

“They Shall Take up Serpents”

The contemporary serpent-handling churches of Appalachia remain fiercely independent. They have been referred to as the renegade churches of God. The phrase is apt, for these churches identify with the great Pentecostal movement at the turn of the twentieth century and two of the major denominations that emerged from it, the Church of God and the Church of God of Prophecy.¹ However, in what is widely recognized as the official history of the Church of God, Charles Conn (1996) only reluctantly admits to the role of serpent handling, for this Pentecostal denomination no longer endorses that practice or the practice of drinking deadly poisons. In the first edition of his history, published in 1955, Conn relegated serpent handling to a single footnote. In the third and “definitive” edition, published in 1996, Conn reluctantly devotes a bit more space to the role of serpent handling in the church but still minimizes its influence and effect. We discuss the initial endorsement and progressive abandonment of serpent handling by the Church of God in chapter 2 (see Hood, 1998; Hood, Hill, & Williamson, 2005, chap. 5; Williamson & Hood, 2004b). For now we want to note that the renegade churches scattered throughout Appalachia continue to believe and practice what many in the Church of God and the Church of God of Prophecy once perceived as normative.

In the beginning, both denominations endorsed the plain meaning of Mark 16:17–18. The plain meaning was not simply preached; it was believed and put into practice (Hood, 1998, 2003a). This passage,

which has become a foundational text for serpent-handling churches, has been associated with many Pentecostals who never endorsed serpent handling, at least since the historic 1906 Azusa Street revival, as we discuss in chapter 2 (Hollenweger, 1972; Church of God, 1910). In the King James Bible it reads as follows:

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. (Mark 16:17–18)²

Adherents of contemporary serpent-handling churches accept these words of the resurrected Jesus as imperatives for true believers and view the practice of four of these signs as unconditional mandates; the practice of drinking deadly substances is considered conditional because of the prefaced word *if*. Serpent-handling churches that practice all five signs do so simply to obey what they believe is the command of Christ. In this sense serpent-handling churches are similar to the Catholic Church and mainstream Protestant denominations that take communion in response to Christ’s imperative to do so. Believing Appalachian serpent handlers can no more conceive of Pentecostalism without this practice than Catholic believers could conceive of Catholicism without the Eucharist. The irony is that many of the early Pentecostals focused on Mark 16, and contemporary Pentecostals still do, while ignoring the more dangerous practices of serpent handling and drinking poison. For instance, Poloma (2006, p. 61) has documented the revival of healing rooms, a throwback to John Dowie’s “healing homes,” which used prayer, rather than medicine, to cure the sick. While no longer practiced in opposition to medicine, the use of *pray-ers* is officially justified by a selective use of Mark 16:17–18. Poloma (2006, pp. 65–66) notes that the official website for the International Association for Healing Rooms states, “Our commission is based on Mark 16:17–18: ‘And these signs shall follow those that believe[;] . . . they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.’” Serpent handlers are quick to note this selective use and refuse to omit what others—for obvious reasons—find difficult to practice.

Technically, serpent-handling churches are sects; that is, they stand in tension with the larger culture (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003, chap. 12). With the exception of West Virginia, at one time or another the Appalachian states, where serpent handling has been practiced, passed laws against this ritual. The courts have ruled that states

may regulate religious behaviors, as opposed to beliefs, if they have an overriding interest. Protecting believers from being bitten, maimed, or killed seems a sufficient overriding interest for many states. However, laws against serpent handling have seldom been effective. For instance, Kimbrough and Hood (1995) have documented the persistence of serpent handling in Carson Springs, Tennessee, despite the outlawing of the practice by the state. Even though the Tennessee State Supreme Court upheld the law on appeal, serpent handling continues in the Carson Springs area today, with active churches in Morristown and Del Rio.

While practicing a religious ritual that has been ruled illegal is sufficient to identify a religious group as sectarian, we do not refer to serpent-handling *sects* except when discussing their struggles with the local and larger societies. Serpent handlers identify themselves as members of a church. Thus when we discuss serpent handling from the perspective of the believers' understanding, we refer to serpent-handling *churches*. Our aim is to understand serpent handling both from within and from without. As such we walk a difficult line. As with Wacker's (2003) treatment of the history of the first quarter century of Pentecostalism, we wish to respect the understanding serpent handlers have of their own tradition, as well as reflect on it from a variety of perspectives. We make no claim of objectivity but rather admit to an empathic understanding derived from our many years of participant observation. While neither of us handles serpents (less from fear than a refusal to mock the faith of those who believe), we have witnessed believers being bit and maimed, even dying. Our overall view is that serpent-handling believers have not been fairly treated by academics, scholars, or the media. While neither of us identifies with the religious beliefs of serpent handlers, we have a deep appreciation and understanding of their faith. We wish to avoid stereotyping these people, a trap even social scientists fall into, especially when they are confident of their own objectivity (Hood et al., 2005). Social scientists have not proven more reliable than the media when they study traditions far removed from their own (Birkhead, 1993, 1997; Hood, 1998, 2003a; Hood et al., 2005).

Some sense of what this book is about can be achieved by a description of a typical serpenhandling service. Unlike many mainstream Pentecostal denominations, serpent-handling church worship has not been “routinized” (Poloma, 1998, p. 101) or “regularized” (Wacker, 2003, p. 107). However, below we suggest a template for serpent-handling worship by which deviations can be easily recognized.

TEMPLATE FOR SERPENT-HANDLING WORSHIP

Serpent-handling churches typically meet at least once weekly (and often more) to worship God and experience manifestations of the spirit. As they gather for the service, members greet each other and any visitors present with warm handshakes and exchanges of conversation; in some churches bodily embraces are reserved for the faithful and those of the same sex. At the opening of worship it is standard practice for the pastor or another designated person to cordially welcome everyone and encourage all to obey God as he moves in the service.

From the front, the leader, usually the pastor, announces the presence of serpents that have been brought to church in specially crafted boxes placed beside the pulpit. These boxes typically bear engraved biblical references or a simple phrase of deep meaning to handlers, such as “Wait on God.” Handlers take great pride in the boxes they have made. All contain latches with small padlocks for protection and safekeeping of the serpents until the service begins. It is usually men who bring the serpents to church. Only when they place their serpent boxes near the altar do they unlock them. In some churches a jar of a poisonous solution sits near the altar. In the past the poison was red lye or carbolic acid; in recent years, it is usually strychnine. In fewer churches there will be a blowtorch or a bottle with a kerosene wick. Fire may be handled but less frequently than serpents. The preacher acknowledges to visitors what all believers recognize as an ever present fact: “There is death in these boxes.” He is referring to the rattlesnakes, water moccasins, and/or copperheads in the boxes. Also, he says that there is “death in this jar,” referring to what is typically a mason jar clearly labeled “Poison.” No church is without a small bottle of off-the-shelf olive oil used to anoint believers for prayer.

After an initial prayer spoken by all congregants in unison, someone begins a song, which is followed by the strumming of guitars, beating of drums, clashing of cymbals, and shaking of tambourines, as others clap their hands and join in with expressions of praise to God. With the onset of music, what seems at first to be a cacophonous exhibition soon gives rise to a synchrony of living worship in which believers move freely about and celebrate what is felt to be the presence of God. Suddenly, and without announcement, someone moves toward one of the special wooden boxes, unlatches the lid, and calmly extracts a venomous serpent. As others gather around the activity, participation in worship increases with a more compelling sense of God’s presence and direction,

and other serpents are taken out and passed among the obedient. Amid these manifestations, a believer passes by the others, almost unnoticed, to take the mason jar from the pulpit, remove its lid, and swallow a portion of its toxic contents. The jar is resecured and quietly returned to its place as the believer takes a moment to worship God in solitude and reverence. When the atmosphere of worship is sensed to have shifted, the serpents are returned to their boxes, at which time the sick, oppressed, and spiritually needy are offered ministry through prayer and the laying on of hands. At such times the focus becomes helping others receive what they need from God by personal surrender and obedience to the spirit. These activities are then followed by songs sung by individuals, personal testimonies of praise, and extemporaneous sermons that are meant to exhort the righteous, admonish the backsliders, and persuade the unbelieving. As the two- to three-hour service draws to a close, believers fellowship once more, then leave one by one.

Although this pattern may vary in order and duration, most services include these basic components that were common, except for serpents and poisonous solutions, in early Pentecostalism. It is Pentecostalism's rejection of serpent handling and poison drinking that needs an explanation as much as the renegade churches' continuation of these practices. If there is a parallel renegade tradition, it is the practice of polygamy in defiance of the law and the Church of Latter-day Saints (Williamson & Hood, 2004b). However, while the Mormon tradition allows for continual revelations, the Pentecostal tradition and serpent-handling churches accept only the revelations contained in their sacred text. Hence much of the debate in Pentecostalism is over the textual justification for serpent handling.

THE PARADOX OF TEXTUAL JUSTIFICATION

It is well established that the major Pentecostal denominations sought to justify textually a particular expression of emotionality, glossolalia or “tongues speaking” (Conn, 1955; Frodsham, 1946; Hollenweger, 1972; Synan, 1971). The justification came from concerns about the wide range of emotionally expressed behaviors emerging in Pentecostalism. A psychiatrist who visited a contemporary serpent-handling service describes what historians have documented as characteristic of Pentecostal services before the routinization or regularization of worship as Pentecostal groups advanced to mainstream denominational status: “Their exaltation superficially resembles mania. At these times, they

shout, scream, cry, sing, jerk, jump, twitch, hoot, gesture, sway, swoon, tremble, strut, goose-step, stamp, and incoherently ‘speak in new tongues’” (Schwarz, 1960, p. 408).

To Schwarz’s list, historians of early Pentecostalism added such curious practices as crawling on hands and knees and barking like dogs to “tree the devil,” as Synan (1971) reported occurred at the 1801 Cane-Ridge revival. What is at issue here is the apparently limitless expression of spontaneous emotion under perceived possession by the Holy Ghost. As Wacker (2003) rightly notes, if Pentecostals sought a sense of empowerment by the Holy Ghost they balanced this with a pragmatic concern with worldly success. Pressure emerged for Pentecostalism to have a more decorous style of worship.

Emotionally spontaneous behaviors have always been a concern to the Pentecostal movement, especially among leaders who sought worldly success. Pentecostals began to search their Bibles for criteria that would indicate legitimate possession by the Holy Ghost. Clearly one factor in seeking textual justification for possession was to limit as much as justify emotional expression in worship (Creech, 1996; Synan, 1971). This has been the case especially in those segments of the Pentecostal movement whose appeal has been to the white middle class and who tried to distance themselves from aspects of rural lower-class white and African American spirituality. Creech (1996) notes that Charles Parham, leader of the Apostolic Faith Movement (which eventually joined with others to form the Assemblies of God) made his African American student, William J. Seymour, of later Azusa Street fame, sit outside his classroom. Parham also demanded restraint in worship, excluding from the legitimate expression of the Holy Ghost “all the chattering and jabbering, windsucking, and holy-dancing-rollerism” (Creech, 1996, p. 412).

Yet where there is justification for speaking in tongues there can be justification for handling serpents. The texts used to justify tongues speaking are crucial to the theological rift that emerged within Pentecostalism itself, eventually serving to separate out serpent-handling churches as renegade churches, usually with reference to their origins in the Church of God as it gradually moved toward rejecting the practice of serpent handling (but not tongues speaking, despite the linkage of both practices in Mark 16:17–18).

As Pentecostalism moved from Azusa Street in Los Angeles to the South and to the mountains of Appalachia, it found soil too fertile to restrict the imaginations of those fated to split from what would become the more mainstream Pentecostal denominations. Tongues

speaking came to be generally accepted as evidence of baptism of the Holy Ghost by most Pentecostal groups (as it is by serpent-handling churches today) in part because of its clear textual justification and also because it can be easily scripted and controlled in worship services. But it had already been practiced in the South as one of many unscripted and spontaneous indicators of Holy Ghost possession. Tongues speaking was not endorsed by all Pentecostal groups, and those groups that endorsed it did not demand that all believers experience it (see Wacker, 2003, chap. 2). However, members of Pentecostal groups that endorsed tongues speaking had significant social pressure to evidence their possession by the Holy Ghost in this way, even though as many as 50 percent of such Pentecostal churches did not then, and do not now, speak in tongues (see Poloma, 1989, 1998; Wacker, 2003, chap. 2). Similar social pressures exist in contemporary serpent-handling churches.

Parham's demand for scriptural justification of indicators of possession by the Holy Ghost was a two-edged sword. Scripture does not always justify tongues speaking in isolation. In Appalachia and the South generally, the totality of Scripture was recognized as authoritative and was well known to even the illiterate from a rich oral tradition. As noted above, in what was to become the foundational text for serpent handling churches, Mark 16:17–18, tongues speaking is but one of the five signs. Two others of the five, casting out demons and laying hands on the sick, were widely practiced and remain common in mainstream Pentecostal denominations and in serpent-handling churches today. However, taking up serpents, once endorsed by the Church of God and its sister church, the Church of God of Prophecy, is today the outsider's definitional criterion by which serpent-handling churches are perceived to be unique. It is the imperative command associated with taking up serpents and not the conditional one associated with drinking poison that has led the media to identify these obedient as *serpent-handling* churches. We have never heard or seen them identified as *poison-drinking* churches. However, in both academic and popular media accounts of serpent-handling churches, the handling of serpents is treated as a bizarre practice initiated by a deviant sectarian group within the Church of God, and it is abnormal enough to require an explanation for why it persists in Appalachia. The claims that serpent handling played only an insignificant role in the history of Pentecostalism and that serpent-handling churches cannot continue to survive ignore the long struggle within Pentecostalism over the issue of practices for which apparent textual justification is so troublesome to modernity (Frodsham, 1946).

Pentecostalism came into its own around the turn of the twentieth century (Synan, 1997). Holt (1940) has suggested that this brand of ecstatic religion achieved success in the first half of that century, particularly in the South, as a manifestation of nature's power to bring healing to those who had experienced psychological isolation and insecurity from the process of urbanization. As the farm population migrated to urban areas to find work, displacement from rural values, strict social controls, and a particular mode of existence—coupled with low income and social discrimination by the more established urban population—often led to psychological tension, cultural shock, and maladjustment. The rise of Holiness and Pentecostal churches was said to help migrants strike a psychological balance as they confronted the urban trends toward permissive social values combined with mainline religious tendencies toward liberalism, both of which conflicted with their more conservative values. Hence these new churches became both a successful buffer for the estranged and a manifest protest against modernist social and religious developments of the time (Synan, 1997).

During this period, the most successful Holiness and Pentecostal churches dominated the attention of social scientists, and the need to explore their less organized factions went largely unnoticed (Holt, 1940). Such investigations, Holt said, might reveal how the religious experience among these groups serves to provide meaning and a sense of hope in their confrontation with hostile environments. Yet he noted the difficulty of studying these less organized denominations:

It should be recognized that not all Holiness and Pentecostal religion is organized. Of all formalized types of denominational religion, it is closest to the unorganized waves of summer revivals which sweep the South when crops are “laid by,” leaving no permanent traces because the poor are too poor to build a church or meeting house. Research concerning unorganized Pentecostal and Holiness religion should be done as soon as possible. (Holt, 1940, p. 740)

Cobb (1965), twenty-five years later, and Hood (1998), almost five decades later, have observed that social scientists' neglect of fringe groups, such as serpent-handling churches, persists as the norm, thus leading to the notion that these groups are pathological (La Barre, 1962/1974, 1972) and to media reports that refer to their practices as a “bizarre” expression of faith (Birckhead, 1993, 1997). Even McCauley's (1995) wonderfully apologetic defense of Appalachian Mountain religion makes but the briefest mention of serpent-handling churches, not wanting to stereotype it, as the media have done.

Wacker’s (2003) justly praised history of the Pentecostal movement in America from 1900 to 1925 makes one mention of serpent handling (and in one sentence, on p. 74). This is despite Wacker’s interest in this period when serpent handling was gaining in strength and popularity, not only in Appalachia, but also as far away as Texas and some midwestern states, and was supported and practiced by the Church of God (and the Church of God of Prophecy) as indicative of the power of the Holy Ghost operating in and through believers. Handling serpents was clearly a legitimate sign for “them that believe” (Mark 16). It was never intended to be a test of faith or required for salvation (Hood, 1998). However, as controversy arose over the practice, A. J. Tomlinson (1922), the first General Overseer of the Church of God, plainly said, “I would hate to be in the shoes of some who are so bitter against taking up serpents” (p. 12).

As mainstream Pentecostalism moved into the middle class, however, studies that first pathologized these denominations (Cutten, 1927; La Barre, 1962/1974; Laffal, 1965; Stagg, Hinson, & Oates, 1967) soon gave way to studies that normalized and legitimized them (Coulson & Johnson, 1977; Hine, 1969; Kildahl, 1972; Malony & Lovekin, 1985; Poloma, 1989, 2003; Richardson, 1973; Samarín, 1972c; Smith & Fleck, 1981; Spanos & Hewitt, 1979). This transformation can be seen as stemming from two factors: the tendency of modern Pentecostal groups to distance themselves from intense emotional experiences at odds with the larger society (Holt, 1940; Hood, 1998; Poloma, 1989; Wacker, 2003); and the willingness of social scientists to take the religious experiences of these groups as a legitimate focus of study (Malony & Lovekin, 1985). With respect to the emotion issue, Poloma (1989, p. 247) has documented the “routinization of charisma” within the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal group that has never endorsed serpent handling. Wacker (2003, p. 167) notes the “pressure for regularization” across all Pentecostal groups, including those that initially endorsed serpent handling. For both Poloma and Wacker, routinization and regularization often centered on debates over tongues speaking, a phenomenon well studied by both psychologists and anthropologists (Malony & Lovekin, 1985; Goodman, 1972a, 1972b). However, one practice that cannot be easily routinized or regularized is serpent handling. How and when serpents are handled can be regulated; whether they will strike, bite, maim, or kill cannot. It is for this reason that Pentecostal groups that moved toward greater worldly success abandoned a practice that others, the contemporary serpent handlers of Appalachia, maintained.

Maguire (1981, p. 179), concerned with the legitimacy of Pentecostal experiences, has called for research into serpent-handling churches that uses descriptive methodologies that move beyond the sensationalized reports of earlier investigations. Birkhead (1997), an anthropologist, and Hood, Williamson, and Morris (2000), psychologists, have demonstrated not only that attitudes toward serpent-handling churches are rooted in prejudice, based on assumptions that religious rituals ought to be “safe,” but also that stereotypes held by most of society regarding serpent-handling churches are media supported. Even the research presented in this book continues the notion that Pentecostal experience—especially that associated with serpent handling—is worthy of scientific inquiry.

The template for serpent-handling worship described above is likely familiar to many Pentecostals. Serpent-handling services have their origins in the practices that were especially common in the first quarter century of Pentecostalism and that can still be detected in the routinized and regularized major Pentecostal denominations of today (Poloma, 1998; Wacker, 2003). What makes serpent-handling churches most identifiable is not simply that they handle serpents and drink poison, but that these practices were the first to be eliminated in Pentecostal groups that once endorsed them. As what were to become the major Pentecostal denominations routinized and regularized their worship, so too did they back away from rituals that could maim and kill. While it is far from the case that most Pentecostal groups handled serpents, those that did soon recognized that denominational success required the regulation of extreme emotional displays and the elimination of practices that jeopardize health and well-being. If modern Pentecostal groups no longer avoid medical care, serpent handlers must decide whether to seek medical care if bitten during a service. In other respects, serpent handlers are less unusual than one might imagine. Like Pentecostals across America, serpent-handling Pentecostals mirror their local culture. As Wacker (2003, chap. 12) notes of early Pentecostals, if they were distant from their Congregationalist and Episcopalian counterparts in affairs that define education, wealth, and class, they stood above the Southern Methodists and Baptists in their direct and immediate experience of God. So it is with serpent handlers. Some are fourth-generation handlers. Some are uneducated, while others have college or advanced degrees. Some are poor, while others have wealth to which few can realistically aspire. Then and now, they are less distant in belief, wealth, education, or other criteria by which we locate groups within the larger culture than the stereotype of the rural, uneducated Pentecostal suggests. One ought not confuse a chosen style of wor-

ship, typical to Pentecostals in general and serpent handlers in particular, as necessarily indicative of much more than that. The lack of a scripted order for the service, the dress of congregants, and the freestyle manner of participant worship contrast not only with other religious groups but also with much of what mainstream Pentecostalism has become today (Poloma, 1989). However, as we note in a variety of ways throughout this book, it is with serpents and with those who believe in taking them up that routinization and regularization perhaps reached an unexpected limit, so that in many respects contemporary serpent-handling churches still mirror Pentecostalism in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. To document the history of serpent handling, we must take seriously Holt's (1940) concern that the unorganized Pentecostal groups have yet to be studied and, we want to add, to have a fair hearing. However, a literature on serpent handling is emerging in which the voices of handlers can be heard. While throughout this text we cite all relevant literature on serpent handling, we want to pause here to note the few texts that try to understand rather than explain away this remarkable tradition.

Under the pressure of postmodern criticism, social scientists are looking at the voices that have been omitted from their discourse (Cahoone, 2003; Rosenau, 1992). With respect to Pentecostalism, otherwise excellent histories such as Wacker's (2003) will no longer be able to ignore voices that must be heard. Among the available texts is the oral history of Jimmy Morrow, pastor of a serpent-handling church in Del Rio, Tennessee, whose family has a long tradition in Appalachia (Hood, 2005). In addition, three major serpent-handling clans (a term that these families probably would not use but one that represents the firm family basis of serpent-handling churches) have had their personal histories told (Brown & McDonald, 2000). A good descriptive history and participant observation study of eastern Kentucky serpent handling, especially of the Saylor clan, has recently been reissued (Kimbrough, 2002). Schwartz (1999) has published a series of photographs of the Kentucky handlers, emphasizing the range of their humanity, not simply their practice of handling serpents. Finally, the widely publicized trial of Glen Summerford, who was convicted of trying to kill his wife by forcing her to be bitten by a serpent, has been brilliantly illuminated by Burton (2004); the story of Summerford's conviction and ninety-nine-year sentence (due to a “three strike” rule in Alabama) is told from the perspectives of believers within the serpent-handling community. Burton is also to be credited with one of the first serious works on serpent handling to be fair and balanced in an effort to present this tradition to the outsider (Burton,

1993).³ As one pastor of a serpent handling church in Georgia said, “If you do not believe in serpent handling, pray for those who do.”

We place the history of serpent handling where it belongs, as a vital part of the Pentecostal struggle to be successful *in* the world, yet not fully *of* the world. Wacker (2003) has suggested a useful way to conceptualize this dynamic by contrasting Pentecostalism’s pragmatism with its *primitiveness*. If the meaning of pragmatism is obvious to the reader, primitiveness is less likely to be. According to Wacker (2003, p. 12), *primitiveness* suggests that the believer’s longing is to be guided solely by God’s spirit, and it further denotes a return to foundational things—that is, it reflects a desire to return to first, or original, things. This desire creates what Hood (1995) identifies as foundational beliefs, which have been shown by Hood, Hill, and Williamson (2005) to characterize not only the Church of God and the Church of God Prophecy but also their bastard children who persist as the renegade Churches of God. We now turn to an exploration of this twisted history. It is a prologue to a more correct understanding of the serpent-handling churches and their more legitimate brothers who now do little more than scorn them as they deny their common ancestry.