neither believed they them. 14 Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen. 15 And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. 16 He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. 17 And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they

cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; 18 They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. 19 So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. 20 And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen.

When we deal with the context of what we know as snake handling, Acts 28 involving the Apostle Paul and Mark 16 as you heard the pastor mention, a commandment that he paralleled with the 10 Commandments, that it's just as valid as those that we see in the book of Exodus 20. The only other passage that you have in your New Testament regarding what we know as the issue of or the dealing with snakes in a proper sense, is found in 1 Corinthians 10:9 where the Apostle Paul is alluding back to the book of Numbers 21. If you're not familiar with Numbers 21, the Israelites as they often do even in the wilderness, they are rebelling, they are doubting, they are questioning the provision of God in their life, and in their unbelief and in their disbelief, there in Numbers 21 the Lord sends fiery serpents to strike them and bite them, and it is toward the end of that chapter that the Lord has the Israelites create a bronze serpent and when they look upon it, they are healed from the viper's bite, when they look away, they are not. This passage is actually alluded to by Jesus Christ himself in John 3 where it says even as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.

As far as we're concerned in the New Testament, these are the passages that we have. We have Acts 28 with the Apostle Paul on the barbarous island. We have Mark 16 and the words of Jesus, and this allusion to the serpents being a judgment of God, not a "test of our faith," which leads to the teaching. I think one of the struggles that I have with the video that you saw and the encouragement of what we might say handling of snakes in a worship environment, is found in Matthew 4:7. Matthew 4:7 is actually a quotation of Deuteronomy 6:16 and a lot of times in the Gospels but particularly in the Gospel of Matthew, you will have an allusion to or a reference to the Old Testament connecting the prophecies of the Old Testament, the teaching of the Old Testament with the testimony of Jesus Christ himself.

In Matthew 4:7 as quoting Deuteronomy 6:16 it says, "Do not tempt the Lord your God." Do not. Do not tempt the Lord your God. In Acts 28, you do not see Paul tempt the Lord with provision from a snake. You do not see him gather it from a box at the back of the church. It is simply a part of his life and his ministry at that time. In fact, the only place I know in the Bible where the Lord says to test him, there are two places: there is one found in Isaiah when he's saying that there will be a virgin that will give birth, that the Messiah will come supernaturally; he says, "Test me and see if this be so"; the only other time I know it is in Malachi 3 in regards to tithing where he says, "Test me and see if I will not open the windows of heaven." So the only time we're told to test God is in regards to the supernatural birth of our Savior and the handling of our financial resources, not in copperheads, boa constrictors, or rattlesnakes.

So back to Mark 16, the commission. Beginning in verse 15, if you have a red letter Bible as I do, you will notice there are a lot of red letters. These are the words of Jesus. He says, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." This is one of the great commissions that we see at the end of all of the four Gospels, some of them very explicit such as this in Matthew 28 where Jesus says, "All power is given to me in heaven and earth. Go ye therefore into all the world, baptize them, teaching them to the utter ends of the earth." You have the Gospel of Luke, very similar. Then the Gospel of John somewhat tells it in a parabolic form. But the thing I think is interesting about this passage in light of the subject matter today is that oftentimes and this is pertinent to the message, we're guilty of reading the phrase we want to believe in and not the entire context of which it is described.

Notice it says, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." It doesn't mention anything about not being baptized, does it? It just says that if you believe and you are baptized, you shall be saved because we know as you read throughout the New Testament, baptism is just a display on the outside of that which has happened on the inside and there have been a lot of folks who have never been dunked in water that have gone to heaven, and a lot of folks who have gone to the baptistery who have darkened the doors of hell. It's not the water that saves, it is Jesus that saves.

That's the commission. 1 John 5:12 makes this statement, "He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God does not have life." Ephesians 2:8-9 makes it very clear, for by grace we are saved through faith, not of works lest any man boast. It is a gift of God and so when Jesus Christ describes what we know as the Great Commission, he is not advocating that our works or that water or any performance that we do leads to our salvation because he says if you don't believe, you'll be damned. It's just like later in Acts 16:31 when the jailer comes into Paul and he says, "What must I do to be saved?" He says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved."

So we have the context for snake handling, we have the commission of the Gospel that's put right in the midst of it, but the third aspect or what I would call the concerns of Mark 16 and this is where I want to encourage you to look at your footnotes, look at the margins of your Bible, look at the parentheses or the brackets because there are a lot of individuals particularly when it comes to what we know as snake handling, that will simply dismiss this as a proper act of faith because they will claim that verses 9 through 20 should not even be in your Bible. So if we remove this passage from the Bible, then there's no commandment to do it. Sure there may be a situation in Acts 28 with the Apostle Paul but it is very clear here in verse 17 that these signs shall follow them that believe, and in verse 18 they shall take up serpents.

Now as you read through the footnotes in the margin and such, oftentimes you will read something very similar to what my Bible has and allow me to read the footnote in my own Bible. It says, "The passage from verse 9 to the end is not found in the two most ancient manuscripts," and it lists them, and then it goes on to elaborate, "Some of your

Bibles will make this statement, that it is not found in the best manuscripts." You do understand that the dating of a manuscript and your subjective opinion of whether it be good or bad are two completely different concepts and I want you to know that what my Bible says in the footnote is absolutely correct. The most ancient, the oldest manuscripts we've got do not have verses 9 through 20, but here's the problem with that: the earliest writings that we have in the "Christian tradition" have a Gnostic slant. Now if you're not familiar with Gnosticism, allow me to kind of give you a brief update. Gnosticism is the belief or the concept that Jesus in particular was not truly in the flesh; in other words, spirit is good, flesh is bad. That is why when you get to the book of 2 John, it says he is an antichrist who denies that Jesus ever came in the flesh. The very first commentary that we have on the Gospel of John is a Gnostic commentary so when it comes to the Gospel of John, should we run to the oldest text? Well, of course not, and yet oftentimes when it comes to academia we have this belief that if it's the oldest, then somehow it must be the best.

For the first 300 years of Christianity we found ourselves in a theological war. We had the Gnostics on one side, we had a group over here with their beliefs and such. All of that stuff did not get flushed out for about 350 years. As soon as all of that got flushed out, nobody questioned Mark 16 again. So it's interesting that the brackets or the footnotes that you have in these "texts," that they come from a time and a tradition where we were trying to hammer out what all this Christianity stuff was and who Jesus actually was, was he really eternal with the Father; was he born of the Father; how did this all work out? But once we got all of the dust settled, the questions were settled as well.

So I just want you to hear that the oldest two really are, the oldest ones really do not have this passage. That's absolutely true, however, if you remove verses 9 through 20 of your Bible, you've got a major theological issue. If you remove this passage, you don't have the resurrection of Jesus. Without the resurrection, is there even a faith known as Christianity? Think about that for a moment. We're here tonight because the tomb is empty. If the tomb wasn't empty, we wouldn't be here tonight. Just the fact that Jesus walked on water, that's not going to cut it. Just the fact that he taught the Sermon on the Mount won't do it. If you don't have a resurrection, then you don't have a complete Gospel. If the Gospel of Mark ends in verse 8, there's no resurrection, there are no words of Jesus, there is no sighting of him three days after the fact that he was placed in Joseph of Arimathea's grave and tomb.

The other issue is this. In Acts 1, you know that whom we know as Luke the beloved physician according to Colossians 4, he writes back to a man by the name of Theophilus. Now Theophilus was the one who obviously he had communicated first what we know is the Gospel of Luke and he says, "O Theophilus, remember what I wrote to you from that which Jesus began to both do and teach up until the time that he ascended to the Father." The book of Acts itself says if you want the complete story of Jesus, you've got to start at the beginning and you've got to get him up to heaven.

It reminds me years ago and one of my favorite pastors of days gone by was a man by the name of E. V. Hill. I don't know if you're familiar with E. V. Hill but E. V. Hill was an

African American pastor in the Los Angeles area, by the time that he passed away the community of his church had turned more Latino in nature, but just a thriving ministry. E. V. Hill tells a story or he did tell a story, that every Monday a group of pastors in his community would gather together and when they were gathered together what they did as oftentimes happens, is somebody was designated to bring a devotional, bring a word in, and if you've ever been in those circles, usually what happens is somebody gets up and preaches the sermon they preached the day before. That's usually what happens. E. V. Hill tells the story that there was a woman in the community who used to show up and sit on the front row every Monday at this pastor's meeting. They didn't know her name. They didn't know where she lived but they called her Old 1800 because nobody knew who she was but she was so old, she must have been born in 1800. That's what they said. They said that as they began to preach, it didn't matter what the subject matter was, it didn't matter where they were in Scripture, she would begin to reply back, "Get him up. Get him up." Meaning get Jesus to the cross. And you do understand you can preach the cross from any passage in the Bible.

So they would weave the story of the cross with whatever text that they were doing and when they would finally get to the cross, she would then change her reply to, "Don't leave him there now. Don't leaven him there." So, of course, once you get him on the cross, you've got to get him in the grave, right? They said once they would get Jesus in the grave, she would then change her countenance to, "Get him up again. Get him up." In other words, if you don't have a resurrected Jesus, you don't have the whole story and in Mark 16 if you cut it off at verse 8, you don't have a whole story. You have a man who claimed to be Savior who's still dead in a tomb somewhere. I believe that because the passage regarding snakes and such, that we are too quick to side with simple textual criticism and not look at the big picture.

So the confirmation. What do we do with this passage? It says very clearly, "And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover." I want you to focus on what Jesus called these things in verse 17, "And these signs." As you go out through the entirety of Scripture, what we know as a sign is a very rare thing utilized by God. In the Old Testament what we know as the rainbow in Noah's flood is called a sign. Gideon's fleece is called a sign. What we know as the virgin birth is called a sign. It's not used very frequently and yet here Jesus says there will be five signs that will follow.

Let me encourage you to turn to the right a few passages to the book of 1 Corinthians 1. In 1 Corinthians 1 and then we're going to go to 1 Corinthians 14, there are two passages that the Apostle Paul is communicating to the church at Corinth which, by the way, would have been an educated Gentile community much like ours, but he draws a distinction between those with a Jewish background and those with a Gentile background. 1 Corinthians 1, "For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom." Interesting that even the Apostle Paul says when you're dealing with the Jewish background, the Lord oftentimes works with signs and with wonders because they require it. That's why Jesus said in Matthew 12, "There's only one sign I'm going to give you,



when I come back from the grave, you'll know I'm the guy." The Greeks, the Gentiles, they seek after wisdom.

Now turn a few more pages to chapter 14. In chapter 14 of 1 Corinthians we are dealing with the most controversial of the spiritual gifts. Chapter 12 they are laid out and they are listed, but in chapter 14 there's an entire chapter dedicated to what we know as the speaking of, the interpreting and the hearing of the gift of tongues which, by the way, was just mentioned in Mark 16. I want you to notice what verse 22 says, "Wherefore tongues are for," what? "A sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying," or preaching, "serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe."

Now the reason that I went to those passages is that as you go back to Mark 16 when it says, "these signs shall follow them," we just read two very explicit passages where it says that the issue or the item of tongues is a sign and yet here it's made very clear that it will be a sign that shall follow them. Now there are five signs that are mentioned in verses 17 and 18: the casting out of devils; the speaking with new tongues; the handling of serpents; the drinking of any poisonous thing; and the laying on of hands for those that are sick and ill. The question we have to ask ourselves and really the conclusion of this entire topic is are these five signs apostolic or are they catholic, with a little "c"? By the way Catholic with a big "C" means traditionally what we know as the Roman Catholic Church; catholic with a little "c" simply means universal. So are what we are seeing in Mark 16, are these signs that follow, are they specifically given to the apostles or are they to be implemented through the church at large?

Well, there are several ways of addressing that. The first one is this: you do not see anyone in the New Testament handle or issue a serpent other than an apostle, and the only one you've got is Paul in Acts 28. The church at Thessalonica, there is no record that they ever brought the snakes up, and don't you think if they did we would have heard about it? The church at Corinth, there's no mention of snakes. The church at Ephesus, there is no mention of snakes. In fact, when you get to what we know as the speaking of tongues, you see it take place in Acts 2 among all the Jews from every nation. You see it take place in Acts 10 when there's a group of Jewish believers who do not believe that the Gentiles can be saved. But as you walk your way through the New Testament, you will not see it utilized unless as 1 Corinthians 14 described, it is laid out as such, and yet there is no reference to anyone at the church of Thessalonica drinking any deadly thing, much less putting strychnine in a bottle to tempt the Lord himself.

Of these five things that are listed in Mark 16, there is biblical evidence that they were manifested within the apostles and their ministries at the initiation of what we know as the church of Jesus Christ, primarily to those with a Jewish synagogue background. However, allow me to put a small little asterisk on that. The first and the last one that is mentioned, you will see a variation of them among the Gentiles, you will see a variation of them within the catholic universal, small "c" tradition. It says in verse 17 that they shall cast out devils. In Acts 16:18, the Apostle Paul walks in and he cast out a devil. Here in Mark 16, it speaks of Jesus with Mary Magdalene casting out the seven devils

that were within her. When you get into your New Testament, one of the things that you see in the church of Jesus Christ at large is that those what we might call not from the Lord, spirits can be removed from and prayed out of people's lives such as 2 Timothy 1:7, "we," believers, "have not been given the spirit of fear but of power and of love and a sound mind." 2 Corinthians 10 says the warfare that we wage is not physical but it is spiritual to the casting out of imagination and the bringing down of strongholds.

Did you know that every passage in the New Testament that deals with what we know as spiritual warfare is addressed to believers in Jesus Christ who are already saved, already on their way to heaven, but as Ephesians 6 says, our warfare is not with flesh and blood but with principalities, powers and rulers of darkness. What you see in the ministry of Jesus, what you see in the ministry of Paul is very different than those passages for Paul walks in in Acts 16, he doesn't get a name, he doesn't get a backstory, he just says, "Get out." When you get to these other passages in Ephesians 6 and 2 Corinthians 10, you get the idea that there are believers that are struggling and dealing with the oppression of the enemy and it is through the prayer of the saints that the oppression is lifted and the spirit of fear and others is taken away from influencing their lives. So I want to be very clear that though you see these are specifically addressed to the apostles, it does not mean that we as believers do not have authority to push back on the enemy, it's just done differently than what we saw in Paul and even in the ministry of Jesus.

Lastly, they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover. The book of James 5 makes it very clear, it says if there are any of you that are sick, let them gather the elders, let them gather the mature believers around them, anoint them with oil and the prayer of the faithful shall heal them. The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 12 there is the gift of healing. It is a spiritual gift that God has gifted some with the gift of healing. So the Bible says even as a New Testament church, there is healing that is brought, there is a giftedness thereof, we are to gather and we are to pray, the difference is we don't see what we saw in Acts 3 where the shadow of Peter caused healing, or in Acts 19 where his napkin when it was passed to someone caused someone to be healed. In summary, when you get to Mark 16 in specific to snake handling, I believe that there is ample biblical evidence that the taking up of serpents was a sign specifically given to the apostles for a specific reason to a specific people. I do not question those in their sincerity today in regards to their practice. I don't question their sincerity but I do question their biblical hermeneutic which is a fancy word for how they rightly divide the word of God.

You and I today stand here in this place, I have never purposefully taken a serpent up in a worship context. I've never purposefully taken up a snake in any context. In fact, I've told people throughout the years the only good snake is a dead snake. But aren't you grateful that your relationship with Jesus Christ is not based on whether you're willing to handle a copperhead? Aren't you grateful your relationship with Jesus Christ is not based on whether you're willing to dance with a diamondback? He said, "For grace as you saved through faith." Yes, there have been times in the book of Acts, yes, there have been individuals such as the Apostle Paul whom the Lord worked incredible miracles but let me close tonight by reminding you of Galatians 5, "For the fruit of the Spirit," in other words the evidence, the outpouring of knowing the Holy Spirit resides in us is, "love, joy,

peace." I'll just stop with those three. Your display, your living, your faith in Jesus Christ would be better served to love people than to handle a snake. It would be better served to exhibit joy in the midst of sorrow than to drink a deadly drink. For the serpents, the deadly drink and such, may in some places on some occasions be a part of a worship service, but every day we wake up including this day and tomorrow, you will have the opportunity whether or not to love or not. You will have the opportunity whether to exhibit joy or not. You will have the opportunity to exhibit peace or not and the only one who can bring those in your life is Jesus Christ alone. There have been a lot of folks for a lot of different reasons that have picked up snakes who have never been believers in Jesus and they've walked away unharmed, but you can't truly love somebody and have joy without Jesus. He makes all the difference in the world.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. As we prepare for our time of invitation whether it is a decision from one's own relationship with the Lord, whether it is to follow in what we know as believer's baptism, or to become a part of this great fellowship of believers, you and I have the privilege tonight after hearing the word of God to respond to the word of God. That may require coming forward and allowing us to celebrate with you or that may simply be walking out of this place in a few moments with a difference of opinion and a difference of direction and a difference of purpose.

*Lord Jesus, tonight we come. How grateful we are that our eternity, our soul and our salvation is not based on the deeds we do or the works we do or the willingness to risk our physical life with a creature, but simply that you finished the deed on Calvary. When you rose from the dead, you made our salvation possible and sure. Help us, O God, tonight whatever the decision might be where we just trust in you and not ourselves. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

I'm going to ask you to stand with me as Brian leads us. Whatever decision, I'll be right here at the front.

"Take up thy cross and follow Me  
I heard my Master say  
I gave My life to ransom thee  
Surrender your all today

Wherever He leads I'll go  
Wherever He leads I'll go  
I'll follow my Christ who loves me so  
Wherever He leads I'll go

He drew me closer to His side  
I sought His will to know  
And in that will I now abide  
Wherever He leads I'll go."

Alright, church family, if you'll be seated for just a moment. I'm about to give you evidence of I'm going to preach on snake handling again. If you would have told me that a message on snake handling we'd have three folks come join our fellowship, I would have preached this message a long time ago. But I do want the privilege to introduce three folks that I have gotten to know in days past. Miss Amy, come on up here. Miss Amy W. She's coming from a fellow church of like faith right up the road in good old Winette, Alabama, and so we're excited about her and her desire to become a part of our fellowship. If you're excited about Miss Amy being a part, give a good old First Baptist amen. Come on, alright. Now just hang on with me. I know you're nervous, that's okay.

Now the B.'s. Come on B.'s. Now their story is a little more creative than yours. The B.'s started out as Baptists, then they became Methodist but they told me it really wasn't a Methodist church, they didn't know that they were Baptists and they were ready to be Baptists again. Did that make sense? That makes perfect sense. So all that being said, if you're excited about the B.'s being Baptists again, give them a good old amen.

So we're excited about these coming to our fellowship. Before we close and you come and give them the right hand of fellowship, let me remind you next Sunday night we are still having a Bible study at 6 pm. It is going to be in the chapel. I will not be leading it. Let me share with you why: next Sunday night is our Cup of Nations. You've seen the advertisements. As of right now, we have 21 different soccer teams that are going to be a part of it. Now, these teams are all representing separate countries, like there will be a country from Honduras, a country from Korea, a country from Saudi Arabia, whatever it may be. A lot of these are students in our community and some of them are just individuals that are a part of our community. About the time that you gather for Bible study in the chapel, I'm going to be sharing the Gospel with the help of a translator on the soccer field next Sunday. So if you're not able to make it to the soccer fields, if that's not something that's just kind of how you're wired, we want you to know we're still having Bible study for you but we do want to encourage you to be there next Sunday from 2 to 6 as we're going to have several hundred internationals there for the purpose of sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's a mission trip that's only five miles away. So it's a great opportunity but if you're not able to go, we still are going to have Bible study at 6 o'clock in the chapel.

If you would, stand with me as we close in prayer and then come and welcome Miss Amy and the B.'s.

*Lord Jesus, tonight as we close, you are so so good to us, not just the message of salvation with Jesus Christ but for Amy and the B.'s, Lord, we thank you that you're taking our family of faith and you're expanding our family. Lord, we thank you for the gifts, for the talents, for the abilities just for who they are and that they would be a part of our fellowship. God, we pray that we would be an encouragement to them and, Lord, that we would allow them to integrate to the fullest capacity to our family. Lord, we thank you that your desire is to do so much through this local body of believers. Thank you again for your goodness to us. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

God bless. Come and welcome these.