

Mark 16:18 & Serpent Handling

Written by K B Napier

Wednesday, 13 November 2013 21:35

There are churches in the USA that handle snakes, claiming it to be a command 'proving' the faith of the handler. Is this true? Instinct alone tells me their belief is very wrong and rather stupid. Snake handling is not mentioned in scripture at all, but being kept safe from them is. In each and every case concerning doctrine the criterion is not my instinct or even my beliefs, but the word of God. What does it REALLY say?

We find that God sent serpents (snakes) to the people as a fatal punishment, not as a test of their faith. Numbers 21:6

“And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died.”

The people themselves acknowledged that this was a punishment from God for their spiritual lack of trust, which led to complaints against Him (verse 7). The remedy? Moses set up a brass serpent, and anyone who had been bitten would have to look upon the brass statue to be saved from death. As far as I know the snake-handlers of America have no such brass serpent made at the command of Moses! There is no hint of a command to actually go and handle snakes.

Deuteronomy 32:24, too, tells us that serpents were sent by God as a punishment:

“They shall be burnt with hunger, and devoured with burning heat, and with bitter destruction: I will also send the teeth of beasts upon them, with the poison of serpents of the dust.”

Cockatrices (poisonous serpents, such as adders) were sent to kill those who disobeyed God: Jeremiah 8:17: “They shall bite you, saith the Lord”! No command to handle them.

In Mark 16:18 we have this text:

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“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.”

Is THIS a command to pick up snakes as a proof of faith? No, it is a promise that nothing will hurt the disciples as they go about preaching the Gospel. Note the mention of poisons... was this a command to deliberately drink poisons? Of course not! Deliberately handling snakes and drinking fatal poisons was not a party-trick!

The words “They shall pick up”, *airo*, can have one of three main meanings (with 13 sub-meanings). One of these is to simply ‘remove’ a poisonous snake which, if it bites, will not kill the disciple. This describes removing a snake before it can do damage. Again, no commands to deliberately put one’s life at risk. If anything, they were to “tread on serpents” to kill them (Luke 10:19), though this is given as a spiritual fact (e.g. Pharisees as serpents/vipers), rather than a physical one. In this text, to ‘tread’ is to crush underfoot; that is, to treat with contempt or to escape the perils of Satan.

The better text tells us that if we tempt Christ we will be destroyed by serpents, as 1 Corinthians 10:9 clearly states:

“Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents.”

Paul links this to the destruction of Hebrews when they complained against God (see above text). This judgment made by God against the travelling Hebrews was an admonition, not a command to handle snakes (verse 11)!

So, is snake-handling by ‘Christians’ in the southern states of America an act of faith? No, it is very clearly an act of stupidity. There is no command to deliberately put ourselves in harm’s way. Rather, snakes were sent as a fatal consequence of disobeying the Lord. Snake-handlers have died of their bites. This confirms that what they do is an human folly, a ridiculous misinterpretation of scripture. To call it an ‘act of faith’ is a travesty, making it a circus act, not a spiritual act! To deliberately put one’s life at risk is to seriously tempt God... so any harm done is entirely deserved.

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(Note: This reminds me of those foolish charismatics who deliberately provoke Satan by going to areas of a town to command him to leave).

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