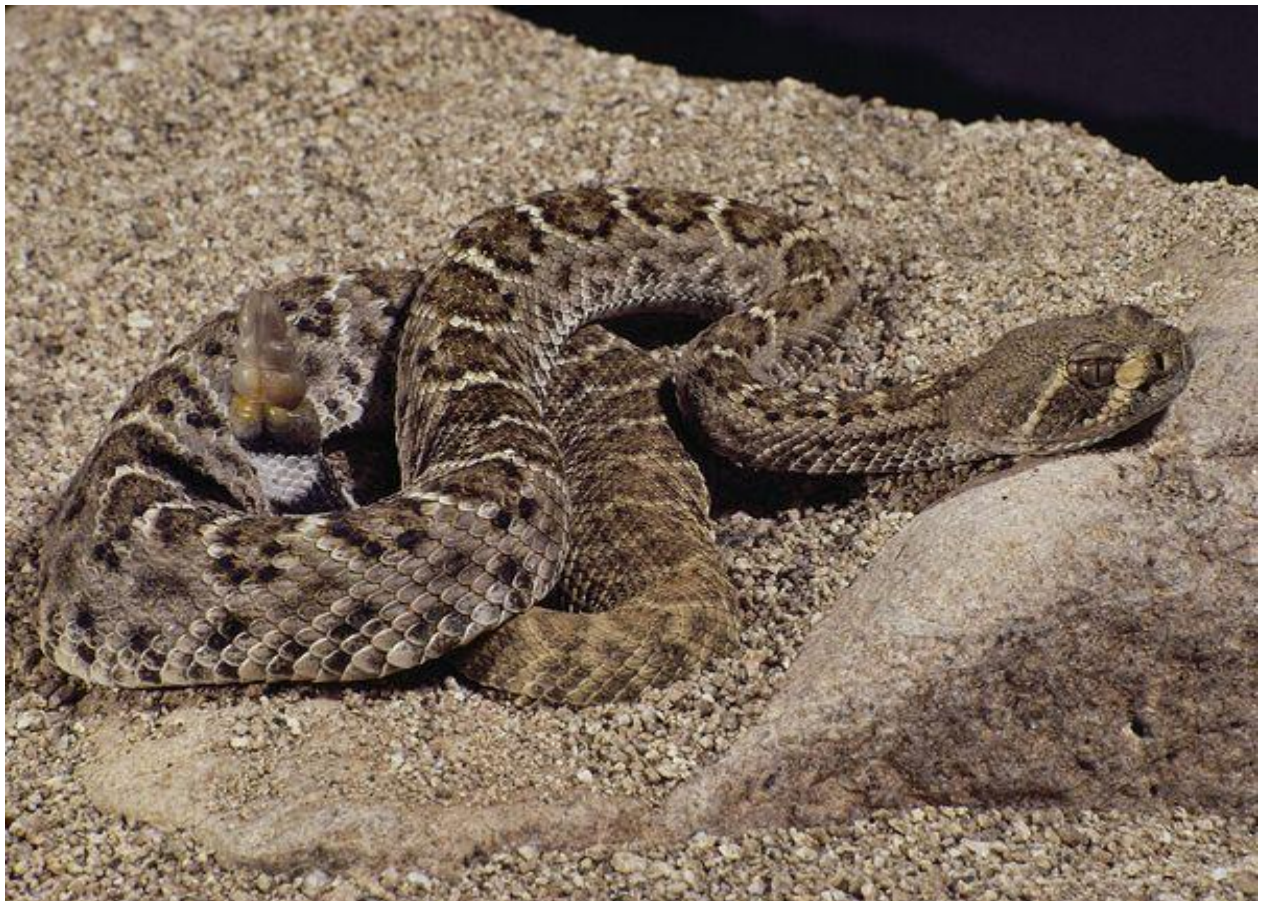


Snakes and Adders and How to kill them off

By Stuart Olyott and published in Evangelical Times
between April to September 1982



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An Introduction to Snakes and Adders and How to kill them off

The boys are gathering in the street with their football gear. The girls are giggling on the corner, wondering what shop they are going to look at in town. The lady opposite is washing her step and the man down the road is tinkering with his car. And what thoughts should go through our mind as we look at mankind on a Saturday morning?

`Wherein consists the sinfulness of that estate where into man fell? The sinfulness of that estate where into mankind fell, consists of the guilt of "Adam's first sin, the want of original righteousness, and the corruption of the whole of his nature, which is commonly called Original Sin; together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it.

What is the misery of that estate where into man fell? All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever.' (Westminster Shorter Catechism)

And it is not too hard to know a catechism as a standard of faith; but it is desperately difficult to look on men and women in the light of these Scriptural truths and remember that everyone of them — those lads playing football, those girls walking to town, the woman on her step and the man at his car —are guilty before God.

Every one of them is going to die and every one of them, unless they are saved, is going to perish everlastingly in the pains of hell.

Something must be done! Somebody must go and tell them about their God. Someone must go and tell them what God has done for men and women in his Son. And they must hear the free offers of the gospel and have justification by free grace explained to them.

And someone must present it to them, and someone must challenge them and plead with them. There is no hope for our friends except in the Lord Jesus Christ. Not just something must be done: everything possible must be done!

Whenever we stress this point to Christians, ten snakes rear their ugly heads

— Ten slippery snakes which would tempt us away from actual evangelism.

'Everything possible must be done and we must get on and do it!'

`Everything that can possibly be done must be done to bring the gospel to those who are lost and on their way to hell. We must get on and do that! Say that once, and say it strongly, and immediately a number of snakes rear their venomous heads, poisoning Christians' minds with the belief that they may properly slide out of their responsibilities to engage in practical evangelism

Say that once, and say it strongly.

Then along slithers the 1st Snake ...

**'Yes something must be done; it's nothing to do with me.
Evangelism is the work of the pastor or the elders
or the deacons... but not me!'**

This is not such a hard snake to kill. In the Greek New Testament there is no such word as 'evangelism'. There is no separate entity, no identifiable department, no defined activity, and no organised function called evangelism.

And this word is not found because there is no self-consciousness on this subject. You find the word 'evangelize' there, which refers to speaking the evangel, speaking the gospel. And the believers did it, spontaneously.

It has been said that many modern believers are standing on the promises while sitting on the premises; but not the early church. Here were men and women (and boys and girls?) spiritually nourished from the word of God; from full hearts they could not help but speak the things which they knew to be true.

Now, of course, there were specially gifted evangelists in the early church, but the world can be evangelized without special messengers, and a good deal of the early world was evangelized without special messengers. Who founded the churches at Rome or Antioch? No apostle.

Then, added to the story of the New Testament, comes churches in Judea and Galilee and Cyprus, Added because ordinary believers naturally and spontaneously spoke about the gospel as they were scattered abroad.

That is the divine pattern and it needs to be stressed on every church member who snakishly says: 'it is nothing to do with me.' **Evangelism in the early church was not the activity of a select few. It was the activity of a mobilised many!**

Then along comes the 2nd Snake ...

'Isn't our gospel service enough?'

This is the view that, because evangelism is church-centred, it must be building centred. I have heard it said by a brother whom I love that, if a church has a gospel service 52 weeks of the year, it can be said to be evangelizing.

Well, the pages of the New Testament kill that snake stone dead! There we find that little, if any, evangelism was carried on by the gathered church. They met for worship and for instructions, but they did not gather to evangelize.

This receives emphasis from the incidental nature of that reference in 1 Corinthians 14 to the unbeliever coming in to the meeting, almost by accident. Nowhere in the New Testament do we read of Christians pressing their unconverted friends to come to a gospel service. They simply spoke to them there and then about Christ.

There are tremendous social pressures, particularly in our inner cities, against going to church. And to insist that people must come into a church building before they hear the gospel is to impose a condition for hearing the gospel which the New Testament does not impose.

Because it is true that preaching is the God-ordained means of communicating the gospel, we must not fall into the trap of thinking that sermons are the particularly God-ordained means. Preaching is simply the speaking forth of the evangel.

I believe that to think mainly in terms of the gospel service is to stand almost every New Testament emphasis on its head. The New Testament says: **'Go where they are'**.

The gospel service says: 'Come where we are, we'll play at home.' The New Testament says evangelism is the work of everybody. The gospel service says it is more the work of the pastor than anybody else.

In the New Testament the believers are active; in the gospel service they're passive. In the New Testament it is buying up every opportunity to speak: in the gospel service it is sermons.

In the New Testament there is opportunity for question and dialogue; in the gospel service you are hardly allowed to breathe audibly.

The New Testament shows us that evangelism was often informal, but the gospel service is often deadly formal.

In the New Testament the church is a dynamic body; in the gospel service the church is thought of as an institution. Certainly let's have evangelistic messages from our pulpits, but let's kill that snake which asks: 'Isn't our gospel service enough?'

Then along comes the 3rd Snake ...

'We can do nothing of significance unless the Lord sends revival.'

I particularly want to tackle this snake. What if the Lord does not send revival? Revival is in his power. He is God. It is his prerogative to give or to withhold, and our Lord may choose to withhold. We may live and die and never see another revival, as historically understood. We pray that may not be so, but that is a possibility we must face.

Now are we going to use, as an excuse for not evangelizing, the fact that God has exercised his prerogative? Is the great commission only a great commission when there are times of exceptional blessing? Aren't we to obey as best we can even when our churches are weak? Aren't we to evangelize in season and out of season? Isn't evangelism a perpetual obligation?

Will we stand before the Judgement seat, before the great God of hosts, and say: 'Lord, we neglected to evangelize every man, woman, girl and boy, because you did not send us days when our preaching was attended with unusual power.'

We never saw the revivals that our forefathers saw, so we could not evangelize because we lacked the resources.'? And God will say to us: Did not I tell you to make disciples of all nations and "Lo, I am with you always". Wasn't that enough?'

If we use the fact that we do not live in revival days as an excuse for not evangelizing, we are disobeying the clear commands of our Master and therefore we forfeit the 'Well done, good and faithful servant.' Fancy it! Wrapping our gift in a napkin and putting it in the earth, on the sole ground that God acted as God and did not do what our human wisdom thought was necessary!

Then along comes the 4th Snake ...

'I'm too scared.'

Of what? Not too scared to disobey the God of gods who has commissioned you to the work of evangelism and to be a light in the world. Not too scared to grieve the Holy Spirit by whom you have been sealed. If a man says, 'I'm too scared', the question to put to him is: 'Are you a Christian at all?'

Isn't the essence of the gospel that I deny myself and take up my cross daily; and, if I will not, then I cannot be Jesus's disciple?

When our Lord used those words, he was thinking of the Roman soldiers coming into a village to arrest a man, and out he went, while the world jeered and said goodbye to him because he was going out to die and he was never coming back.

Jesus said that, if we are ashamed of his words, he will be ashamed of us. We have been commanded on divine authority not to fear those who can only kill the body, but rather to fear God.

It is about time we reminded ourselves of Amy Carmichael's dream. She saw an awful pit and blind people falling into it; and around the edge of the pit were sighted people making daisy chains.

Too scared, when their eternal destiny is at stake! Where would I be now if somebody had been too scared to speak to me about the Lord Jesus Christ?

Can it be that ministers have failed pointedly and repeatedly to preach what the whole counsel of God teaches about the everlasting damnation of the wicked?

Is it because Christian people have not really been confronted with the issues at stake, that they are willing to bring such a lame excuse?

Can a person, filled with gratitude because of what he has been saved from, ever say: 'I'm too scared'?

Then along comes the 5th Snake ...

'Aren't we doing enough already? I can't think of anything else we could be doing.'

The average church member is often so parochially minded that he thinks the Lord's work begins and ends in his own local church. Are you really clued up about the situation locally . . . nationally . . . internationally?

Many pastors seem almost afraid of informing their people about the international scene, lest they should flee off to evangelise the heathen and leave the congregation a little depleted. Internationally, what is the situation?

Right next door to us the nearest countries are the Republic of Ireland and France and their needs are desperate. Here we are in comparative luxury, and the world is rife with Islam and Marxism and the most dominant religion of all — old fashioned materialism.

We are not doing enough and we never can do enough. If we are not doing more than last year, there is something seriously wrong, because there is more need than last year.

It is time to face again the New Testament doctrine of sacrifice and be plain with ourselves that without sacrifice there is no discipleship. And, if we cannot think of anything more we could be doing, couldn't we for a start do more of what we are doing already?

Why not visit more homes, if you visit homes? If you run an evangelistic children's meeting, why not run two? If you run an open air work, why not run two?

What we must do is to learn to develop initiative in the local church. Very often all initiative has lain with the pastor and the office bearers and everybody waits happily for them to move.

Somehow we have got to encourage ordinary Christians to take evangelistic initiative. If some of our folk want to launch out on some evangelistic enterprise, provided there are certain safeguards, let the office bearers bless it and say: 'Get on with it'.

What impresses me about the New Testament church is its flair. What depresses me about our modern church is its lack of it! Is there no synagogue for Paul to preach in? Well then, he will go down to the riverside and find a group of ladies. Is there no synagogue? Well then, he will go and do personal work in Athens market. He does not just sit down and say: 'no synagogue, no preaching'.

Couldn't you really make that Bible class better? What do they sing in your Sunday school? ... Really? Isn't there any gifted young fellow in your church who could put some Scripture or catechism to music, so that they could sing that instead and get the words going through their minds and into their hearts?

Couldn't you get your Sunday school children together some time for a games morning, so that they realize that those teachers are human and capable of bending?

You will get a far better standard of teaching, if you scrap your small classes and get everyone together and put one person at the front who will prepare like fury because the other teachers will be watching.

Why not try some new things? Why not run a recruiting drive for the Sunday school or someone dress up as a sandwich-board man outside the local school and persuade youngsters to come to some evangelistic meetings?

Have you tried to get into your local school? How about local radio? The point is that we sit around waiting for things to happen; the New Testament church made them happen.

Then along comes the 6th Snake...

'But we don't have sufficient resources for Evangelism!'

That is the response of some church members to the sort of ideas which were sketched out last month for open-air meetings, door-to-door visitation, and a mission to young people. 'We just haven't got the man power.'

Some fellowships are small, but that does not mean it is impossible for them to engage in evangelism.

Personal witness to friends, relatives and neighbours is still the chief way to evangelize and we always have sufficient resources for that.

Do not say, 'we don't have enough resources' while personal work remains.

Personal conversation will be with us to the end of the world. The opportunity for that is always there.

But the fact is our churches can do given him, the whole crowd was fed; 5000 men and women and children too.

We may not have a lot, but what the Lord wants to see is the church responding with the resources it does have. He will take care of the rest.

Has it ever occurred to you that our resources are dwindling because God's way of multiplying our resources is by us using the ones we already have?

Would you say to a drowning man: 'I have not got sufficient resources.'? Wouldn't you have a try?

Then along comes the 7th Snake ...

'I would not know what to say to somebody about Christ.'

How could the world be won if the disciples said nothing?

I believe that if Christians genuinely do not know what to say, the teaching ministry in their church must be at fault.

How could a person who was sitting under a fully orbed Biblical ministry not know what to say?

I have a hobby-horse, so I will ride it now! Can it not be, Christian men who exercise a preaching ministry that you can sacrifice a bit of depth for a bit of breadth?

After not too long a stay in Ephesus Paul, in all good conscience, was able to say that he had proclaimed to them the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27).

Can it not be that you should responsibly aim to take your given him, the whole crowd was fed; 5000 men and women and children too. We may not have a lot, but what the Lord wants to see is the church responding with the resources it does have. He will take care of the rest.

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Wouldn't you have a try?

Can you not preach a series whereby you answer the common objections of unbelievers?
Can you not do a series on contemporary issues which Christians have to face?
Can you not give Bible teaching about the cults and how to deal with them?
And can't we have a return to simple preaching that is easy to follow and understand?

The great test of your preaching is that the congregation who, when they came to the passage, hadn't a clue what it meant, now understand it so well they could explain it to anybody.

What people say about Christ to their friends and workmates will very largely be a distilled version of what they have been taught. If they cannot distil the version the preacher has been giving them, it is no wonder they say: 'I wouldn't know what to say'.

We are to teach faithful men, so that they in turn will teach others. It is the loss of that perspective that is responsible for this snake which so often appears among our church members.

Then along comes the 8th Snake ...

'I would evangelise, but I get so discouraged and my zeal flags so easily!'

Without being harsh, may I suggest that this is because you do not take the work of evangelism seriously enough, Imagine a farmer who, without any forethought or preparation, ploughing or harrowing, goes into the field, throws a few seeds willy-nilly on the hard ground and then goes home to sit by the fire and hopes that they will somehow take root.

As he looks out of the window, down come the birds and almost all the seed goes. Of course, he is discouraged! He would have lost a lot less seed if he had taken his work a lot more seriously.

If you think souls are won without labour, you must think again. **You ought to realise that the Lord's work is WORK!** Often those who are the most discouraged are those who treat evangelism as an occasional hobby.

For the rest I would say: open your Bibles and read again the parable of the Sower. Some of the seed will bear fruit. It is the knowledge that the Lord will give life to whom he will that gives us perseverance and hope and expectancy.

It was this knowledge which lifted the spirits of our Lord Jesus Christ during a hard and unfruitful period of evangelism and gave him heart to continue with evangelistic labour (Matt.11.25— 28). We will see many hollow professions of faith in Christian work. The parable of the Sower tells us so. But we will also see true regeneration.

Many churches have lost their zeal for evangelism. The pot has gone off the boil. The Great Commission is not taken seriously. The state and destiny of the lost are down on paper in the doctrinal statement, but don't move the people.

Much of the responsibility for this lack of zeal often lies at the door of the pastors and elders. It is rare for the church member to rise higher in the things of God than his elders.

If the flame for spreading the gospel does not burn on the hearts of the eldership, it is unlikely to burn on anyone else's. But if the gospel flame burns in the elders' hearts, eventually it will burn in other people's too.

If the ministry feeds the flame which has been lit with the solid fuel of biblical teaching; if there is a little draught of exhortation and encouragement; and if the fire is occasionally poked and stirred with prayer and leadership by example, then we will soon see a return of zeal for evangelism in the churches.

Then along comes the 9th Snake ...

'We must get the church sorted out first before we can think about going out with the gospel'.

It is true that many churches desperately need to reform themselves in the light of Scripture. They are not the kind of fellowships to which we could honestly expect the Lord to entrust a new babe in Christ.

We should not separate church reformation from evangelism — away with the thought that we will get the church perfectly reformed first and then evangelise later.

Equally, away with the idea that we will evangelise first and put off reforming the church until later, Let us evangelise because it is part of our obedience and we reform the church and seek to put it right because that also is part of our obedience.

We cannot put one obedience against another obedience. We need to set about **both**.
What does the evangelist say?

He says `What shall I do with people who get converted?

I must integrate them into a church where everything necessary for their spiritual development will be provided'. So he sets about reformation of the local church.

What does the church reformer say?

`How can we make our church glorious for Christ?

We need to display the fully-orbed pattern laid down in Scripture as to what a church ought to be.' And one of the conclusions he comes to is that the members of the church should be engaged in evangelism.

Do not wait for tomorrow either to reform the church or to evangelise.
Somehow tomorrow never comes. **Set about both tasks today!**

Then along comes the 10th Snake ...

**'I believe in the doctrine of election.
The salvation of those whom God has chosen is certain, and
in no way depends upon my efforts to win them.'**

But let me ask you why you believe in the doctrine of election. Undoubtedly you will answer: 'Because I see it taught in the Bible'. That is totally convincing. We must obviously believe and submit to all that God's Word teaches. This must even be true when what we read is hard to accept, or impossible to fathom.

But the doctrine of election is not the only truth in the Bible, is it?

God's Word certainly tells us that God has chosen who will be saved. But it also states how they will be saved.

They will each flee from their sin and avail themselves of the mercy of God in Christ. They will grieve over their iniquities, hate them, resolve to turn from them, and desire to live in obedience to God. They will receive the Lord Jesus Christ, and will rest entirely on who He is and what He has done, for their acceptance by the God they have offended.

And what will bring them to do this?

The answer is plain. It will be God's Spirit working through God's Word. 'No one can say, "Jesus is Lord", except by the Holy Spirit' (1 Corinthians 12.3). 'Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ' (Romans 10.17).

God has not simply decreed that his elect will be saved. He has also decreed that they will be saved as a result of the proclamation of the gospel. No one who has any respect for God's decrees would give respect to one, while ignoring another.

And who, precisely, is to do this work of proclamation?

Not the angels. It is the church of Jesus Christ, composed of you and me and all other believers, whom the Lord has commissioned to this task. Then is all the church responsible for spreading the gospel, or is it the work of a select few?

Our Lord Jesus Christ has already given US the answer. Having commanded his apostolic band to make disciples of all nations, he then told them that every instruction he had given them was also to be taught to every convert.

This obviously included the work of proclaiming his gospel to all humanity, which he had just mentioned (Matthew 28.18-20). We believe in election because the Bible teaches it. And we go to the work of evangelism, because the Bible says that we must.

The reason for believing in one is the reason for doing the other.

This doctrine and this duty are not in tension with one another, for our authority for both is God's Word. We are not at liberty to forget either one or the other. We should rejoice in both, and should rejoice in them equally.

We cannot work out how election and the free offer of the gospel can both be true, but should hold to what God has revealed.

We should not treat these truths as enemies who are out of sympathy with each other, but as friends who therefore have no need to be reconciled.

To use the doctrine of election as an excuse for disobeying the declared will of God's Son is an immeasurable wickedness.

How can we possibly consider appealing to God's eternal decrees as our reason for not performing the duty he clearly demands from us?

Only the devil uses the Bible to contradict the Bible. It is a tactic he used in Eden (Genesis 3.1), and again in tempting our incarnate Lord (Matthew 4.6).

The voice of what is so often called 'hyper-calvinism' is, in fact, the voice of a snake.