THESE SIGNS SHALL FOLLOW:
ENDANGERED PENTECOSTAL PRACTICES IN APPALACHIA

A Thesis
by
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Submitted to the Graduate School
at Appalachian State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

August 2015
Center for Appalachian Studies

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Abstract

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This research explores the five signs practiced by Pentecostals that are listed in Mark 16 in the Bible. This research consists of four chapters and a short documentary. Pentecostal practices are becoming endangered in the region of Appalachia and this research analyzes both traditional and nontraditional Holiness churches. A brief history of Pentecostalism as well as an analysis of the five signs, and which churches practice them, is included in the first chapter. An ethnographic analysis of an Apostolic Church whose attendance is dwindling is the subject of the second chapter. The third chapter examines the religious rights of serpent handlers in Appalachia and argues that, with proper regulations, serpent handling should be legal. The Tabernacle Church of God in La Follette, Tennessee is the center for a strong serpent handling community whose Pastor utilizes and welcomes media to spread the Gospel of Mark 16. The short documentary explores the stereotypes that surround the serpent handling tradition and attempts to demystify the false perceptions.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my incredible thesis committee and wonderful friends for supporting me and encouraging me throughout this whole process. In addition, I would like to express my appreciation for the Center for Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University. To the Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ in Vilas, North Carolina, thank you for welcoming me into your congregation and showing me your ways. Thank you to The Tabernacle Church of God and Pastor Andrew Hamblin. I would like to thank Ralph Hood for being a tremendous resource for the past three years. Finally, I want to express my immense gratitude to Laura Ammon, without her constant support, this thesis would not be possible.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my wonderful parents who have supported me since day one. I love you both. “Always remember there was nothing worth sharing like the love that let us share our name.” –Avett

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Introduction

In May 2010 I had been working late in the Psychology building at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. I heard loud noises down the hall, which, at the time, I did not know was a video of a group of Pentecostals speaking in tongues. Dr. Ralph Hood was viewing footage he had taken during a serpent handling service. From this experience, I had many questions that I wanted to answer. I learned about the practice for three semesters while receiving my undergraduate degree in the Anthropology and Psychology. For the past two years I have been studying the practice on my own terms while receiving my Master's in Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University.

There are two questions that my research seeks to answer. Why do people practice this potentially life-threatening religion? Though, statistically, many people do not die from the practice, there is still a very real possibility of death from handling poisonous snakes and drinking poison. This research explores why people practice the 5 signs list in Mark 16. In addition, I ask if a person chooses to practice these signs, why should they have a right to do so? In other words, what are the state laws and which states have a compelling interest in the matter? My research argues that people choose to practice these signs and, with obvious safety precautions, should legally be able to do so. In addition, this practice is dwindling in the region of Appalachia, so I find it important to research these endangered indigenous practices.

Chapter 1: "Pentecostalism"

It is vital to understand Pentecostalism as a religion before focusing on just one of the practices within it. After attending serpent handling services and Pentecostal services, I

have gathered that all 5 signs are considered equally important to serpent handling Pentecostals. However, Pentecostals often view two of the signs to be metaphorical, referring to "They shall take up serpents" and "if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them." One of the issues about Pentecostal churches is outsiders sensationalize one sign, such as serpent handling or glossolalia. This is why it is vital to provide an overview of the history of how Pentecostalism came to be and how it has split into different sects over the past century.

Chapter 2: "Receiving the Holy Ghost: Personal Experiences in the Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ"

In chapter 2, I argue that the experience of speaking in tongues is extremely personal. This group believes in the Holy Ghost Baptism along with traditional values, resembling the earliest Pentecostals. In addition, I will discuss the fact that Pentecostalism is growing exponentially on a global scale, but in a small congregation in Western North Carolina, the tradition is dwindling.

Chapter 3: Exploring Religious Rights in the Serpent Handling Tradition

Serpent handling is illegal in every state except for West Virginia. It is my understanding that in order to handle a serpent or drink poison you must be 18 years old and you have the right to say no. Typically, it is strictly members of the congregation that engage in these activities. In other words, if it is legal for people to put themselves in certain life threatening situations as long as they are consenting adults, serpent handling should be included under this umbrella. In addition, it is strongly encouraged within these churches that if you do handle a serpent you must be of sound mind and you should believe

in the gospel of Mark 16. Serpent handling pastors would not allow just anybody to come in and handle a serpent.

Winnifred Sullivan argues in her book *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*, that, in today's society, complete freedom of religion is unattainable. Though her research is not in the realm of Pentecostalism, the argument can still be applied to serpent handling. In the 3rd chapter, I will argue that serpent handling is freedom of religion and though the practice may be declining, serpent handlers have a right to practice their faith.

Documentary and Chapter 4: Demystifying Stereotypes in the Serpent Handling Tradition

Appalachia is a region that is a victim of many stereotypes. One stereotypes is that everyone in Appalachia handles serpents. Obviously this is not true; in fact, serpent handling is quickly becoming obsolete. In addition, many people believe that serpent handling is the only activity that Appalachian Pentecostal churches engage in. This is also false; churches have several other practices that are considered equally important. Serpent handling is an endangered practice in Appalachia, but it is being sensationalized in the media, specifically on reality television and news outlets.

The documentary accompanying this thesis will exhibit the above argument. My film features two interviews. The first interview is with Pastor Andrew Hamblin, the pastor of the Tabernacle Church of God, a serpent handling church. Dr. Ralph Hood is also featured in this documentary as an expert on this sect of Pentecostalism. With the help of these two men and my own research, I will explore the media and the stereotypes it produces, and then demystify these perceptions.

The documentary accompanies Chapter 4, where I contend that while these stereotypes are important to discuss, it is also important to discuss the media impact on the serpent handling community. In addition, I will use the example of a specific serpent handling church in La Follette, TN. for the centerpiece of my reasoning for how this practice gives church members a sense of belonging.

Chapter 1

Pentecostalism

Pentecostalism is a relatively new sect that is extremely diverse and it is impossible to provide a sole definition. Deborah McCauley states in her book *Appalachian Mountain Religion,* "[The Holiness Church] has an almost complete absence of a clearly defined doctrinal tradition, making them amorphous, difficult to pin down and examine" (McCauley, 1995, p. 256). Holiness Churches are made up of many different sects and beliefs. The Holiness movement is a subset Pentecostalism (Hood & Williamson, 2008). This chapter will examine and define Pentecostals from a broad perspective and explore the specific practices within this denomination. However, this chapter will first outline the history of Pentecostalism.

The history of Pentecostalism is important to illustrate for a variety of reasons. Because this research explores both serpent handling and non serpent handling congregations it is vital to explain the difference between the two sects as well as when and why they split. In addition, the history of Pentecostalism will describe the reasoning behind this endangered Appalachian tradition as well as peak experiences practitioners report in these congregations. Glossolalia is practiced in both traditional and nontraditional Pentecostal congregations. Glossolalia occurs when a person speaks in an unknown language and is central to 'receiving the Holy Ghost.' It is distinct from xenolalia, which is an occurrence where a person speaks in a known language, such as Chinese, that the individual did not previous have knowledge of. Serpent handling is integral to certain

Pentecostal and Holiness groups in Appalachia, though it is not central to the larger global denomination. Serpent handling is an endangered tradition, surviving primarily in Appalachia.

Pentecostalism

There is a separation between "traditional" Pentecostalism and the "neo-Pentecostalism" movement, also known as the Charismatic movement (Anderson, 2004). Neo-Pentecostals are much less strict than traditional followers and have become more "mainstream," similar to the changes made by many other denominations after the Enlightenment (Anderson, 2004). The literature in this review focuses on the practices of traditional Pentecostalism as it pertains more to this research.

The Pentecostal faith is a Christian sect that began in Africa and expanded into Europe. During the nineteenth century revivals sprang up in Europe and eventually made their way to the United States (Anderson, 2004). In its infancy, the Holiness movement was known as The Apostolic Faith and a Pentecostal revival across the United States was beginning to occur in the early 1900s. This revival stressed "oneness, meaning there is only one God and that the Holy Ghost is God in the spirit and Jesus is God in the flesh. It is out of the council of Nicaea that the three became separate and known as the trinity, which many dominant denominations believe today" (Kay, 2011, pg 40). William Joseph Seymour is credited for sparking the most influential revival in the history of Pentecostalism (Espinosa, 2014). In the beginning of the 20th century, from Los Angeles to Houston, people began to spread the word of William Joseph Seymour's Apostolic doctrine.

Charles Parham is another extremely influential member of the Pentecostal movement. Parham was trained as a Methodist minister and began to use the verses in Acts

2:4 to teach people about the spirit baptism in 1901 (Hood & Williamson, 2008). Parham was a Methodist pastor in Kansas who was captivated by faith healing and the Holiness movement (Espinosa, 2014). Parham was physically handicapped until he was a young adult, but one day promised God he would devote his life to spreading the word if he was healed; God answered his prayer (Espinosa, 2014). Shortly after, Parham opened a "healing home" in Topeka, Kansas. "There, he propounded his views of healing in the atonement of Christ, premillenialism with the belief in a worldwide revival (the 'latter rain') to precede the imminent coming of Christ, and a third blessing beyond 'entire sanctification'" (Anderson, 2004, p. 34). In addition, Parham published a newspaper entitled *The Apostolic Faith* (Anderson, 2004). This publication is responsible for the spread of early Pentecostalism in the United States.

Parham's teachings were attracting a lot of local attention, but he wanted the movement to attract national and even global attention, so he began to spread the word to other locations (Anderson, 2004). After Parham spent several years of traveling and spreading the gospel, people became interested in this new faith. Parham is credited with the spread of the practices that are the basis of Pentecostalism, such as tongue speech and faith healing. Parham, along with his students, spread the word of Acts 2:4 and established a new form of baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of xenolalia or glossolalia (Espinosa, 2014). He began spreading this message in December 1900 and a month later on January 1st, 1901 the first recorded receiving of the Holy Ghost occurred (Hood & Williamson, 2008). The woman who received the Holy Ghost and experienced glossolalia on this day was Agnes N. Ozman, a student of Parham (Espinosa, 2014). According to Anderson (2004), "By 1905, Parham was at the height of his influence, and

several thousand people were said to have received Spirit baptism in this new movement known as the 'Apostolic Faith' (Anderson, 2004, p. 34). Parham no longer considered himself a Methodist; he had created a new doctrine and, therefore, a new sect of Christianity. "Thousands converted to his Apostolic Faith Movement. A new Christian denomination was born" (Espinosa, 2014, p. 46).

The Book of Acts is extremely important to Pentecostals. "Before leaving on a three-day preaching trip, Parham gave the students the assignment to discover in the Book of Acts 'some evidence' of the Baptism with the Spirit" (Anderson, 2004). Upon his return, Parham's students informed him that they believed tongue speech was evidence of the Spirit Baptism. Followers of the faith believe that the Day of Pentecost, mentioned in the Bible, is the first Pentecost and there is another soon to come:

> And when the day of Pentecost was full come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak with utter tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:1-2:4)

On this day, followers received the Holy Ghost and they were told that this Pentecost would occur again and any follower of God would be saved. "And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh" (Acts 2:17). According to the Pentecostal creed, the book of Acts indicates that events in the days leading up to the second coming of Christ will be similar to the events that took place on the first day of Pentecost. Furthermore, Pentecostals model themselves after the attendees of Pentecost and

believe those who do not do the same will not be saved and God will not take them with him to Heaven. The split between 'non-believers' and Pentecostals happened on this day described in the book of Acts; even at the time many people believed that the tongue speech they witnessed on this day was because, "these men are full of new wine" (Acts 2:13), suggesting that the Apostles were drunk. This occurrence is a cornerstone of Pentecostal belief.

This incident in the book of Acts can be described as an altered state of consciousness. People in a trance state are sometimes mistaken as intoxicated by onlookers. Trance states, or altered states of consciousness, have been practice for hundreds of years in several different cultures and faiths. Barbara Ehrenreich describes this history of wariness and judgment from outsiders in her book *Dancing in the Streets*. "People caught up in trance might speak in a strange voice or language, display a marked indifference to pain…see visions, believe themselves to be possessed by a spirit or deity, and ultimately collapse" (Ehrenreich, 2006, p. 5) The actions described in this excerpt occur quite often in Holiness Churches that I have personally witnessed and my interpretation of trance states is explained in Chapter 2.

Pentecostals believe that God has lead them to this faith and that their actions and way of life are all for Him and his return to earth which, they believe, will happen on a day soon to come. "A person's life on earth is mainly a testing ground for either heaven or hell. For many the purpose of being alive is to serve and honor God "(Abell, 1982, p. 3). Believers live their life and make each decision with the intention of going to heaven.

In 1901 Parham's son died just before his first birthday, and the "father" of the Pentecostal revival then began to spiral downward and lost control of the movement. The

former Methodist pastor was arrested and convicted for homosexuality and many of his followers lost faith in him though the movement continued. Regardless of his legal and leadership difficulties, Parham was extremely influential, Anderson continues:

> But there can be no doubt that it was probably Parham more than any other person who was responsible for the theological shift in emphasis to glossolalia as the 'evidence' of the Spirit baptism in early North American Pentecostalism. (Anderson, 2004, p. 35)

Another student of Parham was William Joseph Seymour, an African-American man who was responsible for one of the largest revivals and spread of Pentecostalism in the United States. The Azusa Street Revival in 1906 is the most well known Holiness revival and the most influential. Seymour was extremely interested in Parham's teachings, but was limited in his ability to attend many of Parham's sermons, because of the color of his skin (Hood & Williamson, 2008). At first, Parham welcomed Seymour to attend his services, often giving him a seat to listen outside of the room where he was lecturing. Parham became more and more bitter after his own success began to decline. He became increasingly racist and began to speak to members of the Ku Klux Klan, and this was the basis for the split between Parham and Seymour. Parham's former student decided to start a movement of his own. Seymour began a church located on Azusa Street in Los Angeles, California.

Out of the revival of 1906, started by Seymour, the Apostolic Faith Mission was born. Because Seymour was African-American, he received a lot of criticism from outsiders, but nonetheless black and white followers alike began to follow this faith. This is a truly unique part of the origins of this tradition; the mixed-race element is significant and

continues to be important to Pentecostals. From 1906-1909 this revival served as the center of the Pentecostal movement. Anderson writes:

> Seymour's periodical *The Apostolic Faith* reached an international circulation of 50,000 at its peak in 1908…. at least twenty-six different denominations trace their Pentecostal origins to Azusa Street…. Pentecostal missionaries were sent out all over the world from Azusa Street…. reaching over twenty-five nations in two years. (Anderson, 2004, p. 40-42)

The Azusa Street Revival was the most influential revival in the history of the Holiness movement and without a doubt is responsible for the spread of Holiness (Anderson, 2004). This Revival is known was the "second" Pentecost because of its major influence on Pentecostalism (Hood & Williamson, 2008). The Azusa Street Revival was similar those in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in the early nineteenth century, which were also extremely influential in spreading Pentecostalism in Appalachia. While Pentecostalism was beginning to gain followers on the west coast, the tradition was already well underway in the Appalachia.

The Church of God, now located in Cleveland, Tennessee, was, at first, independent from the Azusa Street Revival. It began in 1886 and during that time had several small congregations scattered in the mountains in Southern Appalachia. As the Azusa Street Revival gained more and more attention, several pastors who were associated with the Church of God traveled to Los Angeles to observe this new sect called Pentecostalism. Upon their return to Appalachia, the word began to spread about the "Holy Ghost Baptism," and soon the Church of God became a Holiness sect. The most significant Church of God

revival in Appalachia was in Camp Creek, North Carolina in 1896 (Hood & Williamson, 2008).

A.J. Tomlinson was the preacher at The Holiness Church at Camp Creek. The Holiness church began to grow and spread throughout North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia. All of the smaller congregations began to meet in General Assemblies. After the church began to grow, Tomlinson moved the church from the mountains of North Carolina to the town of Cleveland, Tennessee. Tomlinson believed this would be a more accessible, centralized location (Hood & Williamson, 2008). The Church of God became the official name of the group in 1907. After the Azusa Street Revival, the Church of God began to embrace the receiving of the Holy Ghost.

In January of 1908, Tomlinson received the Holy Ghost with the evidence of tongues (Hood & Williamson, 2008). This was a major event, because it changed the Church of God's doctrine. After this event, Holy Ghost Baptism was preached extensively in the Church of God. The Church of God officially adopted this type of baptism at its 6th assembly in 1911.

As spirit baptism was making its way into the Appalachian mountains in the early 1900s, so was serpent handling as a religious practice. It is important to note that "…discussions and witnessing of handling [serpents] occurred across the Appalachians and Ozarks, areas where serpents were plentiful and where serpent handling was part of folk practice long before the emergence of Pentecostalism" (Anderson in Hood & Williamson, 2008). It is possible that serpent handling was part of religion in Appalachia before the Pentecostal movement in Appalachia adopted it as part of its practice.

George Went Hensley, of Grasshopper Valley, Tennessee, is credited for the spread of serpent handling. This is because he is the first known person to preach the practice within the Church of God. In addition, Hensley's biggest addition to the doctrine is linking glossolalia to serpent handling, "thus giving biblical justification for both as legitimate *religious* ritual" (Hood & Williamson, 2008). Hensley left the Church of God to form a church that practiced all five signs, calling it the Church of God with Signs Following. He preached all over the region of Appalachia, including small communities to larger cities such as Knoxville or Chattanooga. There is much dispute about how much influence Hensley actually had. Many religious scholars believe that Hensley may have discovered serpent handling from another source, instead of his story. Hensley claimed that God spoke to him and recited Mark 16 to him, instructing him to engage in the five signs (Hood & Williamson, 2008). Although Hensley was extremely influential in the spread of the practice, it is highly unlikely that he is the sole reason for the tradition. "Even in the Appalachian Mountains it is likely that serpent handling had several independent origins" (Hood & Williamson, 2008). The two authors claim that this is a situation similar to the spread of spiritual baptism explaining that, "the issue was one of denomination endorsement or rejection of the practice, not whether it existed in various subcultures as an established folk practice" (Hood & Williamson, 2008). Furthermore, the history of serpent handling has depended on media for facts meaning that the more popular, widespread teachings were better documented. As the practice became more prevalent within the region, the media began reporting on charismatic preachers, and George Went Hensley was one of them (Hood & Williamson, 2008).

During the years of 1912 to 1914, the Church of God became interested in the practice of serpent handling. Tomlinson allowed Hensley to preach Mark 16 at the General Assembly of the Church of God. In the years following, revivals were held all over the south, including larger cities, such as Chattanooga, Tennessee. Serpent handling began to spread rapidly from 1915-1921.

1922 marked an important event in the history of serpent handling churches. In 1922, Jim W. Reece was the first recorded death from a serpent handling bite. He was bit in a church and passed away in Alabama. Not many details are known about Reece's death, but it is known that many people started to become skeptical during this time (Hood & Williamson, 2008). This event established that serpent handling could mean death and this caused some people to reject Hensley's doctrine. During that same year, Hensley resigned from the Church of God for personal issues with his family and lifestyle, including three divorces and suspicions of domestic abuse. He later preached sporadically in different churches throughout his life.

In the 1940s, the Church of God began to reject the practice and even denied any history of supporting it. However, research by Hood and Williamson (2008) supports the fact that the Church of God did in fact endorse the practice:

> The leadership of the Church of God of the Prophecy strongly endorsed and defended the handling of serpents as a legitimate sign among its members well into the 1940s and even beyond. (Hood & Williamson, 2008)

In present day, serpent handling churches are completely separate from the Church of God. "With signs following" Churches practice the full gospel of all five signs listed in Mark 16 and are not supported by the Church of God. They are independent, but typically have an

extremely similar doctrine to other Holiness Churches that are supported by the Church of God.

Today, Pentecostalism is widespread and can be found in almost every country in the world:

> The Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in all their multifaceted variety constitute the fastest growing group of churches within Christianity today. According to some often-quoted estimates there are over five hundred million adherents. (Anderson, 2004, p. 1)

Pentecostals are most commonly oneness churches, meaning they believe in a sole God that has always been and always will be. Jesus Christ is the flesh of God who had a beginning and end on Earth and the Holy Ghost is the spirit of God. Pentecostals believe in 'spiritual gifts' and the most notable gift is receiving the Holy Ghost, or the Spirit Baptism. To receive the Holy Ghost with the evidence of tongues is the start of a new life for followers; it is the moment they are reborn. Glossolalia is not the only evidence that one has received the Holy Ghost, but it is the first and most crucial.

Pentecostals in Appalachia

It is unclear exactly when the Holiness-Pentecostal movement made its way into Appalachia. There are many theories, but it most likely stemmed from the various revivals that came out of the Azusa Street revival. Many of the beliefs and practices may have already been occurring in the region, but the revival and the introduction of Pentecostalism solidified the basis of the faith in Appalachia. McCauley states, "To what extent and in what ways mountain religion influenced, directly and indirectly, through its oral and material culture the Holiness-Pentecostal movements…remains a question mark"

(McCauley, 1995, p. 262). Appalachian Holiness is unique in that it is a sect within a region that has its own indigenous beliefs and practices, but it is also a part of the Global Pentecostal doctrine and movement.

The main religious denominations in Appalachia include: Southern Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Holiness. The Church of God based in Cleveland, Tennessee was the second largest Pentecostal denomination in the South during the mid 1990s (McCauley, 1995, p. 276). Though this sect is no longer ranked as high as it was, it still has over 1 million adherents today (ARDA). This Church was assembled in the early 1950s from several smaller congregations that were spread throughout the Southern Appalachian Mountains in Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia. They decided to form a Church outside the mountains and in a valley in East Tennessee:

> The symbolic import of moving the Church of God out of the mountains of Appalachia into a valley town and developing it into a large, international denomination from its roots in a tiny handful of independent Holiness churches should not be lost. (McCauley, 1995, p. 277)

This occurrence is extremely important in the history of Pentecostalism in Appalachia, because it is responsible for the expansion of Holiness within the region. Integral to this movement was A.J. Tomlinson who was an important figure in the spread of Pentecostalism, and if it had not been for him, "the Church of God would never have left the mountains nor would it have developed as it did" (McCauley, 1995, p. 277). His influence was widespread, as is evident from this short overview.

There are many different sects of Holiness churches in Appalachia with various names that include terms such as Pentecostal, Holiness, Church of God/ Jesus Christ, and

Apostolic. However, they all believe in the same core ideas of the faith and it is perhaps due to the ruralness in the region that these churches have remained independent of any denomination. On the other hand, there are a few Holiness churches within the region that are in contact with one another and they are referred to as "sister" churches. Sister Churches often attend one another's services once a month and aid one another in membership attendance, finances, and other needs.

Practices in Appalachian Holiness Churches

The literature on the religious practices of Pentecostalism tends to be specific to a particular practice, such as faith healing or glossolalia. There are several practices within the Holiness denomination, and some of the most important are the signs, which are listed in the Bible. There are five signs that a Pentecostal must engage in to show their faith, though only three tend to be regularly practiced. Pentecostals point to Mark 16 for the statement of the five signs of faith:

> He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. 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.

It is important to note that while there are a number of churches that practice the two other signs mentioned in Mark 16, which are "taking up serpents" and drinking "deadly things," these two customs are less often practiced and considered metaphorical in most Holiness churches. These two signs are Appalachian specific and they are under continual pressure to change as other Pentecostal and holiness movements reject these practices.

According to Abell (1982) three of the practices are usually exercised during each service in an Appalachian Holiness Church that is non-serpent handling. Thus in the typical service in a Southern Appalachian Holiness Church, the order of events is as follows:

> –opening prayer –singing –prayer requests –prayer time for the sick and laying on of the hands –collection tithes and offerings –announcements –special music –sermon –altar service –testimony time –closing prayer. (Abell, 1982, p. 124)

During prayer and song, glossolalia frequently occurs. It is also during prayer that a follower must repent their sins. The practices listed are essential to followers of Pentecostalism in Southern Appalachia. Testimonies are important, which is when a member expresses a story that praises God and serves as proof of His existence and presence in everyday life. In addition, it is critical that the members constantly repent for their sins and if they do not they will not be saved or healed. Prayer is an integral part of most faiths and it is also critical in Pentecostalism. Furthermore, the members must not only ask things of God, they must praise God and thank Him for everything that He does.

There are two forms of baptism in this sect, the physical baptism in water and the spiritual baptism, taken from Mark 1:8, "I indeed have baptized you with water, but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost" (KJV). The Baptism of the Spirit, in the eyes of a Pentecostal, is the greatest gift that one can receive. In order for a member to experience the Holy Ghost it is crucial for them to repent their sins, this is the first step. In addition, a follower must praise God and stay true to the word of the Lord. The process of receiving the Holy Ghost is not considered final until one engages in glossolalia and has repented all

of their sins, as is stated in Mark 16:17 “these signs shall follow them that believe.” In addition, faith healing is a major component in the tradition and a believer must assist other members in healing the sick as well as allowing themselves to be faith healed. On the other hand, these congregations do not believe that serpent handling and drinking poison are things that member should engage in. Most congregations believe that these two signs merely indicate that God will protect the follower if they drink poison or encounter a serpent.

“Speaking in tongues,” scientifically known as glossolalia, and within the Holiness tradition this experience is evidence that one has received the Holy Ghost or the Baptism of the Spirit. However, this is not the only time that one speaks in tongues, throughout these services members engage in glossolalia, usually during prayer and song. It is a way of receiving communication from God; a believer is a portal for God to audibly speak through. Abell quotes Frank Harper, “It’s just God taking ahold of your vocal chords and your intellectual mind” (1982, pg. 134). Another Pentecostal, Richard Stacks, from Abell’s study states, “The Holy Ghost wants you to say words you don’t know about” (Abell, 1982, pg. 134).

Glossolalia is a phenomenon that interests both religious scholars and scientists. It is extremely controversial in part because it is a difficult concept to grasp and to explain. T.M. Luhrmann (2012) broadly explains glossolalia as,

> a flow of speechlike utterances that sound more or less as if someone is speaking in a language you do not understand. It is a skill—people talk about learning to speak in tongues and teaching others to speak in tongues—but it also has an uncontrolled dissociative quality.

It is important here that Luhrmann states that speaking in tongues is considered learned as well as uncontrollable, because the experience is described as both by glossolaliacs. Most often, God can only understand the language of tongue speech, according to followers. A member is in a trance state when experiencing glossolalia, members call this "being slain in the spirit." It has been proven in multiple studies that people are in some altered state of consciousness when speaking in tongues. "Indeed, contemporary brain-imaging studies find that those who speak in tongues have less conscious control than when they sing" (Luhrmann, 2012). However, there is occasionally a church member with that claims to have the spiritual gift of understanding tongues (Luhrmann, 2012). To be clear, however, "speaking in tongues" is not a developed language that is used to communicate outside of a trance state during worship. On the other hand, there are incidents where xenolalia occurs, meaning that a person does speak a known language, such as Chinese, without having any prior knowledge of speaking the language (Espinosa, 2014). For the purposes of this research, I will only be referring to glossolalia.

In addition, Pentecostals believe that healing by way of prayer is vital for a person's health. James 5:15 is an important verse to followers as it explains faith healing. "Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord" (KJV). Faith healing, or laying on of the hands, is a common occurrence in almost every service at a Holiness church. This is a process that involves the pastors and other members to literally lay hands on the sick, rubbing oil on their forehead, and praying for the ailing member to heal; "they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover" (Mark 16:18). This is a ritual that has occurred for decades and is still prevalent in present day Appalachian Holiness congregations.

Serpent Handling

To understand the discussion of stereotypes of this practice, we must first understand what exactly the tradition is and its origins. Serpent handling is but one practice that members of the Holiness faith engage in. In fact, many members in Holiness churches never handle a serpent or consume poison. For this branch of the Holiness tradition, each of the five signs are considered equally important and members believe that one cannot be practiced without the others. There are five signs that are followed in serpent handling Holiness churches. The five signs are stated in Mark 16:17-18:

> And these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name **they shall 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.

The first sign, "cast out devils," most often refers to some sort of exorcism. This can be as simple as encouraging followers to repent their sins in order to have a "pure" spirit (Hood & Williamson, 2008). On the other hand, it can be a more intense ritual, such as holding a full on exorcism. This situation may require the preacher to throw holy water on the individual with an "unclean spirit" and the congregation would pray and engage in glossolalia until the "devil was rebuked" (Hood & Williamson, 2008).

To "lay hands on the sick," otherwise known as faith healing often coincides with "casting out devils" (Hood & Williamson, 2008). The two are usually done simultaneously or close together during a worship service. In the simplest terms, "laying hands on the sick" or "faith healing" is to use prayer instead of medicine in order to cure an individual's ailment(s) (Hood & Williamson, 2008). During this time, members share their sickness

with the congregation and members literally lay hands on the ill and pray, sometimes in tongues, for their health (Abell, 1982).

"Speak with new tongues" tell believers that they shall engage in glossolalia, the scientific name for 'speaking in tongues' (Hood & Williamson, 2008). This can occur at any time during a worship service, usually during prayer or song. However, it is considered abnormal for glossolalia to occur if an individual is not in a trance state, or as followers say, "slain in the spirit" (Hood & Williamson, 2008).

"They shall take up serpents," which handling churches take quite literally, simply advises followers to handle poisonous snakes. "With signs following" congregations believe that the word *shall* in the scripture legitimizes the act as a command (Hood & Williamson, 2008). On the other hand, most Pentecostal churches believe this to be metaphorical or perceive it as if they were to encounter a serpent, it would not harm them (Hood & Williamson, 2008).

The last sign notifies that if one "drinks any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them," and during many serpent handling services members and pastors alike pass around poison and voluntarily drink it; the most popular choice is strychnine. This practice is, generally speaking, only practiced in "with signs following" congregations. Non-serpent handling churches do not engage in this practice and, again, believe that this sign means that *if* they consume poison, it will not harm them.

Most Holiness churches do not engage in serpent handling or drinking poison and stick to the other three signs, considering the other two to be metaphorical (Hood & Williamson, 2008). The Church of God does not endorse serpent handling anymore (Hood

& Williamson, 2008). Hood and Williamson suggest that there are a little more than 100 serpent-handling churches in the region of Appalachia today.

It is a small tradition, continually under scrutiny in an economically strained and changing area. In addition, it is endangered; this is a minority practice within a global denomination but in the region of Appalachia it is not growing. Pentecostalism is rising in other areas of the world, especially in Latin communities, though serpent handling does not seem to be a significant part of these growing church groups (Anderson, Bergunder, Droogers, & Van der Laan, 2010). However, Holiness churches are stagnant in attendance in Appalachia, and serpent handling churches are possibly even fewer in numbers (Hood & Williamson, 2008).

Churches that handle serpents are more difficult to have an exact count of, due to several factors. Many congregations are very small in numbers and because of this, people are unaware of their existence. In addition, many congregations meet in various types of dwellings, such as trailers or abandoned gas stations and therefore it is unknown where and if there is an actual church (Hood & Williamson, 2008). The last, and perhaps most relevant factor is, as Hood and Williamson describe: "given that the legal actions taken against this tradition, churches do not 'announce" their presence. Handlers learn by word of mouth of another church. By the time some people learn of the new church it is gone because of the inability to attract support from the community or other believers" (Hood & Williamson, 2008). Serpent handling churches are in Appalachia, though it is certainly not out of the question that they could exist in other places, but they are most documented and well known in this region (Hood & Williamson, 2008).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined Pentecostals from a broad perspective and explored their specific denominational practices. I have shown that serpent handling is essential to various Appalachian Pentecostal communities. Serpent handling is a threatened practice that is subsisting primarily in the region of Appalachia.

Chapter 2

Receiving the Holy Ghost:

Personal Experiences in the Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ

This chapter will discuss the Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, a small church located in Vilas, North Carolina. Though this congregation does not handle serpents, it is a Holiness Church that practices glossolalia, faith healing, and repentance of sins, which are three practices listed in Mark 16. This research supports my overall argument that the Appalachian practices in the Pentecostal faith are endangered. In addition, this particular chapter discusses the stagnant growth of a small Apostolic church located in western North Carolina.

Pentecostalism is a denomination that is growing rapidly on the global stage, though the branches that handle serpents are smaller and not necessarily connected to the larger global movement. Groups that speak in tongues are, as a general rule, part of this growing global group of Pentecostals. However, there are exceptions to this rule. Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori discuss the exceptions in their book *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement.* It is true that Pentecostalism is the fastest growing denomination in the world. However, Miller and Yamamori argue, Pentecostalism encompasses a plethora of strains and not all branches are exponentially growing (Miller & Yamamori 2007). The two authors claim that there is one division that is growing the most, a movement they call Progressive Pentecostalism (Miller & Yamamori 2007). Miller and

Yamamori describe the movement as follows: “we define Progressive Pentecostals as Christians who claim to be inspired by the Holy Spirit and the life of Jesus and seek to holistically address the spiritual, physical, and social needs of people in their community” (Miller & Yamamori, 2007, p. 2). In my opinion, this very broad definition can technically encompass all Holiness congregations. However, there is much more depth and specifics to the doctrines of, for example, smaller, more “traditional” churches such as the Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ in Vilas, North Carolina. In any case, Yamamori and Miller make an excellent point that the Progressive Pentecostal movement has a broader, more accessible or attractive doctrines as opposed to churches with stricter, less flexible rules. The Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ is not part of the kind of Pentecostal churches Miller and Yamamori describe, as it remains more insular and does not reach out to the broader community of Vilas.

Many scholars have misunderstood the Pentecostal denomination and this chapter will address some of these misunderstandings. Often, Holiness congregations have many rigorous requirements such as a strict dress code, refrainment of alcohol and tobacco use, and other rigid codes (Kay, 2011). This contradicts many people’s way of life and/or convictions. However, the Holiness doctrine encourages the belief that members should live and believe as the Apostles did two thousand years ago. On the other hand, it is important to note that some Holiness churches are stricter in their doctrine than others, many are much less stringent in their teachings.

Many Pentecostal practices are not found in other branches of world Christianity and therefore are not accepted. These practices are often sensationalized and misrepresented in the media and therefore taints the view of the public. There is not one certain practice

that is exercised in all Holiness churches, but various practices that are exercised collectively. The media often overemphasizes practices such as glossolalia and serpent handling and scholarly research is often guilty of doing the same. In other words, there are several practices and beliefs that are emphasized in Pentecostal churches, but the literature often does not support this fact.

Much of the literature that exists on Pentecostalism and its practices is negative, subjective and often offensive. Two examples are Nathan Gerrard and John Donald Castelein, both were scholars in the 1980s and though they are outdated their claims are still relative in present day. Gerrard has an uninformed view of the region of Appalachia, including the infamous stereotypical labels such as "ignorant" and "impoverished." Castelein, on the other hand, argues that Charismatics do not necessarily belong to a certain economic or social class but "suffer from narcissistic disorders" (Castelein, 1984). Other scholars have challenged this perspective such as Howard Dorgan, Wade Horton, and Troy Abell.

There is a lack of research that investigates these Pentecostal practices as a whole and really delves into the meaning of them for Appalachian congregations. My research will provide an emic perspective of this sect and the practices exercised within it. In addition, this exploration will give the members a voice, a chance for people who actually engage in these practices to explain the meaning of them. I am arguing that all of the signs are considered equally important within Appalachian Pentecostal Churches and some of these practices are endangered as Pentecostalism grows and expands globally. Using an example of a church that engages in glossolalia as well as other signs in Mark 16 is vital to show that these signs may be interpreted differently, but they are still recognized. In

addition, this chapter is relevant as I compare a serpent handling Pentecostal church to a non serpent handling Pentecostal church in order to have a more in depth discussion of the various practices.

Pentecostalism: The two perspectives in research

Many mainstream Christians, as well as others outside of Pentecostalism, believe that these practices are not natural and do not abide by the rules of Christianity. When Pentecostalism first began to spread, many Christian Churches rejected the movement simply because they did not want to lose followers (Kay 2011). Because of this, many non-Holiness churches would "demonize" Pentecostalism in order to deter those interested in the new movement. "In many cases, the established churches presented themselves as the rule, the Pentecostal churches being deviations" (Anderson et al., 2010) In addition, the "spiritual gifts," such as glossolalia and the overall ecstatic worship style of this movement was deemed too unique by many (Kay, 2011).

There is much debate on glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, and what exactly the phenomenon is. Some believe that people who speak in tongues are speaking an actual language that, prior to the trance state, did not previously know (Luhrmann, 2012). Others argue that anybody can speak in tongues by mimicking or making up words to sound like an exotic language. T.M. Luhrmann is the author of *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship With God,* where she explores the different arguments and explanations of serpent handling. However, she argues, "But language or not, the person who speaks in tongues often feels great: refreshed, buoyant, and alive" (Luhrmann, 2012).

Allan Anderson, a former Pentecostal preacher, is the author of *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity;* he explains the history of the movement as well as the current spread of, what Anderson calls, the "non-western nature of Pentecostalism." Though the Holiness tradition is relatively new, some of the practices are thousands of years old. However, people in other religions and traditions have always criticized the "charismatic gifts," or the signs exhibited by followers such as glossolalia. As early as 1000 AD the Catholic Church considered these practices to be signs of possession and people who demonstrated them should be exorcized. To many in the outside world these "gifts were now seen as signs of the demonic in the official church" (Anderson, 2004, p 22). The practice of speaking in tongues is perhaps the most controversial and is, for the most part, unique to the Holiness denomination. In addition, many outsiders who believe solely in modern Western Medicine do not consider faith healing as a legitimate method for healing the sick. Though many Pentecostal followers do believe in some kind of Western Medicine, their primary way of curing is through faith healing (Anderson, 2004).

There are two perspectives in scholarly research: one, which strives for an objective account of Pentecostal practice, and the other, which has a negative, judgmental outlook. I will discuss the latter first. In *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research on Glossolalia* Dr. Nathan L. Gerrard (1986), a former anthropology professor, argues that members of Holiness churches are hopeless and uneducated. In other words, Gerrard argues that people who grow up in this tradition and in the region of Appalachia have no chance of changing their lifestyles for the better. In his article entitled "The Serpent-Handling Religions of West Virginia" Gerrard speculates and makes many assumptions about the people who engage in the practice such as they do not plan for their future and they are

"hopeless."(Gerrard, 1968). Gerrard continues, "…with their poor educations and poor hopes of finding sound jobs, its promise of holiness is on of the few meaningful goals in a future dominated by the apparent inevitability of lifelong poverty and idleness" (Gerrard, 1968). Gerrard is extremely condescending throughout this work and refers to Appalachian Pentecostals as "contemporary primitives" and "ignorant Holy Rollers" in his chapter "The Holiness Movement in Southern Appalachia." Gerrard's work focuses on the wealth disparity on Appalachia and divides the lifestyles into two offensive titles. "the upwardly mobile poor" and "the stationary poor."

Sean McCloud has a slightly different approach in his article "The Ghost of Marx and the stench of Deprivation: Cutting the ties that bind tin the Study of Religion and Class." McCloud argues that class is a major influence on where a person decides to worship (McCloud & Mirola, 2009). However, he argues, there are several other factors that have to be taken into account as well. McCloud recounts research he conducted about two Pentecostal churches located in the same town. One church, he calls "Holiness Road," has static growth and is low in attendance. In addition, this church was extremely strict in keeping in line with holiness codes as well as extremely "ecstatic in worship style" (McCloud & Mirola, 2009). The other church, "Brown Hill," was quite the opposite of "Holiness Road," as the church was less restrictive in keeping the holiness codes, especially in regards to dress and behavior. In addition, "Brown Hill" had a steady attendance and growth and the members were much less lively in regards to their worship as practices such as glossolalia were not widely encouraged. Though the two congregations were vastly different from one another, they both had members of the same economic and social

background: middle class. This study claims the attendance differentiation has to do with the encouragement, or lack there of, of holiness codes (McCloud & Mirola, 2009).

John Donald Castelein (1984) is the author of "Glossolalia and the Psychology of the Self and Narcissism" in the *Journal of Religion and Health.* This article, like Gerrard's work, also has a negative approach in regards to Pentecostal practices. He suggests that glossolalia is a voluntary, narcissistic practice, which is in complete opposition to other literature and the views of Pentecostals. Castelein does, however, argue that anybody can speak in tongues, regardless of race, education, social class, or religion. He bases much of this on his own experiences with glossolalia, claiming that he himself spoke in tongues everyday for a year (Castelein, 1984). Castelein argues that Charismatics only feel whole when they achieve glossolalia, and they yearn so much to speak in tongues that they eventually learn to mimic the act and can perform it on call (Castelein, 1984). From my own research as well as reading numerous other accounts, this is not a widely circulated view on glossolalia, speaking in tongues is not considered a voluntary act, but an occurrence of being "slain in the spirit."

Howard Dorgan (2004) investigates negative literature such as this and calls Gerrard's work "offensive." Dorgan explains that judgmental and objective works like these are responsible for many people misunderstanding this tradition. "Unfortunately, much of the outside world took Gerrard's indictments as the general rule for Appalachian religious cultures" (Dorgan, 2004, pg. 185).

Fortunately, there is literature that exists with a more objective, emic perspective of Pentecostals and their practices. Wade H. Horton (1966) is the general editor of *The Glossolalia Phenomenon*, which is a much more thorough, beneficial source for the practice

of speaking in tongues. Horton thoroughly investigates the practice and it is obvious that he respects the people who engage in glossolalia. In reference to contradictory works Horton writes, "Most of them are uncertain and immature voices, and they often do more clouding than clearing the issues on glossolalia" (Horton, 1966, pg. 14). The author goes on to say that his work's aim is to shed light on the practice and attempt to explain from the perspective of Pentecostals. In addition, Troy D. Abell (1982) writes a detailed, authentic book entitled *Better Felt Than Said*. This book is almost completely filled with interviews, in which members Holiness churches in Southern Appalachia describe their beliefs and practices. Interview based approach to research is an effective method as it provides valuable insights.

My research builds on McLoud, Horton, and Abell and strives to represent the people of this movement accurately. The purpose of my research is to give Pentecostal followers a voice and to accurately represent their thoughts. I do realize, however, it is difficult to flawlessly represent another person's experience, especially given the fact that I am outside of this tradition. However, this research admits this implication, and strives not to replicate the mistakes of other research. This research adds to the literature because it strives for accurate portrayal and unbiased accounts of the members in the Pentecostal faith.

Methodology

The purpose of my research is to investigate the significance of religious rituals practiced within the Pentecostal church and will pose the question: What is the meaning of religious practices to the members in the Pentecostal Church? The significance of this research is to accurately portray and explain the importance of these practices for insiders in

order to promote a better understanding of those practices for outsiders. In order to accomplish this goal my research has utilized participant observation and interviews.

This research will add to the existing literature, because it will take a new, more updated approach. There are only a few adequate sources that exist and most of them are dated. My research has been conducted in a present day congregation and will provide a 21st century perspective on religious practices in the Pentecostal Church. Furthermore, I will focus on the meaning of these rituals for outsiders and present the viewpoints of the people who directly experience them, contributing to contemporary literature on Global Pentecostalism with a local emphasis on Appalachia.

There are several sources about the growth of Global Pentecostalism, many with an emphasis on the signs, especially glossolalia, including Miller and Yamamori's work as well as T.M. Luhrmann's *When God Talks Back*. However, there are few contemporary works on the declining interest in Pentecostalism in the mountains of Appalachia. This research discusses one church in the region, but this discussion can be applied to Pentecostal congregations throughout Appalachia.

The Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ was the main site for this particular research. This church is a small, grey, cinder-block church in Vilas, North Carolina with approximately ten regular church members. This site was chosen for this research, because its members exercise the practices being studied, specifically glossolalia.

I utilized two research methods will be utilized for this research: participant observation and interviews. I attended church services at the Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ roughly three times a week over a 3 month period. There is a Bible study service on Wednesday nights at 7 o'clock , a service on Sunday mornings at 10 o'clock, and a prayer

service Sunday nights at 6 o'clock. During the services I participated and took field notes as well as conversed with various members. In addition, I observed and discussed with the members and pastors, as well as the activities that both engaged in during the services. The setting, attire of the members, and other important factors will be observed and interpreted. I strove to be both a participant and an observer in order to obtain the most accurate information and discover the emic perspective. In addition, I balanced between being engaged and disengaged during the service in order to develop as accurate interpretation as possible.

In addition to participant observation, interviews were conducted in order to collect data. This was a useful method, because it provided information directly from the members. Interviews helped me to gain insight into the meaning of the practices of Pentecostals, because they contributed their own perspective and significance of the rituals. The sample for this research consisted of three members and the pastor of the Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ. This particular sample was chosen because the group demonstrated the practices, specifically glossolalia, The members and pastor I interviewed were able to answer questions that explain the meaning of their religious practices. The interviews allowed me to gain additional information and personal insight about the practices. Furthermore, recording private, individual accounts of experiencing glossolalia and faith healing was especially useful because this allowed members to speak openly, without other members listening and possibly influencing their descriptions.

Most members tended to be an older generation (ages 65+) and there is fear among the members as well as the pastors that in the next generations, the Holiness-Pentecostal movement, at least as its practiced at this church, will cease to exist. There is one main

pastor of this church, Terry Carver, but there is often another pastor in attendance, especially at the Wednesday night service. Furthermore, there are often pastors in attendance from visiting congregations. All of the members in the church were Caucasian and tended to be in the middle class. Based on the clothing and vehicles of the members, I concluded they were living a middle class lifestyle. Three women members were interviewed and they were all over the age of fifty. In addition, the main pastor, a male, of the Church was interviewed. Each member of the congregation and the pastor signed an informed consent agreement before their interview was conducted and they had the option for their name be used or for me to choose a pseudonym for them.

Donna Mills is a long time member of the Apostolic Church and she is very enthusiastic and vocal about the importance of youth joining the congregation. She is sixty-seven years old and has been a member for about eight years. She lives in Vilas, North Carolina and has two children and three grandchildren, none of whom are religious. Mills has had a difficult life that has led her to Pentecostalism and she believes that her faith will continue to help her through difficult times.

Pastor Terry J. Carver is the main pastor at this church and is 61 years old and has been a preacher for 24 years; Carver is white and middle class. I have gathered this information from an interview and concluded his class based on former occupations at Eastman Chemical Company and as a carpet layer. He started the Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ in Vilas and one of his main concerns is the lack of membership in his congregation.

Marjorie Louise Bowers Miller Gaffney is the oldest member at the Apostolic Church and is extremely vocal during the services. She is 88 years old and has been

attending the church for three years. She is extremely educated with two degrees from Appalachian State University and two degrees from Eastern Tennessee State University.

Lily Andrews has been attending an Apostolic Church for over thirty-five years, though she was raised Baptist. She is white, working class, and is employed as a zip-lining instructor. Anderson sings at every church service and is the only member of her family that attends the Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ.

Observation

I attended the main service on Sundays for three months. The following description comes from my various visits during the time period of approximately three months. The number of attendants averaged between ten and thirty during the main service. Music is typically being played on the piano, sometimes the guitar joins in the background until the service begins. The organization of each service is relatively consistent and each of them begins with prayer requests. During the Sunday morning service it is not uncommon for there to be three or four pastors from visiting churches. However, the home pastor leads service, but a visiting pastor may sing a hymn or discuss a verse from the Bible. The pastor asks the members to share their requests and they raise their hands and explain their needs. The Sunday morning service begins with prayer after all requests are stated. Prayer is not led by any one person, the pastor stands at the front of the church and prays, but he is not the only person audibly speaking. Most members mumble or speak softly when they pray, but the pastor is usually the loudest. All of the prayers are in English, although, occasionally, someone will break out into a glossolalia prayer during this time. After prayer, there are several hymns that are sung and various instruments are used. The piano is played during every service and often a guitar. On occasion, there will be more instruments

when more members are in attendance, including the violin and drums. After a few hymns are sung, the pastor asks members to share a testimony in which members state an occurrence where God has been present in their life. Next, a prayer is said over the offering and then a hymn follows as people walk up to give their contribution. Then, members great each other while one or more members plays a hymn on the piano. The pastor then quiets the congregation and begins to preach and always states the section of the Bible he is reading from in order for people to follow along in their Bibles. Acts 2 is frequently used during the services, as it discusses the Day of Pentecost. The sermon lasts about an hour and after his sermon, the pastor asks if any members in the congregation are sick. If so, he brings them to the front and other pastors and some members join him as he lays his hands, which have been dipped in oil, on the sick and prays for their recovery. It is at this time that people come to the front in an attempt to receive the Holy Ghost and to speak in tongues, which is encouraged by the pastor(s) and members during prayer. The reason for this encouragement is because speaking in tongues is the first sign that a person has received the Holy Ghost. Glossolalia and prayer are practiced throughout the service by various members, but it is at the end of the service that speaking in tongues is most prevalent as well as expected and encouraged. The amount of members who speak in tongues during the services vary, some members engage in glossolalia more often than others.

The attendance at each service differs greatly depending on which service. The Sunday morning service is the most attended, with membership being anywhere from six members to about forty. However, the Sunday night and Wednesday night service has the lowest attendance with usually about three to six members. Once a month the sister church

in Newland, North Carolina attends a Wednesday night service, which usually makes the attendance approximately thirty members.

Each practice, including glossolalia, prayer, and faith healing, is an extremely individual ritual and the church services adhere to this by accepting all kinds of worship throughout them. Troy Abell states in his ethnographic study, *Better felt than said: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in Southern Appalachia,* "To the Holiness-Pentecostal, religion is a highly personal and continual struggle" (Abell, 1982, p. 17). The struggle Abell describes is the effort to achieve glossolalia and to receive the "spiritual gifts." In addition, there is a constant fight to become closer to God. Though there is pressure to receive the Holy Ghost with evidence of tongues, there is also a deeply personal relationship to God. "I think each person has to work out their own salvation with God," states a member interviewed by Abell (1982).

Abell's book contains accounts from different members in two different Holiness Pentecostal churches in Appalachia. His research is extremely important and similar to mine, but these interviews took place over thirty years ago. Every member describes their beliefs and practices differently, which makes it impossible to generalize each practice. However, my analysis will attempt to highlight different members' experiences and perspectives in order to help gain a new understanding.

Pentecostalism may be the fastest growing religion in the world but in Watauga County, North Carolina the denomination is dwindling. The Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ in Vilas, North Carolina has the lowest membership it has ever had. According to Pastor Carver, at the church's height there were approximately 50 people in the

congregation. Now the church averages 10-15 people weekly. There are many factors that are the reason for the low attendance in this church and other Pentecostal congregations.

The Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ is a sect of Holiness Churches and they adhere to a similar doctrine that Pentecostals do. Pastor Carver explains:

> Well in our organization, as far as the term, the term Apostolic simply means is that we preach the doctrine as the Apostles preached at Pentecost and Pentecost is the experience of receiving the Holy Ghost and being baptized and then in the organization Pentecostals we have the Assemblies of God they call themselves Pentecostals and the reason they do is because they believe in receiving the Holy Ghost.

However, Andrews states, "I don't think it's the name of the Church…I think it's God in you."

Finding Holiness

Each of the members interviewed for this research were raised Baptist and later found Pentecostalism in their individual way. Pastor Terry Carver's parents took him and his brothers to a Baptist Church in Johnson City, Tennessee until they were teenagers. "My mom and dad were Baptists," Carver states, "and they went to the Baptist church and then my dad felt like if there wasn't no more to it than that then he just wasn't going to go." After his mom brought him to a Pentecostal tent revival in Johnson City, Tennessee, Carver continued to attend the church until he became a minister himself.

Many members had the same feelings as Pastor Carver's dad, moving towards attending Baptist Churches expressing that they never really felt fulfilled in those congregations. Donna Mills attended a Baptist Church with her husband and two children

for twelve years. “I started attending a Baptist church when I was 17…just because I wanted to take my children…I thought it was right…Not that I lived a Christian life, I didn’t. I still didn’t get the hang of that. I just went to Church,” states Mills. She felt like this was the right thing to do, but she never felt that she belonged in a Baptist Church. “They told me when I had a seizure during a meeting that I was demon possessed, because I had seizures during the message. So, we quit going to a Baptist Church,” says Mills. She now believes these ‘seizures’ were, for her, what Pentecostals call being “slain in the spirit.” Mills began to read her Bible and asked God for guidance, “God I don’t know how to read my bible. Please give me some understanding…And in my living room sitting on my couch I received the gift of the Holy Ghost.” After she received the Holy Ghost, Mills finally felt fulfilled and she again asked for God’s assistance, “And I asked God, ‘Now what do I do God?’ And he said, “Find you a church.” I said ‘Where?’ He said, ‘find a Holiness.’”

Marjorie Gaffney has attended various Baptist churches and a couple of Methodist churches throughout her 88 years of life. She, too, felt like she needed to experience more in her faith. Gaffney received the Holy Ghost almost 70 years ago, but she only realized what occurred a couple months ago. “Being a Baptist , there was Baptism of the water, that was Baptism to me, and then couple of months ago our pastor explained Baptism of the Spirit and that sucked my mind.” Gaffney recalls receiving the Holy Ghost at 22, “when I was about 22 years old at a Methodist church of all things…I experienced it and it was a wonderful thing. As if the Lord were touching me, filled me the Holy Spirit from head to toe…. I didn’t know to call it at the time in fact I just learned that, that word, to associate it in that aspect of it just about 2 months ago. Name it, and label it, and realize.”

Membership and Lifestyle

The membership of the Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ in Watauga County is diminishing. Because of the lack of understanding and standards that come with this faith, non-members are more and more wary with experimenting and/or joining this congregation. Pastor Carver comments on the situation:

> I guess people aren't just real familiar of Pentecost and the doctrine scares them away a lot and we preach a separated lifestyle from the world and of course we have a lot of people here who don't adhere to that but that's the way we preach it anyway and a lot of people want religion but they don't have a full time commitment to salvation.

Pastor Carver believes people are not willing to give up a certain way of life to follow the policies. Many Apostolics do not adhere to all the restrictions, such as smoking or consuming alcohol.

Lily Andrews struggles with adhering to these standards on a daily basis, during our interview she explained that she often wears pants, which is frowned upon in this congregation. However, Andrews also explained to me that she believes there are certain regulations that are more important than others and God understands that she has to bend the rules sometimes. In regards to the declining membership, Andrews adds, "I don't really think numbers is nowhere near as important as the sincerity of those that's in there."

Commitment to anything is often difficult and a significant problem in this congregation is a full time allegiance to faith. Pastor Tim Sanders during one service stated, "God isn't just something you can take out like a spare tire." Practicing this faith is a lifestyle choice and it is a general consensus within the church that many people only come

to church or abide by the doctrine when they need something. Andrews states, "I'd love to have my husband sitting here beside of me but I don't want him just *sitting* beside of me.…if you're not in there for yourself, if you're not in there to try to worship God…. if you're not in there for that, you're not fooling nobody."

Practices

Now I will discuss the various practices that are significant in this community. These practices are listed in Mark Chapter 16, Verse 18 in the Holy Bible. "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" (KJV). Two of these practices are considered metaphorical in the Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, which are serpent handling and drinking of deadly things. However, the other three signs are practiced regularly. These are prayer, glossolalia, including trance states or being "slain in the spirit," and the repentance of sins. Modest dress and attendance (as discussed above) are also important in the community. Furthermore, supporting each individual in the community is important to this group, taking prayer requests, making meals for one another, offering car rides, etc. There is a strong sense of "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22: 39, KJV).

Prayer

Every individual interviewed agreed that each practice is equally important in this congregation. However, each person stressed that the most commonly practiced ritual is prayer. The members and the pastor both pray almost constantly. In addition, each individual also stated that their prayers often get answered and this is the reason for the

continuous prayer. Carver adds, “prayer is just releasing your feelings to God and you talk to him and you can talk to him like you talk to any friend.”

Glossolalia

Each member explained that speaking in tongues was not something that one could control, although the experience was explained to me differently by each person. In addition, each member and the pastor expressed out difficult it is to put the experience of glossolalia into words. Carver describes the experience of speaking in tongues, “it’s just a joyful, glorious feeling of God that comes into your life…you’re yielding yourself…to describe the spirit would be hard to do other than what Paul said, “joy unspeakable.”

The pastor and two of the members all stated that they did not understand what exactly they were saying when speaking in tongues. However, one member, Donna Mills, explained that she knows exactly what she is saying when experiencing glossolalia. However, some members say they do understand the general idea of what they are saying, but not specific words. Gaffney clarifies:

> I understand most of the things I say but I can’t say that I definitely understand each word that I say speaking in tongues it is the spirit that I understand the fulfilling spirit, just fulfilling love and care and greatness of God but you do realize that it is God speaking, the Holy Spirit speaking.

Receiving the Holy Ghost and the glossolalia that is experienced during it is perhaps the most difficult for members to express. Each tried to explain it to me, but it was clear to me that it was a struggle to do so. In addition, it is necessary to speak more than just a couple words in glossolalia when receiving the Holy Ghost, which seems to put a lot of pressure on members. Carver explains, “the bible says there is stammering lips there is a

stammering tongue that comes, but whenever you receive the holy ghost there will be fluent tongues come that it would be more a language." Carver also told me that if a member is not "fluent in tongues" during their receiving of the Holy Ghost, he is not convinced that it was actually received. Gaffney does her best to describe it, "it's an experience it is satisfying and it is fulfilling because the spirit of God is in you…speaking in tongues is not you speaking, it's God and I do believe that, because it is fulfilling and makes everything seem right."

Being Slain in the Spirit

What many people call "trance states" or "altered states of consciousness," Apostolics call "being slain in the spirit. " Andrews describes this experience:

> I remember the Lord throwing me to the ground, what we call "being slain in the spirit"…and I heard someone speaking in tongues and I said, 'Lord if that's me let me hear it,' and it was just as if somebody had pulled cotton out of my ear and then I heard my voice, I heard me speaking in tongues.

During one Wednesday night service, when the sister church from Newland was visiting, I witnessed a woman, Jessica, being "slain in the spirit." She had just testified and described a bad situation she had just came out of and she had God to thank for that. She was extremely verbal and animated during the service. Jessica's mother testified and then began to sing, Jessica began fervently speaking in tongues. She began to shake vigorously as if she was seizing, eventually she was so animate that she knocked over a pew and fell to the ground. After, Carver laughed and stated, "Have you ever been slain in the spirit so much that you knocked over the pew?! We are 'Holy Rollers!'"

The night that the sister church visited was one of the most attended and lively services I witnessed during my research. Approximately forty people were there. During these trance states I saw glossolalia, being "slain in the spirit," and other occurrences that I had not witnessed before such as members jogging around the church. At one point, three women had been speaking in tongues and they began to run laps around the Church and eventually one Pastor, male, joined them for just a couple laps. The women were running, while experiencing glossolalia, and some of their children mimicked them.

It is obvious that the members of this Church find fulfillment in the practices and beliefs as well as a sense of belonging to this community of Apostolics. In addition, these practices are extremely personal and often vary from person to person. It is impossible to come to one conclusion about the meaning of this faith and these practices. My findings imply that it is almost impossible to truly understand these practices without experiencing them yourself. These are intimate and almost indescribable experiences even to the people who have them. Through these accounts it is clear the experiences in the church are important to their daily lives. Displaying various accounts from the members themselves, my research offers an analysis that supports the ways that this community provides meaning and belonging for these members.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown several insiders' perspectives on Appalachian Pentecostal practices. Through our conversations, members have talked about how important their experiences of the Holiness tradition are and what those experiences mean to each of them. Their voices, those of people who actually engage in these practices, shared and explained the meaning of their experiences. The Apostolic Church of Jesus

Christ in Vilas is an indigenous Appalachian community in the Pentecostal tradition and it is slowly disappearing. While serpent handling is not practiced at this church, the 5 signs are still significant to the community yet these practices are endangered as Pentecostalism grows and expands globally.

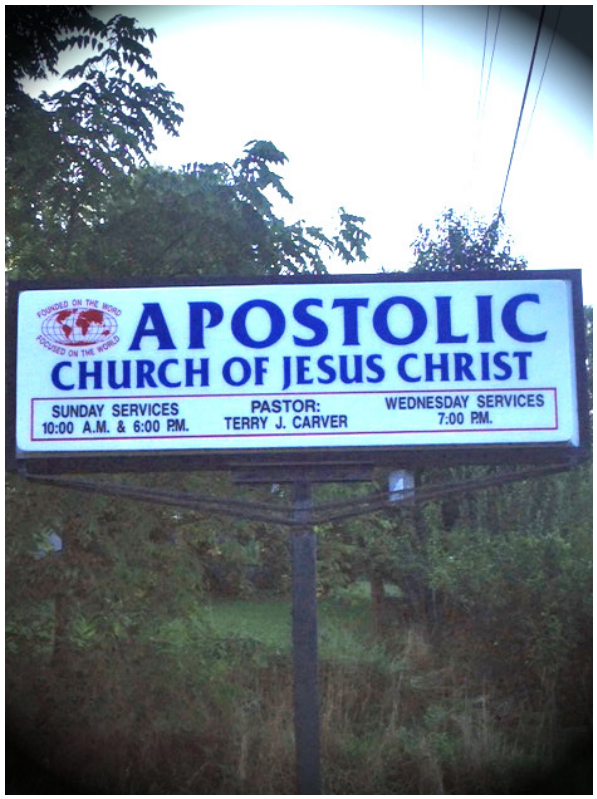

Figure 1. The Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ in Vilas, North Carolina.

Chapter 3

These Signs Shall Follow:

Exploring Religious Rights in the Serpent Handling Tradition

Serpent handling has long been studied and has become a popular media topic. This tradition has been featured in national news outlets and has been the subject of two recent reality television shows. Unfortunately, the practice has been sensationalized and misrepresented. Additionally, many people do not understand this practice and therefore are quick to judge. Because they do not comprehend the tradition and because the traditional is improperly represented in the media, people tend to misunderstand the reasons that serpent handlers give for the practice and what it brings to their lives. In this chapter I will argue that serpent handlers have a religious right to handle serpents during church services.

Dr. Ralph Hood

Dr. Ralph Hood has been studying this tradition for over 25 years and is an expert on this practice and the Holiness faith. Building on Hood's research, I am investigating the claims the media has made and will explore religious freedom in regards to serpent handling. There are implicit and explicit limitations to what can be legally allowed, despite the free exercise clause, which states that citizens of the United States have a right to freely practice their religion.

Dr. Ralph Hood is a social psychologist with degrees both in psychology and sociology. He received his PhD at the University of Nevada at Reno and has been teaching at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga since 1973. He has been the editor for several religious journals both in the United States and in Germany. He is a renowned psychologist of religion and is an active international scholar.

Hood has great respect for the tradition of serpent handling and the individuals who are a part of the movement. He has never handled a serpent, but he has a deep understanding of the practice and the doctrine. Hood states his "overall view is that serpent-handling believers have not been fairly treated by academics, scholars, or the media" (Hood & Williamson, 2008). However, he does not claim to be unbiased, "but rather admit to an empathic understanding derived from…many years of participant observation" (Hood & Williamson, 2008).

It is clear that Hood is accomplished in the psychology of religion and even though he is in his 70s and he joked with me on the phone "I got one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel," he says he has no plans to stop any time soon. After our phone interview he was traveling to Poland to give a speech on the theories of mysticism.

Hood is interested in several religious sects and has studied everything from to Islam to Atheism. When asked why study religion, Hood replied, "It's intrinsically interesting and also I had the interest in certain forms of behavior that seem to be either strange or bizarre if they weren't protected under the umbrella of religious traditions." Serpent handling falls under this group of "abnormal" religious traditions that Hood refers to.

Scholars such as Ralph Hood continue to take measures so that people can begin to see serpent handling in a different light. The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga has an extensive collection of DVDs containing footage of serpent handling services. These DVDs are available for any research scholar to utilize, but Dr. Hood emphasized not for use in "any kind of sensational fashion."

The practice of snake handling is not widely known, especially outside of the region of Appalachia. Even growing up less than an hour from a serpent handling church, I was not aware of its existence until well into my undergraduate studies. Hood became interested in serpent handling almost as soon as he arrived in Tennessee. In early 1973 there had been two deaths from serpent bites in Carson Springs, Tennessee not far from Chattanooga. Hood recalls,

> Professors at the University [of Tennessee at Chattanooga] were commenting on these two deaths and I realized that none of the people that were talking about these deaths at Carson Springs had ever attended a serpent handling church or even knew anything about it so I decided what I would do is to get to know these people and to document the tradition so that there could be facts or knowledge about their beliefs and their practices. (Hood, personal communication, 2014)

Because Hood has been following the serpent handling tradition for over 25 years now he has become extremely close with the members of the churches he has studied. He has gained rapport in several ways including helping believers gather snakes for use in services. Hood states, "It helps my research because I've never handled a serpent; they know that I don't handle serpents but I participate in documenting their tradition and always make sure that I can present it in an objective fashion so that people can understand."

Serpent Handling

Serpent handling is but one practice that believers engage in in the Holiness Tradition. In fact, many members in Holiness churches do not handle serpents or drink strychnine. There are five signs that are followed in serpent handling Holiness churches. To refresh, the five signs are stated in Mark 16:17-18:

> And these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name they shall 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.

The signs, as explained in Chapter 1, vary from congregation to congregation. However, "with signs following" churches practice all of the five signs, fully interpreting the gospel of Mark. All of the practices are considered equally important, but some are practiced more frequently than others. During some services, serpents are never removed from their boxes or the strychnine is never offered. It is seldom, though, that faith healing, glossolalia, and exorcism are absent from the service.

In the churches that practice all five signs, serpent handling and drinking poison during services is completely voluntary. Members are not required handle the serpents. However, the preacher will always warn the congregation saying something like "Make sure God's in it if you come to handle the serpent." Hood explains,

> Anybody who wanted to handle a serpent who was of sound mind, not inebriated or anything the serpent handling churches would allow to handle. On the other hand, they would tell you firmly that if you don't believe in this and if you don't believe God's in it, then don't do it.

In the popular press, there is a common misconception that members are forced to handle serpents or they are put in danger by attending services (Hood & Williamson, 2008). Handling serpents, drinking poison, and any other "exercises of faith" are extremely personal and completely voluntary.

Serpent handling worship services are more complicated to describe than the services described in Chapter 2. "Unlike many mainstream Pentecostal denominations, serpent-handling church worship has not been 'routinized' or 'regularized'" (Hood & Williamson 2008). The services are fairly unorganized and vary from meeting to meeting. However, there are many similarities to non-serpent handling Holiness church services. Every serpent handling service has gospel singing and music, prayer, faith healing, and exorcism. Serpent handling and consuming poison is sporadically practiced throughout the worship with no proper introduction other than a preacher stating "there is death in these boxes" and "there is death in this jar" (Hood & Williamson 2008). The serpents are kept in handmade wooden boxes at the front of church until "the lord moves" on someone to remove the reptile(s) from their enclosures. This is the same for the strychnine, which remains in a jar labeled "poison," until it is opened (Hood & Williamson 2008). Serpent handling occurs more often than consuming poison. In addition, there is usually a blowtorch or some sort of bottle with a flammable wick in it, so that members can handle fire if they wish to do so. However, fire handling occurs even less than "drinking deadly things." These services typically last three to four hours though sometimes as little as two hours. Each service varies in the order of events, but they contain these main components (Hood & Williamson, 2008).

There is some controversy over what kinds of snakes are handled during the services. There is often question concerning how poisonous the snakes are. Regarding what type of snakes the members handle in the churches in Appalachia, Hood responded:

> Serpent Handlers will handle any kind of venomous snake, any serpent, but most common are the ones that are indigenous to the regions where their churches are, because the go out and hunt them so the most common serpents that are handled are varieties of rattlesnakes, varieties of copperheads, and water moccasins…but I've seen serpent handlers handle cobras, I've seen them handle coral snakes. Largely that they get from trading areas such as Florida.

"With signs following" congregations only handle serpents, which are strictly venomous snakes. People are called to limit this practice because it is illegal in most states, but constitutional freedoms should protect religious practices.

Legality of Serpent Handling

Serpent handling is illegal in every state except for West Virginia. Every state has its own laws and regulations about the practice. Hood explains:

> In Tennessee there is a Class 1 category, which means that you have to be licensed to handle wild life including you couldn't own a pet tiger or a pet lion and under that category includes venomous snakes so in Tennessee you would have to be licensed to possess a venomous snake according to the law.

These licenses are difficult to obtain and law enforcement obviously does not often give them to serpent handling preachers. Because of this, most serpent handling churches are breaking the law when they gather and handle serpents. Although a few preachers do

possess a license, such as Jamie Coots a handling preacher from Middlesboro Kentucky, most do not and have to continue their practice illegally.

In 1940, Kentucky passed the first law against serpent handling (Hood & Williamson, 2008). Kentucky's law, which is still in effect today, is the only one that specifically outlaws the use of reptiles in a *religious* setting (Hood & Williamson, 2008). Tennessee's law, passed in 1947, for example, does not refer to religion directly and states that it is unlawful to, "exhibit, handle, or use any poisonous or dangerous snake or reptile in such a manner as to endanger life or death of any person" (Hood & Williamson, 2008). Other states' laws in Appalachia resemble the wording of Tennessee's law, which does not directly refer to religion. West Virginia is the exception--serpent handling is still regularly practiced and legal. While this is the case, my own case study is located in Tennessee where possession of poisonous reptiles is strictly illegal. Various serpent handlers have attempted to challenge and change the laws in Tennessee without success (Hamblin, personal communication, 2014).

Pastor Andrew Hamblin

Andrew Hamblin is a pastor at the Tabernacle Church of God in LaFollette, Tennessee. He was born in 1992 and was just 22 years old during this research project. He is a new convert to the tradition. Hamblin is extremely open about serpent handling, despite its illegal status in Tennessee. He has a publicly accessible Facebook page that contains pictures of him handling serpents. In addition, he rarely turns down an interview with the media. He allows all visitors to his church and announces this on every media outlet he can. The young pastor has been featured on many different radio and television programs and also allows people to film during his church's services. He has hopes of opening the first

serpent handling mega church. Also, he is on the reality show called *Snake Salvation,* which broadcasted from September 10th to October 22nd 2013 on National Geographic Channel. Hamblin unapologetically possesses venomous snakes without a license. He is eager to share the gospel and the practice with others.

Pastor Hamblin's tactics are extremely rare and he does not fit the mold of a typical serpent handler. Hamblin converted to the tradition in 2010 after discovering the practice on the internet, which is atypical of serpent handlers, who usually grow up in a "with signs following" congregation. In addition, Hamblin is adamant about sharing his beliefs and encouraging others to attend his church. Because he is so open about his church and their practices, he has critics both in the religious and secular worlds. Other serpent handling congregations are wary of the young pastor, because it has never been acceptable to be as conspicuous as Hamblin is. On the other hand, non-serpent handling Christians are also suspicious of Hamblin, because the practice is illegal and some believe it is an unconventional and dangerous way to worship. In addition, the secular belief is that serpent handling can be a danger to minors as well as the creatures themselves. As the Tabernacle Church of God gains a larger following and more publicity, the probability law enforcement making an arrest increases.

On November 7, 2013 the Tennessee Wildlife Resource Agency confiscated 53 of Hamblin's serpents from The Tabernacle Church of God. He was charged with a Class 1 misdemeanor for possessing venomous snakes without a license. Hamblin pleaded not guilty at his arraignment on November 15, 2013 stating that it was his religious freedom to handle serpents. Following his arraignment, he held a service at his church, where serpents were handled and strychnine was consumed (WBIR, 2013).

I traveled to La Follette, Tennessee on the day of Hamblin's arraignment where I had a conversation with some of the locals at a diner. The arrest was the talk of the town and they expressed to me that they did not attend Hamblin's church no did they support the practice of serpent handling. Additionally, it was clear to me from their general demeanor in the conversation that they did not approve of Hamblin's openness and considered his belief in serpent handling a way to seek attention, calling him "crazy" and "stupid." The group also accused Hamblin of being "lazy," claiming that he was taking advantage of the publicity in order to receive money. One man said that he was close with the Hamblin family and Andrew is the only member that handles serpents and his family doesn't understand why he practices and preaches.

It has been suggested that people replace certain harmful aspects of their lives such as drug abuse and suicidal thoughts with serpent handling (Hood, personal communication, 2014). Many of Hamblin's church members are recovering addicts and Hamblin has previously attempted suicide (Hamblin, personal communication, 2014). One could conclude that serpent handlers are suicidal because of the constant possibility of death. On the other hand, this form of worship, or any form for that matter, can replace these suicidal thoughts or depression, giving a new meaning to life. From talking with Hamblin and following his story very closely, I believe that the latter is true. For Hamblin, serpent handling and leading a congregation has given him a fresh perspective on life and a belief in a new doctrine.

Serpent Handling and the Media

Serpent handling has experienced a great deal of publicity because of the reality show, especially following Hamblin's arrest. There have been two recent stories on

National Public Radio, several local new stations (*The Tennessean*, WBIR, *Johnson City Press*) and an article in the New York Times (Blinder, 2013). Additionally, ABC's *Nightline* featured Hamblin following his arraignment. There have been two reality shows, *Snake Man of Appalachia* on *Animal Planet*, which was cancelled in 2012 and *Snake Salvation*, which finished its first season in 2013 on *National Geographic TV* and has since also been cancelled.

Hamblin stood on the courthouse steps in Campbell County, Tennessee before his arraignment and addressed the media on November 15, 2014. People wore red in support of Hamblin. He told the crowd that if there were to be a season two of *Snake Salvation* it would not be focused on gathering snakes. Hamblin continues, "My goal with that show wasn't to say 'World you need to this because I'm doing it.' My goal was to preach the Gospel and confirm the word, just like the disciples did with signs following" (Braden 2013). I believe that Hamblin wants to show outsiders that they have a right to practice their religion in this way and they are not harming anybody but rather engaging in religious expression.

I will discuss the media representations of Hamblin and serpent handling, explaining the stereotypes that come out of these stories in chapter 4. However, it is important to consider the media here as well, because coverage of serpent handling in the media has had a significant impact on the enforcement and establishment of the laws against the practice. Hamblin believes the use of media to spread his beliefs will increase awareness of the practice as well help attract more followers for the tradition (Hamblin, personal communication, 2014). However, it seems that the increased publicity has only caused trouble for Hamblin and his congregation. The charges against Hamblin were eventually

dropped, but the pastor is still not satisfied. Hamblin has started petitions and handed out flyers to recruit people to help change the laws in Tennessee in regards to possessing venomous reptiles. Hamblin yearns for the law to be changed so he can freely practice his religion.

The Right to Religious Freedom

The United States Constitution states, in the First Amendment, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The exercise clause clearly states that there should be no restrictions on the basis of religious practices that come from the Federal Government. However, as I have established, there are laws restricting serpent handlers to worship in their home states. It is important to reiterate, however, that Kentucky is the only state that directly references religion in the law, where other states simply prohibit handling poisonous reptiles.

In Kentucky it is easier for serpent handlers to obtain serpents and handle them in their places of worship, because they can obtain a license. In Tennessee, for example, it is more difficult because licenses are rarely given to residents, serpent handler or not. Even though the laws in states other than Kentucky do not include the word "religion," they were implemented to prevent churches from serpent handling (Hood& Williamson 2008).

In *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom,* Winnifred Sullivan argues that religious freedom in the United States does not exist in her book, appropriately named. Though Sullivan does not discuss Holiness churches, her examination of the Warner vs. Boca Raton case highlights similar concerns about laws prohibiting religious freedom for serpent handlers, Warner vs. Boca Raton was a case of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews that were fighting to keep their various religious artifacts on the graves of their families at a Boca

Raton cemetery; the city won the case (Sullivan, 2005). Because of cases like this, Sullivan believes that it is impossible to freely exercise religion in the United States, and I tend to agree with her.

Serpent handling is an expression of religion. The Boca Raton case indicates that municipalities can limit religious freedom in public places (such as cemeteries) and this implies that it would be easier to enforce anti-snake handling, at least in spaces that are open to the public. There is a precedent for further regulation even though it pushes against the limits of the Free Expression clause.

Sullivan suggests that cases such as this is "not the right of 'religion' to reproduce itself but the right of the individual, every individual, to life outside the state—the right to live as a self on which many give, as well as chosen, demands are made." Sullivan continues, "Such a right may not be best realized through laws guaranteeing religious freedom buy by laws guaranteeing equality" (Sullivan, 2005). In the case of serpent handling, perhaps it should be a matter, as Sullivan says, of "equality." Every person should have the right to be who they are, and religious practices should fall under that category.

Ralph Hood makes a valid point concerning this matter, explaining that there are many "high risk" activities that are allowed in the United States. "You can hang glide, you can ride a motorcycle. The injury rate in football is now 100%," states Hood (Personal Communication, 2014). People make decisions that put their life in danger every single day, and often these decisions are legal.

Hood and Williamson argue in their book *Them That Believe: The Power and Meaning of the Christian Serpent-Handling Tradition* that the laws are based on sensationalized accounts from the media and other outsiders' views, stating "it is a

compelling argument against the unfortunate reliance on media reports that accentuate, stereotype, and sensationalize the unique practices of marginal groups" (Hood & Williamson 2008). A firsthand account of a serpent handling service such as mine in the following chapter and having officials from Department of Wildlife observe the snake enclosures could be a positive step in the right direction for a civil investigation of the practice with an eye toward regulating and accepting such practices as legitimate. "Although such a hearing may find neither agreement nor acceptance from those committed to differing views, the result judgments can be based on reason, not prejudice" (Hood & Williamson 2008). Exposing church practices may not guarantee a change in laws, but doing so would encourage a clearer understanding of the role of serpent handling in Holiness religious practice.

The goal of my research is to understand the perspective of the serpent handlers. Serpent handling is a religious practice and Americans should have the right to practice religion freely. In this paper I have argued that serpent handlers have a right, as stated in the United States Constitution, to freedom of religious expression. I do think there are concerns in regards to serpent handling and the consumption of poison, but more direct laws can be considered here.

Serpent handling is an expression of religion. Do I have concerns with certain aspects of the practice? Of course. However, I do think that the law could be more supportive of religious freedom in Pentecostal serpent handling churches. Instead of outlawing the possession of poisonous reptiles, I believe that the law restricting the mistreatment of reptiles can be applied here. Concerning safety, I know that serpent

handling, as well as the consumption of strychnine, is not forced on anyone. The members are consenting adults. They can choose to partake in handling and/or to drink poison.

Clearly, the media have played a huge role in the outlawing serpent handling. The reasoning for this is because serpent handling has been sensationalized and judged by news outlets and reality television shows. In the next chapter, I will discuss these stereotypes and how the representation of serpent handling churches is often misconstrued. Furthermore, I will explain the reasoning behind the various perceptions and what I have found to be the truth when it comes to the practices in "with signs following" congregations.

Figure 2. The Tabernacle Church of God in La Follette, Tennessee.

Chapter 4

These Signs Shall Follow:

A Sense of Belonging in Serpent Handling Communities

In my project thus far I have discussed various expressions of Pentecostalism. Serpent handling, a small subset of American Pentecostalism, has long been misunderstood and stereotyped. The stereotypes about this tradition are numerous and the purpose of my research is to rectify some of the most egregious distortions of this tradition. What are stereotypes that go along with this practice? What are examples in the media that perpetuate these stereotypes especially addressing the reality show *Snake Salvation*? My research deepens our understanding of this maligned practice and offers a corrective to the classist, distorted interpretation of practitioners of this branch of Pentecostalism. I will argue that serpent handling is an endangered practice and the continually reinforced stereotypes are part of an American exoticism of Appalachia. The show, Snake Salvation, as well as many authors have thought that only poor and disenfranchised people participate in this practice but I have seen that people are empowered to change their lives through these communities. The religious experience and identity gives people a sense of belonging in the serpent handling community. In order to explore the stereotypes and claims made by *Snake Salvation,* I will utilize different methods. First, I am a participant observer at a serpent handling church, which is an essential element to this exploration. In addition, I have

attended and observed a four-hour serpent handling service. In addition, an interview conducted with Pastor Andrew Hamblin, a pastor of a serpent handling church, will be utilized. I will explore stereotypes of the serpent handling tradition and how it is often misrepresented in the media.

Serpent Handling Service

On Sunday, April 6th, 2014, I attended my first serpent handling service. Though I had watched hours of footage from services and had gone to, approximately, twenty Holiness services at another church which did not handle serpents, I was not sure exactly what to expect. I had talked to Pastor Andrew Hamblin several times on the telephone, but had never met him prior to visiting his church. The Tabernacle Church of God is located along a windy, gravel road in the hills of LaFollette, Tennessee. There is a simple sign at the foot of the driveway stating the name of their church, their pastor's name, Andrew Hamblin, and the times of their worship. The Church itself is located on a hill surrounded by a picturesque view of the hills and mountains of Campbell County.

The Tabernacle Church of God holds services at 1:30 p.m. every Sunday. I arrived just on time and the parking lot was already full of vehicles. The cars were various makes and models, ranging from Hondas to SUVs, there were several vans, as many large families attend the church. The church is a simple red brick building with the of two grey brick crosses on either side of the church. I could hear the music before I even stepped out of my car. The loud bass, drums, and guitars echoed from the building and I could a woman with a powerful voice belting out hymns.

The energy in the Tabernacle Church of God was vibrant. Everyone was standing, shouting, singing, dancing, and thrilled to be there. Hamblin was greeting everyone,

welcoming members, and embracing his friends and family; he immediately recognized me, because I was the only new face in the crowd, and introduced himself. I sat in the back corner and took it all in. The music was loud, so loud that I could not hear people speaking three feet in front of me.

The church was decorated with posters of Hamblin taking up serpents, framed verses, and a bulletin board with pictures and letters sent to Hamblin from his admirers. The most notable ornament in the church is the large mural painted on the front wall of the church, behind the pulpit. The mural fills the whole wall; it is a scene of a raging sea during a storm, perhaps an image of the Genesis flood.

The pulpit at the front of the Church consists of a couple pews, a set of drums, a bass, several guitars, and, during worship, ten to fifteen members of the fifty people in the church. The serpents were placed on the pulpit before the service had begun, kept in locked wooden boxes until members were ready to take them up. I was taking notes of my surroundings until I noticed people glancing back at me, as if they were looking for a reaction from me, I then noticed Hamblin holding two large copperheads. Hamblin held the two serpents in his right hand with his bible in the other. No one in the church seemed phased by the fact that Hamblin had two poisonous reptiles in his hands. The act was normal to the members of the church, because they see it on a regular basis. I have seen hours of footage from serpent handling services, but I thought it would be different to see it in person. Though the act of taking up serpents seems shocking, the act seemed so natural in this setting. As Hamblin gingerly passed the two serpents to the other members, both men and women, on the pulpit, I realized that the service only had a couple differences from other Holiness services I had attended at the Apostolic Church (see chapter 2). With

the exception of taking up serpents, drinking poison, and handling fire, the service was similar to the services at the Apostolic Church in that there were prayers and sermon. However, while these differences between the two are rather major, it is important to note that the doctrine and message of the sermon is comparable. During the service at the Tabernacle Church of God, the energy never lulled, members shouted and worshipped, drank poison and handled fire, prayed and embraced each other, none of these activities changed even if a serpent was being handled. There was a great deal of movement during the service, which is another significant difference from the Apostolic church, where, for a majority of the time, the members were sitting in their seats. On the other hand, the Tabernacle Church of God's members, rarely were sitting down in the pews and were running around the church, jumping, and were just overall animated throughout the service.

During the first two hours of the three and a half hour service, members worshipped, engaging in all five signs plus the handling of fire and playing music. There were about forty members present at any given time; people often arrive late or leave early. There were four serpents, two copperheads and two rattlesnakes, present at the service, three of which were handled, but the two copperheads were handled the most. There was one timber rattlesnake that was handled for only a brief time, because, Hamblin told me later, the serpent was being aggressive. Two copperheads were handled for the first hour and a half before they were put away for the rest of the service. Approximately fifteen different members, men and women, roughly 18 to 45 years old, handled the two serpents. Hamblin and two other men were the three people who handled the serpents the most. However, about 20 members, roughly 13 men and twenty women, ingested the strychnine, which was sitting on the podium at the front of the church. On the other hand, more women handled

fire than men did, leaning over the blowtorch with their hair, which did not seem to singe at all.

Each person to handle the serpents seemed to be calm in their trance state, but also extremely focused and euphoric. Hamblin was the most animated whilst handling the serpents, jumping around and lifting the serpents above his head, often using them to wipe the sweat off his brow. Others were far less vivacious, holding the serpents much more still but still in a trance state, speaking in tongues. People handled the serpents for approximately two to three minutes each before finding an eager recipient, who would let the handler know it was their turn by tapping them on the shoulder or holding out their hands.

During the second half of the service, a man preached a sermon for about thirty minutes. He was a visiting pastor from another church, but I did not hear his name nor where his home church was located and there was not a program or any set schedule to the service. However, the pastor seemed like he was a member of the group and not an outsider. This pastor was dressed similarly to other members of the congregation and he was very welcomed in the church. He explained to the congregation, that all five signs are important and that worship should not be limited to serpent handling. In addition, he emphasized a person does not have to serpent handle in order to be of the Holiness faith. During his message, a handful of members drank strychnine, but the serpents remained in their boxes and the blowtorches remained untouched. This theme seemed to really resonate with the congregation, the men listened intently, while the women performed a foot washing service in a plastic pool at the front of the church, almost demonstrating the message of the sermon.

The remaining thirty minutes consisted of announcements, goodbyes, and attempting to get everyone's vehicles out of the parking lot, which resembled a complicated game of Tetris. The gravel parking lot is small and no spaces are marked, so this makes for a confusing parking situation. This service was the third day of a ten-day Revival to kick of their Homecoming service, which was held a month after my visit. During revivals, churches have a service everyday until the attendance declines.

Holiness churches hold Homecoming services annually (Hood & Williamson, 2008). Homecoming is usually the largest event a church holds during the year. Members and pastors attend from other Holiness congregations and everyone is welcome. This service usually lasts three days, with elongated services and other churches bring serpents to handle. It is during this service that pastors usually try to bring exotic, new serpents to take up.

Analysis

Overall, my experience at the Tabernacle Church of God was a positive and welcoming event. However, I could sense some skepticism from some of the members, because I am an outsider to the serpent handling tradition. Perhaps this stems from the manner in which serpent handlers have been portrayed in the media, which is not always an accurate depiction. On the other hand, it may be because this is a very tight and close community that has a strong sense of belonging. From what I've gathered, many members do not have the same ideas that Hamblin has when it comes to the "everyone is welcome" policy. Because many people attend the services to observe, and not participate, there is a lack of conversion from new attendees. Furthermore, some people are there to gawk and criticize the practices, which also defeats Hamblin's purpose of welcoming everyone.

There were two other nonmembers in attendance at this service. One was an English professor at Middle Tennessee State University who had attended the Tabernacle Church of God on several occasions, as she was very interested in the practices and religious studies. The other nonmember who attended was a man from Alabama who had heard of the church and was thinking of writing a book. Both of these people attended by themselves and both arrived late and left early, as did many of the members. The congregation seemed to have the same interactions as I did with the members, they were welcoming yet extremely cautious.

I do believe that the members were very eager to share their practices and doctrine with me, though they knew I was not there to be converted or to participate. Some members were more friendly than others, several people came up to me, shaking my hand and welcoming me, encouraging me to ask questions and move closer to the front. I did sit near the rear of the church, I felt this gave me a better view of the whole church. Other members, looked at me in curiosity, as they knew I was there as an observer. A couple of members gave me less than friendly looks, these glances tended to come from the teenage girls in the congregation. I do realize that many people are wary of outsiders and are not eager to allow nonmembers, whether they are in attendance for educational purposes or not, because of the way they have been represented in the media and the fact that the numbers are not growing exponentially.

After the premiere of "Snake Salvation," the reality show starring Andrew Hamblin and his congregation, the Tabernacle Church of God's services were so well attended, that the services were standing room only (Hamblin, personal communication, 2014). However, the majority of people in attendance were not there to convert to the tradition, but there to

watch, and sometimes ridicule, the practices and the members of the church. On the other hand, Hamblin was still very hopeful, telling me that many people attended the services "as a joke" and were not expecting to be moved, and left the church "a changed and saved person." (Hamblin, personal communication, 2014). I attended the service four months after "Snake Salvation" aired its last episode, which was on October 22nd, 2013. There was plenty of space for people to sit, indicating that the numbers had dropped in the months following the reality show.

This endangered Appalachian belief may not be practiced in overwhelming numbers, but the members at the Tabernacle Church of God are extremely faithful and are a part of a close community. Members help one another in and out of church. Spiritually, members take prayer requests and pray for their fellow followers in times of need (Hamblin, personal communication, 2014). However, members will also help other individuals in the community with the fall on difficult financial times, for example, by providing transportation to church or feeding them a meal (Hamblin, personal communication, 2014). I believe that this sense of belonging derives from the fact that Church and the religious experiences are, for some, one of the only constants in the members' lives. Church is a support system and many of the members need the encouragement that this community provides.

Serpent Handling in the Media

There is much controversy surrounding the topic of serpent handling, NPR's "Snake-Handling Preacher Opens Up About 'Takin' up Serpents'" was an article that featured Hamblin and Jamie Coots, who served as Hamblin's mentor and taught him everything about the practice (Block & Cornish, 2013). Coots showed NPR his snake room

behind his house, he explained to the journalists that all of the snakes are cared for, fed, and locked in their cages. The NPR story also spoke with Dr. Ralph Hood, who explained serpent handling is, "kind of like playing Russian roulette. The more frequently you hand [snakes], the more likely you are to get a bite." Serpents don't get tamed […and the serpents are not] "milked, defanged, or weakened by mistreatment." Hood continued, "All I know is that these people do handle [snakes], and most of he time they are not bit, and they can do what scientists think is not likely. Nobody has a good explanation" (Block & Cornish, 2013).

Just two weeks later NPR came out with another article on the topic entitled "Serpent Experts try to demystify Serpent Handling." Audie Cornish states, "We heard from several snake experts, they strongly suggest that a snake's reluctance to bite may have more to do with the creature's poor health than with supernatural intervention" (Cornish & Siegel, 2013). This article consists of interviews of herpetologists from the Kentucky reptile zoo (Cornish & Siegel, 2013). They claim that the snakes are mistreated and because of that the serpents are less likely to strike and their venom becomes less potent. I am not questioning their expertise, but I am concerned about their lack of knowledge about religious studies, specifically the practice of serpent handling. This second NPR article poses the question: "Why are the handlers bitten so rarely, and why are so few of those snakebites lethal?" There is not a certain answer to this question, but I do believe that this articles, and the herpetologists interviewed, jumped to a conclusion without full knowledge of the situation. The herpetologists state in the article that the serpents they have seen from handling churches are often in "bad condition" (Cornish & Siegel, 2013). In addition, the snake experts suggested that serpent handlers may have mistreated or avoided feeding the

serpents in order to make them too weak to strike their handlers. However, it is not mentioned whether these herpetologists have ever attended a serpent handling service (Cornish & Siegel, 2013). Mistreatment most likely occurs in certain churches or has in the past. On the other hand, both Hamblin and Coots are very adamant about the fact that their serpents are well cared for. Hamblin states, "Feed them, take care of them, keep them healthy, they'll last you. Especially females and babies, we don't keep females and babies. If we go out hunting and catch a female you're taking what one would assume be 15 snakes out one spot, destroying the ecosystem and everything else." Hamblin continues, "I do keep a temperature controlled room, you know, warm in the winter, cool in the summer, they're cleaned." (A. Hamblin, personal communication, April 7, 2014). Hamblin and his congregation take turns hunting for serpents, it is a community effort to care and to hunt for the serpents. Furthermore, handling unhealthy serpents defeats the whole premise behind the beliefs of "with signs following" congregations.

Reality Shows, Social Media, and Death

"Snake Salvation" is a reality television show that features Jamie Coots and Andrew Hamblin and a couple members from their congregations. There are several problems with the way that the practice of serpent handling, as well as the members of the tradition are portrayed. Most of the show documents the hunt for snakes and ignores much of what the members believe. "With signs following" congregations do have a strong emphasis on serpent handling, but their community and their overall doctrine is much more powerful; "Snake Salvation" does not emulate this sense of community and belonging.

Jamie Coots and his family are featured on "Snake Salvation." His church is located in Middlesboro, Kentucky, which is approximately thirty miles northeast of Hamblin's

church, in La Follette, TN. The Coots' family has a long line of serpent handlers. At the time of this project, Jamie Coots was the pastor of the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name. His grandfather was also a serpent handling pastor as well as his father, who still handles today. Jamie's son, along with his wife and daughter, also attend his church and all practice the five signs in Mark 16.

Andrew Hamblin and Jamie Coots are of the few serpent handling congregations that allow cameras into their churches; Both pastors are also active on social media. However, this social media is informing more and more people about the practice directly from the serpent handlers themselves. I think social media has both positive and negative outcomes. I do think it is spreading the word, perhaps informing more people of this threatened practice, and in turn, Hamblin and Coots are gaining more followers. On the other hand, the pastors are posting their views and pictures of them engaging in illegal activity, which can taunt law enforcement, but also this might hinder the advancement of understanding the practice. I think the most successful outcome of the use of social media for this group is the community that this outlet can create.

During the service I attended, I noticed that many of the members were young. I have also noticed that most of the followers Hamblin's Facebook are young and are very appreciative of their pastor. Because social media is rather new, it is associated with a younger generation of people, as is Hamblin's congregation. Prayer requests are posted on social media as well as overall spiritual support for the members of these two churches. For this group of people, social media is a way to continue this sense of belonging even when they are not in a church service. Furthermore, when tragedy or rough times strike, this

community takes to social media for support from other serpent handling communities, or believers outside of the area.

Pastor Jamie Coots passed away from a serpent bite on February 15th, 2014; the media had a field day. News sources such as CNN, Huffington Post, TMZ, etc. had multiple articles about the "reality star's death." In an interview with Pastor Hamblin, he describes the situation for serpent handling after Coots' death:

> Everyday I think about him, there's not a day goes by that I don't miss him. I've needed him in this 7 weeks time, I have. It's half and half, you've got the half that says it's just another crazy snake handler that's committed suicide and then you got the half that believes exactly what, and not all serpent handlers believe this and I think it's so silly, you've got what the majority of snake handlers believe: God's appointed time came and that was the way he was going to die. That was his death date and there was nothing to stop it and that's exactly what I preach and believe. If Jamie hadn't got bit and killed that night, he would have died in a car wreck, heart attack, or anything else. I don't remember for sure the time he died, I know all the articles said he died at home which is where they pronounced him dead, because you know, no medical attention, that was his wishes and we upheld that.. You have a very small artery in your hand and it was one in upon billions and billions of chances, but that snake caught that artery for some reason. I've seen Jamie bit in that exact same spot with a 5 foot rattler and no harm come to him, it was like, 'hey whatever' and went on. And then a little 2 foot rattler is comes along and just 'pop' and able enough to catch that right spot. That was his appointed time and there's no other way around it. It's God's will, when his will is set forth and happens that way,

there's nothing we can do, not a doctor, not a prayer, not nothing, his work was done it was time for him to go home. It hurts, I promise you that. (April 7, 2014)

Though this was obviously a difficult time for the congregations and Coots' family, it is, as Hamblin said, what they believe, "God's will." However, it is a time to confirm just how tenacious this community is. The serpent handling communities from both La Follette and Middlesboro went straight to social media for support. A Facebook page was made to raise money for Coots' family and funeral costs. Hundreds of people from the community attended the service and helped raise money. Furthermore, the group stayed strong in their beliefs and did not hesitate to handle serpents the very next service (Hamblin, personal communication, 2013).

Many theories surround the media's influence on serpent handling, some arguing that there is no impact whatsoever. I believe that media can have little clout on serpent handling congregations, perhaps simply altering the manner in which people act during a service. On the other hand, the media's presence can have a major impact on a serpent handler, possibly flaunting the practice to show off for the media, taking up serpents for more of a spectacle, rather than a religious practice. From what I have witnessed, I do think the former is more prevalent than the latter, but the media certainly does have an effect on the serpent handling community.

Keith Tidball and Christopher Tourney (2003) explored the media's impact on serpent handling in Appalachia in their article, "Signifying Serpents: Hermeneutic Change in Appalachian Pentecostal Serpent Handling." They argue that media has completely changed Pentecostal Serpent Handling's doctrine. In addition, they refer to the argument that the practice was an Appalachian reaction to outsiders exploiting the land and the

culture stating, “some Appalachian people have then reacted against their predators by embracing a cultural practice that is so peculiar, so perplexing, that it cannot be co-opted or exploited—namely serpent handling during Christian worship” (Tidball & Tourney, 2003). The two authors suggest that because the practice commenced in the region just as capitalism did, that the two are connected. I disagree with this theory, I think it is coincidence that the two appeared in the region at, roughly, the same era. There is no concrete evidence to suggest that the practice of serpent handling began in retaliation and protection of culture. However, it is true that this community is extremely protective of the practice and their right to religion and Tidball and Tourney have brought up an interesting suggestion, but I do not believe it is the reason for the emergence of serpent handling in Appalachia.

In addition to the above argument, Tidball and Tourney also contend that the media has sparked two changes to the serpent handling doctrine. The two authors state, “the first concerns direct interaction between snakes and snake handlers during this ritual practice” (Tidball & Tourney, 2003). They argue that in the 1920s-40s, when photographs of serpent handling first started circulating, the faces of the handlers were “entranced,” suggesting a more euphoric, serious interaction with the serpent (Tidball & Tourney, 2003). However, Tidball and Tourney suggest, in the 1990s, when they visited a serpent handling church in Eastern Kentucky, the handlers had a much different experience, smiling and caressing the serpents. This suggests that the serpent went from signifying the devil to signifying something that is worshipped. Their only source, however, is photographs from the early 1900s and a visit to one serpent handling service. The reaction of the serpent handling community following a death from a serpent bite has changed over the past century. This

study argues a bite from a serpent "was an indication that one's spiritual status was less than it should be" (Tidball & Tourney, 2003). However, now serpent handling communities often have a different response when a person dies from a bite.

In regards to the reception of death from serpent bite, Jamie Coots' demise serves as a perfect example to the reaction of a serpent handling community. Both Coots' and Hamblin's churches helped to raise money and continued to worship together, seeing this death as a way to bond and grow as a community. In addition, if a person is bit by a serpent, the congregation will pray and unite in order to send the wounded the spiritual support they need (Hood & Williamson, 2008). If anything, a serpent bite makes a serpent handling congregation a more resilient community.

Thomas Burton also argues that "with signs following" congregations have as strong sense of community in his book, *Serpent Handling Believers* (1993). Burton states, "It provides them with a means of coping with the realities of the present; it demonstrates at least to them that they are important, that they have power over obstacles, that they are supported by temporal as well as eternal forces, and that they have a better life coming" (Burton, 1993, p. 130). The "it" that Burton refers to is the practice of serpent handling, but also the Pentecostal traditional overall can be applied here. Though Burton's research was conducted over twenty years ago, it is extremely relevant to the point that community and sense of hope that it brings is a longstanding tradition in Pentecostalism, specifically serpent handling.

Stereotypes

Serpent handling has been falsely represented in the media by people who do not have an interest or background in the knowledge of the practice or religious studies

(McVicar, 2013). In the early 1900s, when the Holy Ghost baptism started to gain believers, the media started to take notice in this new tradition. Michael McVicar discusses the history of Pentecostalism in the media in his article, "Take Away the Serpents From us: the Sign of Serpent Handling and the Development of Southern Pentecostalism" stating, "by the 1910s, however, as more and more Pentecostals throughout the South debated Holy Spirit baptism, secular and religious media alike appropriated this new practice into the holy roller phenomenon" (McVicar, 2013). As the media made the connection of serpent handlers with other Pentecostals, the "holy roller" phenomenon began. As visual media became popular in the 1940s, people began using photographs and this "solidified the iconic otherness of serpent handling for Americans" (McVicar, 2013). This is the root of the exoticization of Appalachian serpent handling.

With reality shows and serpent bite deaths and the various articles on the subject, come stereotypes. In the following paragraphs, just a few of these stereotypes will be addressed. It is vital to point out the stereotypes and to then demystify them. In addition, I will explain how this group confronts these perceptions and how they have remained a community of believers. While the a majority of the media is stuck in the 1940s, with their outdated view of snake handlers as a dangerous, backwards group of people, I argue for a new way to look at this community with the information I have gathered and the church services I have witnessed.

Stereotype: "They do it to prove their faith in God."

In the other NPR article mentioned earlier, "Serpent Handlers Open Up About 'Takin' Up Serpents,'" Melissa Block states, "Snake handlers dwell at the edge of the spiritual frontier, they take up venomous snakes to prove their faith in God" (Block &

Cornish, 2013). It is a common misconception that serpent handlers take up serpents to prove their faith, but it is not true. Hamblin states,

> They [the media] say we say we're doing this to prove our faith. Handling serpents, the only part about faith is having faith that God can let you do it. We do not take up serpents and say, 'Oh God, we're doing this to show we believe in you,' that's not why we take up serpents. We take up serpents because the Word told us we could and through and by the anointing of God to be assigned to a nonbeliever, not a non-believer of snake handling but a non-believer of Christ, and of God and of His power to show them that there is a realness of God and it works people. They wanted God in their life, they may never take up serpents and that's fine but the most important thing they done was they gave their life to Christ yesterday. (A. Hamblin, personal communication, April 7, 2014)

Hamblin, and his congregation, believes if a person does not believe in the existence of God and the Word of the bible, then there seems to be no point in risking your life for it. Each person that was in attendance at the service exhibited a wide array of emotions, including joy and excitement, portraying their adoration and passion for their religion, God, and their community. The members who attended the service were present in every sense of the word, whether than handled serpents or not, they were both physically and mentally there; it seemed that church and their fellow members were the only thing that mattered during that period of time.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that serpent handlers may be a small group, but they are in fact a community that challenges stereotypes. Though this branch of the Pentecostal

tradition may not be the 'norm' within Christianity, it also may not be what has been engraved in our minds about serpent handling. While this practice is illegal and rejected in larger society, Hamblin and his congregation remain faithful and determined. Hamblin states:

> As long as time lasts there will still be somebody that will take up serpents, they'll be somebody who will drink poison, they'll be somebody that will handle fire, and as long as time lasts they'll be people bit, they'll be people die, that's just the way of it. Time will march on, and so will serpent handling. As long as I'm alive I'll make sure it goes on. If I'm the only one jumping straight up and down in the middle of the street with a snake in my hand preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, telling people to repent, be saved by the blood of Christ. If I have to do it by myself, I'll do it. I've come to far to give up, been through too much to stop now. (A. Hamblin, personal communication, April 7, 2014)

This project was completed at a very specific and strong moment in this church's existence. I have argued that serpent handling is an endangered practice and the continually reinforced stereotypes are part of an American exoticism in Appalachia. I have seen a community of people empowered to change their lives through Hamblin's and Coots' congregations. Further, in my documentary, I have shown the vitality of these communities of believers. The religious experience in the Holiness tradition and identity of being a serpent handler gives people a sense of belonging to a larger, caring community. I have shown that serpent handling believers, specifically in Hamblin's congregation, are in fact a community that attempted to confront stereotypes and to remain faithful.

Conclusion

Pentecostalism is dying out in the region of Appalachia, especially serpent handling. Serpent handling and 5-signs Pentecostalism is more than a religion or a belief, it is a culture, a tradition. I think it is important to serpent handlers that their children carry on the practice for many reasons. Death is always a possibility and I think it gives a believer peace if they know the tradition will continue once they pass. For non-handling believers and handling believers alike, I think it is an Appalachian belief of tradition, like passing down recipes, they pass down their beliefs and religious customs. Pentecostalism really hasn't been around for that long and it seems that it is on its way out before it ever really was in.

Chapter 1

In Chapter 1, I discussed the history of Pentecostalism, its practices, and how it came to be. In addition, this chapter examined the split between traditional and nontraditional Pentecostalism, including the split between "with signs following" congregations and non-serpent handling churches. Pentecostalism in the United States has been on a steady incline since 1935 (ARDA). Furthermore, in this chapter I pointed out that Pentecostalism is growing in attendance on a global scale. However, in the region of Appalachia Pentecostalism, including traditional and nontraditional sects, seem to be declining in number.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 discusses the Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ in Vilas, North Carolina, a traditional Pentecostal congregation. Specifically, this chapter described the experience of speaking in tongues, as well as faith healing, and the Holy Ghost baptism. In addition, I

argued that there is a strong sense of belonging that coincides with being an Apostolic and worshipping in this way and this belonging is part of the serpent handling branch as well.

Chapter 3

In the third chapter, I have shown that the endangered indigenous practice of serpent handling is dwindling and the illegality of the tradition furthers its chance of vanishing. Furthermore, I argued that "with signs following" congregations have a right to handle serpents as it is their religious freedom.

Chapter 4

In the final chapter, I argued that there is a strong sense of community in these serpent handling congregations. Though there is death and uncertainty in this practice, the community is supportive of one another when the group falls on hard times. This sense of belonging is crucial to the serpent handling community. However, this was a very specific moment in the Tabernacle Church of God's life and the situation in La Follette, TN. has changed.

Andrew Hamblin saw serpent handling on YouTube one day, and after attending serpent handling services and eventually converting, he started his own church (Hamblin, personal communication, 2014) When I went to Andrew Hamblin's church, I saw a congregation that was excited to be there and they were filled with hope. Many of his members were recovering addicts or attempted suicide survivors and most of them were young. This church gave them something to believe in and something to look forward to, they acted like a big family and they were supportive of one another. However, the Tabernacle Church of God is no longer in existence. The details here do not necessarily

matter, but I will say that it is likely there is very few, if any, remaining members in La Follette, TN.

Jamie Coots' church is also in danger of ceasing to exist. Coots passed away in February of 2014. He left his church in Middlesboro, KY to his son, Cody Coots. Cody's wife does not support his serpent handling and because of this Coots' church is no longer a serpent handling church, but I have with good authority there is still worship at the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name. Without Coots' or Hamblin's' church in existence anymore, the short wave of "media hungry serpent handlers" is also gone. A tradition that once thrived on being passed down from generation to generation cannot even rely on this once absolute means of survival. So now all that remains are a few, very private serpent handling churches sprinkled throughout the mountains of Appalachia.

Serpent handling is an endangered practice in the region of Appalachia that may soon only exist in folklore. I do hope this research brings light to the current situation of Pentecostalism in the region. However, I think it is more important to stress the importance of recording Appalachian culture. Further research on the indigenous traditions of Appalachia is vital.

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Vita

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