

## These Signs Shall Follow: the serpent-handling Christians of Appalachia

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**This paper traces the roots and development of the Church of God with Signs Following, a charismatic Christian group of worshippers that has been increasingly investigated and publicized by the courts and media in the last half century. A Church of God with Signs Following service is much like any other within the Pentecostal Holiness tradition, utilizing spiritual gifts such as “glossolalia” (speaking in tongues) and healing, but with a few important exceptions: members regularly take up poisonous serpents and imbibe deadly toxins during the course of worship. According to members, their ways are Biblically justified and they are subject to no law but God’s. This unique tradition has caused widespread notoriety and stigmatization of the group and to their current position as one of the least understood sects of Christianity. This paper also examines their particular beliefs and practices to explain and hopefully dispel the basis of the modern-day view of the group as deviants from Christianity, or as members of a barbaric cult. The presence of the church as a uniquely rural and southern phenomenon is also explored, as well as popular opinion and litigation that the church has historically faced. Above all, we seek an understanding of how and why this particular (and undeniably peculiar) denomination has endured and staked its claim as a legitimate religious institution in a land where it has been the object of fear and ridicule for decades.**

Throughout Appalachia, a small and unassuming group of believers, perhaps only two thousand in number, continue to practice their misunderstood religion, despite the inherent danger of both arrest and injury. What they do is illegal in most states, and highly stigmatized almost everywhere. The Church of God with Signs Following, as they are loosely defined, remains one of the few environments left in America in which it is possible to die for one’s religious beliefs. A Church of God with Signs Following service is much like any other within the Pentecostal Holiness tradition, with a few important exceptions: members regularly take up poisonous serpents and imbibe deadly toxins during the course of worship. This unique tradition has caused widespread notoriety and stigmatization of the group and to their current position as one of the least understood sects of Christianity. Members are often ostracized and persecuted by the outside community and other denominations, and face prosecution from authorities for both their practices and the deaths and injuries that have occurred because of their rituals. In this paper, the roots and development of the church, as well as their particular beliefs and practices, are traced to explain and hopefully dispel the basis of the modern-day view of the group as deviants from Christianity, or as members of a barbaric cult. The presence of the church as a uniquely rural and southern phenomenon is also

explored, as well as popular opinion and litigation that the church has historically faced. Above all, we seek an understanding of how and why this particular (and undeniably peculiar) denomination has endured and staked its claim as a legitimate religious institution in a land where it has been the object of fear and ridicule for decades.

Religion, by its organic nature, is complex and cross-influential, drawing inspiration in doctrine and practice from countless sources. It does not proceed in clean scientific order, one event following the next in rational succession. Rather, religions develop concurrently, borrow from each other, merge, split into factions, adapt to changing times, alter their names and focus, and take countless other actions that confound their true origins. Thus it is very difficult to separate the history of any one denomination from others, or even to discern a line of descent or development. The origins of the sign followers movement are characteristically mystical and entangled with numerous other influencing southern religions and movements, such as Methodism, Pentecostalism, and the Holiness movement.

It is important to distinguish that the sign followers did not develop directly out of the Pentecostal movement with which they are often associated, nor do all consider themselves to be a part of it today. In fact, as Pentecostal groups have distanced themselves from the infamy of serpent-

handling congregations and the charismatic Christianity of their early days, sign followers cling to their roots and are thus more easily seen as a legacy of historical and less-visible denominations. Indeed, McCauley notes that the smallest difference exists between the churches of the sign followers and those of Holiness independent non-denominational groups; their practices are very similar, with the exception of serpent-handling.<sup>1</sup> Thus, an understanding of the Holiness legacy is essential to comprehending the doctrine of the sign followers. Pentecostalism is widely acknowledged to have been born out of the Holiness movement, a group preaching the doctrine of re-establishing a New Testament, or apostolic, church and receiving the Holy Spirit in the mid-nineteenth century. Holiness followers strove to return to Biblical faith and practices, through rejecting the trappings and vices of popular culture (such as alcohol, tobacco, popular entertainment, and fashion) and the belief that the Holy Spirit still worked among Christ's believers as it had in the days after his resurrection. A central belief of the movement was that the spiritual gifts, as manifestations of the Holy Spirit, received by first century Christians (such as those of prophecy, healing, and speaking in tongues) could be received and practiced by modern believers. This movement developed from the Methodist ministry in the U.S., particularly the Wesleyan tradition which emphasized the achievement of perfection after spiritual redemption.<sup>2</sup> Methodism, which along with the Baptist and Presbyterian churches formed the three largest and most influential religious groups in America at the time, was also characterized by and controversial for its lively revivals and ecstatic performances by adherents during its early years.<sup>3</sup>

The Pentecostal church grew from modest beginnings to become a worldwide force, and one that has influenced the development of the sign followers movement and the doctrine they preach. The name is taken from the first Biblical Pentecost, or the fiftieth day after Christ's resurrection, in which the Spirit entered the believers and allowed them to speak in unfamiliar languages, or "in tongues" as it came to be called (though scientifically referred to as glossolalia). The belief that contemporary Christians can receive the same spiritual gifts as did the apostles is a cornerstone of Pentecostal doctrine and an evident descendent from the Holiness movement.<sup>4</sup> It is generally assumed that the crystallization of Pentecostalism doctrine (if not the birth of the denomination itself) occurred during the 1906 - 1915 Azusa Street Revival in

Los Angeles, in which thousands witnessed the fiery preaching of William J. Seymour, an African-American steeped in the Holiness tradition, and the controversial services he presided over, which included such shocking and unorthodox happenings as interracial mixing in the congregation and women in leadership positions. Seymour focused intently on the importance and attainability of the Holy Spirit for modern Christians and events such as miraculous healings and, most importantly, speaking in tongues were reported. The proceedings at Azusa Street polarized the Christian community, drawing joy and admiration from some, and fervent criticism and indignation from others, who derided the participants with names such as "Holy Rollers". From this revival, Pentecostalism received national attention and spread across the nation along with the idea that the spiritual gifts of the apostles were both available and necessary to faithful Christians.

The tenets of Pentecostalism, however, were being practiced and challenged long before the events of Azusa Street, though under different names. A group of disillusioned mainstream Christians were responsible for the spread of the Pentecostal tradition into the south, and for forming its largest and most influential sects today. In 1886, eight members of various Baptist congregations in both North Carolina and Tennessee met in the mountains to air grievances against what they perceived was the slackening of Biblical tenets in the current religious environment and to embrace the doctrine of holiness. They organized in a "Christian Union", and were soon excommunicated from their various houses of worship for their beliefs. Out of this initial meeting came the spread of ideas and the founding of new congregations (including directly what became the second largest southern Pentecostal body, the Church of God in Cleveland, TN), and the beginning of the southern Pentecostal movement, emphasizing tenets of conversion, sanctification, and baptism in the Holy Ghost. The Church of God maintains that an 1896 revival held in the Shearer Schoolhouse in Cherokee County, North Carolina, in which speaking in tongues was recorded, was the true beginning of Pentecostalism as a whole, rather than the 1906 revival, but this claim is generally unsubstantiated on the basis of the Shearer revival's localized nature.<sup>5</sup>

What, then, truly defines Pentecostal doctrine, and how do the beliefs of the sign followers compare? Keeping in mind that different Church of God with Sign Following congregations follow different rules and are autonomous in their practices, there are

generally many similarities in both doctrine and custom: in both traditions, conventions of modest and Biblically-sanctioned dress for men and women are followed. Popular fashion is opposed, with women prohibited the use of cosmetics or the cutting of hair, and wearing conservative long dresses or skirts and long sleeves. Men also observe modest dress, and keep hair short. A verse from the King James's Version Bible is cited for this strict gender-defining convention: "The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God" (Deuteronomy 22:5).<sup>6</sup> Church services and worship styles are often analogous, characterized by lively, ecstatic sermons and praise, singing and dancing, and other exuberant displays characteristic of the charismatic Christian influence.

The importance of the signs of the Holy Spirit as described in the Gospel of Mark to both groups cannot be overestimated. Mark 16: 17-18 puts forth these signs: "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." These five signs of casting out devils, glossolalia, serpent-handling, poison imbibing, and healing are where the majority of differences occur between Pentecostals and sign-following denominations. While Pentecostals recognize all five signs, serpent-handling and the drinking of "deadly thing[s]" are taken as symbolic rather than literal: if one were to do these things, the power of faith could sustain the person, but this does not mean one should actually do these things to test God: "Ye shall not tempt the Lord, your God" (Deuteronomy 6:16). Sign followers believe all of the signs to be literal and direct commandments of God, and necessary to fulfill their religious obligations and show their devotion. The word "shall" is often the point of contention between the groups: sign followers insist that in context it signifies "must" or "will", not "could". Belief in the inerrancy of the Bible is fundamental to this interpretation: if Jesus had meant that followers "could" handle serpents, he would've said that. Luke 10:19 is cited as further support for their doctrine: "Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you." Differences in interpretation of these verses form the basis of the dissociation of Pentecostals from sign followers.

The origins of the sign followers movement are shrouded in mystery: the actual dates and locations vary with different accounts, but all agree upon the importance of an enigmatic and contradictory man named George Hensley in disseminating the practice in southern Appalachia. Hensley was born sometime between 1880 and 1882 (no birth certificate or records available) and, according to a 1936 newspaper article, "did not know how to read or write and could not spell the name of his birthplace in Tennessee".<sup>7</sup> It does, however, bear mentioning that the birth certificates of his first three children list his place of birth in three different states.<sup>8</sup> Initially a Baptist, Hensley was expelled from his church and later re-baptized into the Church of God, where he eventually became a pastor (before being excommunicated once again for his serpent-handling). Accounts differ as to how Hensley first came upon the practice: some say he climbed White Oak Mountain in southeast Tennessee, praying for a sign as to how to interpret some verses that had been troubling him (Mark 16:17-18). As he prayed for guidance, a snake allegedly appeared to him, and he found he could handle it without injury, thus confirming his belief that serpent-handling was a commandment of God. The story goes on to say that Hensley carried the snake back to his church, where others were anointed with the Holy Spirit and handled it without injury. Other accounts have him believing in the truth of these verses, but not practicing until a group seeking to discredit the Church of God let loose a box of serpents at a tent revival. Hensley calmly handled them, demonstrating to all present the apparent truth of his convictions. Yet another account describes how Hensley witnessed serpent-handling almost twenty years before he was to try it himself in the actions of Nancy Younger Klienieck, a Virginia "prophetsess of Jesus" in the late 1800s. Klienieck spoke prophecies and handled serpents in revivals held in the coal towns of the Virginias, but even then serpent-handling was not unknown among religious bodies.<sup>9</sup> It would be impossible to ever pin down where the first instance of handling occurred, or what person or group was first to practice it.

Since the introduction of the sign followers movement into modern Christianity, the practice has spread beyond Appalachia but remained mostly contained to the southern states, with notable concentrations in Tennessee and the Virginias. Many reasons for this have been proposed, including geographical isolation, widespread poverty limiting migration, declining economic

situations in rural areas with the advent of industrialization, and a specific propensity in Tennessee for the creation of new groups. One historian notes that the state has more sects per million inhabitants than any other, and refers to it as the “most prolific breeding ground for new sects in the U.S.”<sup>10</sup> He describes the unique environment in the state that made it so willing to innovate in the area of religion: Tennessee and the Appalachian region as a whole was originally settled in large part by Scots-Irish people who immigrated to find freedom and opportunities they lacked in their home countries. These immigrants were rebelling against, among other things, the rigidity and strict solemnity of doctrine in the Church of Scotland.<sup>11</sup> Thus, a legacy of separatism and independence, a “heritage of dissent”<sup>12</sup> was already established in the south. When Tennessee achieved statehood in 1796, a new wave of immigration into the state occurred, along with a revival movement along the frontier. Many new settlers across Tennessee and indeed the entire south brought their newfound religion into their communities, establishing a foundation of more or less fundamentalist denominations that favored a traditional approach to the Bible for the Holiness movement to build upon. Once this movement had taken off and the signs were an integral component to worship (i.e., glossolalia and healing were already practiced), it was a small step from believing in a few signs to believing in and practicing them all.

Another important reason for the Holiness and sign followers movements being centered in Appalachia is the lack of focus on formal education in the church. The south has always lagged behind the north in both quality and quantity of education, and this was particularly evident in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the southern society was almost entirely rural and/or recovering from the devastation of the Civil War. Appalachia was instead a place of oral history and culture, where personal charisma and emotion were valued over dry knowledge. Naturally, the Holiness movement appealed to the inhabitants; a movement where emotional religion and enthusiastic worship took precedence over strict doctrinal learning and preaching. Leonard describes how the sign following hermeneutic was both developed and spread through oral tradition and sermons, rather than through written works or schooling.<sup>13</sup> These movements did not overly value education in ministers or adherents, instead emphasizing the depth and sincerity of belief over strict doctrinal knowledge. As previ-

ously stated, the best-known early practitioner of handling, George Hensley, was an illiterate pastor. The quotation of Bible passages during his services was thus either from his own memorization of them (which he had obviously done from oral sources) or was done by his wife, who assisted him when reading was required.<sup>14</sup> This was not uncommon, to have uneducated men leading the congregation, nor was it regarded as shameful. As long as a man truly believed in the word of God and had an emotional connection with his beliefs, it did not matter if he could read or write. Indeed, sometimes excessive education was distrusted or shunned for making one too worldly and distracting from one’s religious obligations. It should be mentioned that this is by no means unique to the movement: many other groups discourage or curtail formal higher education for these same reasons (e.g., the Amish). In the words of a 20<sup>th</sup> century Holiness preacher, “God speaks to the heart. The Devil speaks to the head.”<sup>15</sup>

Having discussed where serpent-handling originated and is historically practiced, we now shift to a description of those who perform it. Who are the sign followers? What made them decide to follow the tenets of an infamous religion where the possibility of danger is so pervasive? Generally speaking, serpent-handling is localized and passed down by families. Most current practitioners were brought up in the church or live in a church-centered community where conversion was never really an issue. But for those who did not begin as followers, a dramatic event was necessary to spark their beliefs. Many attended tent revivals or services where the faithful sang, danced, and preached the gospel while covered in snakes and drinking strychnine; others were inspired to take up serpents themselves by witnessing charismatic leaders such as Hensley in action. Still others were converted by observing personal miracles and evidence of the signs in their everyday life: tales of incredible survival, hearing the voice of God, and even the raising of the dead through prayer abound in sign followers’ testimonies. Most left a similar or parallel religious tradition, such as Pentecostal or Baptist to pursue the signs. Followers consider themselves nondenominational Christians, believing religious factions to be destructive and not in keeping with the original spirit of the apostles. This inclusive attitude (coupled with the realities of isolation and rural life) leads many sign followers to attend multiple churches, occasionally even those of different traditions. As one Holiness pastor remarked in 1990,

“I go to Baptist churches [...] but you know, after awhile, I just get a little bored”.<sup>16</sup>

Given the dangerous possibilities and legal ramifications of their practices, why do sign followers continue to observe their controversial beliefs? Their ultimate goal lies in preserving the inerrancy of the Bible: If any one passage is not taken as absolute truth, they argue, the veracity of the entire work is questioned. By following the signs as they believe them, they are demonstrating to all that the text is undeniably true, and that they are confirming God’s word rather than tempting Him. Sign followers do not actively proselytize; instead, they allow their practices to speak for themselves in preaching to non-believers and skeptics. Similarly, they believe that events such as bites are necessary to disprove common misconceptions held by outsiders, such as that the snakes are drugged or de-fanged before being handled. This also goes for sickness or death caused by poisons: many outsiders deny that real toxins are consumed, or believe that immunity develops over time. A common view expressed by followers is that Jesus never said the serpent wouldn’t bite: He just said a believer would be taken care of if it did: “And some of them of understanding shall fall...” (Daniel 11:35); “...he that loseth his life for my sake, shall find it” (Matthew 10:39). Followers accept that this care may be in the form of death or suffering, and that this is decided by the will of God and should not be questioned by humans: One Holiness bishop remarked, “We realize God permits death... to inherit the things God has for me, I have to go through death sometime”.<sup>17</sup> A bite or death may also be a reinforcement of faith, when it is lacking in the handler or others in the congregation or gathering: “...and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him” (Ecclesiastes 10:8). Sign followers view themselves as preservers of the true gospel, blessed and just as often burdened with demonstrating the legitimacy of the Bible to a harsh and unbelieving world.

Serpent-handling was more or less localized during its inception and early days, but was spread as many adherents were forced to migrate beyond their mountain communities to search for work in the years leading up to the Great Depression. Within a few decades, sign following churches were to be found in states such as Ohio, Indiana, and Florida. With this expansion of the movement came increased attention from the American public, and an overwhelmingly negative response to the activities and beliefs of the church. As early as 1920, the Pentecostal Church of God was trying to distance

itself from the negative press and perception of the sign followers by protesting their use of the “Church of God” title, outlawing serpent-handling, and excommunicating those who continued to practice.<sup>18</sup> A rash of highly publicized injuries, deaths, and court cases in the ‘30s and ‘40s only amplified the church’s infamous reputation. One need only to look over newspaper headlines regarding the church to see how deeply ingrained the discrimination was and how the sign followers were perceived, even by others in their communities: “Continue to Play with Poisonous Snakes” *Chattanooga News*, 1914<sup>19</sup>; “Snakes Figured in Pagan Religions but Only Lately in Christian Rites” *Chattanooga Times*, 1945<sup>20</sup>; “Court Upholds Ban on Snake Worship” *Chattanooga News Free Press*, 1948<sup>21</sup>; “Girl, 14, Bitten by Snake at Cult” *Chattanooga Times*, 1948<sup>22</sup>; “Leaders Claim Kentucky has 1,000 Cultists” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 1947<sup>23</sup>; and “Snake-tossing Preachers Offer to Let Hearers Pick ‘em Up; Find No Takers” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 1939<sup>24</sup> are but a few of the hundreds of defamatory articles published in major papers that were, in many cases, operating only miles from the churches themselves.

In response to the epidemic of incidents and negative press in the ‘30s and ‘40s, many states and communities passed legislation against handling snakes. Often these laws did not specifically mention handling serpents in a religious context, but merely alluded to endangering the public and qualifications for possessing or transporting snakes. Kentucky was the first southern state to pass such a law in 1940, levying a fine on those convicted of religious serpent handling. Other states, including Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Alabama, and Virginia, soon followed suit, instituting various qualifications (such as a permit to handle poisonous snakes) and penalties of fines and jail time for violations. Initially, Georgia’s law was the harshest in the country: twenty years imprisonment for handling or the death penalty is handling resulted in a casualty. This law was later repealed due to its severity hindering convictions, and replaced with a law requiring a permit for handling poisonous reptiles.<sup>25</sup> West Virginia was the only state with a significant sign follower population that never passed legislation regulating the practice (though local communities are free to set their own laws) and has never reported a case appealed to a higher court.

Since their rise to infamy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, various congregations across Appalachia have responded to public curiosity and skepticism by welcoming the media and attention garnered

from print, documentaries, and the academic world, despite the legal and personal risks entailed. Several social scientists, photographers, and researchers maintain decades-long relationships with churches, continually visiting, studying, and recording their events and tribulations. From Peter Adair's "Holy Ghost People", a 1967 documentary on the church in Scrabble Creek, West Virginia, to the 2006 documentary "Heaven Come Down" by Michael Mees and Gabriel Wyre, many sign following churches have used the media as outlets to dispel myths and false assumptions and explain their unique teachings. Some invite photographers and reporters (provided they don't interfere) into their weekly services or revivals, and these are seen as opportunities to reach out to nonbelievers and convince others of their sincerity and dedication to their faith. At a 1973 homecoming service at a church near Newport, Tennessee, the pastor addressed a crowd of newsmen with, "We want you to see and judge for yourself [...] we welcome people to come to our church, no matter who they are".<sup>26</sup> The attendees also included a professional snake exhibitor, whose attitude changed from skepticism in the honesty of the handlers to awed respect and acceptance after witnessing a young follower handle a deadly Indian cobra without harm.<sup>27</sup>

The sign followers themselves displayed remarkable composure and understanding towards outsiders and those who criticize their practice. As previously mentioned, music and singing form an integral component of a Holiness service, and the legacy of nonresistance as influenced by the Gospel of Matthew<sup>28</sup> is clearly evident in songs unique to the church. A song by an unknown author, entitled "I'm a Holiness Child", contains the lyrics "I went down to the altar with a hunger in my soul, I did not care what the people said for the Spirit had control...No, you can't make me doubt it, you've come too late to change, the Bible means just what it says, and it's gonna stay the same".<sup>29</sup> Another song, progressively composed by members of many churches as it spread throughout Appalachia (again emphasizing a tradition of oral doctrinal development), is entitled "Holy, Holy, Holy", and features such verses as: "They call us holy rollers, but that's alright... they say we're of the devil, but that's alright... they call us serpent handlers, but that's alright... they say we've all gone crazy, but that's alright... oh, if you're living holy, that's alright."<sup>30</sup> Adherents seek to understand the cynicism of doubters while preserving the integrity of their beliefs, generally displaying a much more tolerant attitude than the

outsiders who accuse them of various crimes and deviations from Christianity.

Sign followers have also historically shown a distinctly pacifist reaction and resistance to judgment handed down by the courts. The continued existence of the practice in the face of bans and state laws, and the behavior of believers when directly confronted or called into court are clearly indicative of both the nature and sincerity of their faith. Members never deny the charges levied against them, and only protest when aspects of their faith are exaggerated or misrepresented. When penalties such as fines or jail time are handed down by the courts, the accused followers generally accept and perform their sentence without complaint, and then return to their practices, citing God's law and not man's as the one they must be accountable to: "There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?" (James 4:12). Several congregations have been repeatedly called to court, disregarding entirely the court's ruling and returning to practices when legal representatives are no longer in attendance at services. In an interesting contrast to the dramatic views of American popular opinion, many states have adopted a policy of "don't ask, don't tell" of prosecution for sign following congregations: obviously, the amount of media attention proved some churches were violating the law, but more often than not, local authorities turned a blind eye to these transgressions until public sentiment, triggered by a tragic or unusual event, made it impossible.

One such example that may be taken as representative of trials against sign followers as a whole is the series of court cases in the 1970s involving churches from Del Rio and Carson Springs, Tennessee. In 1970, attendees of the Sand Hill Church revival were found guilty of violating state law by handling serpents, but were levied no punishment; instead, they were advised by a sympathetic judge to continue their practices on private property, out of reach of the law. Following the judge's counsel, the church at Carson Springs purchased its own land and building, and practiced the signs without police interference for the next three years. It was then that a tragic event spurred public outrage and necessitated governmental action. Two members, Buford Pack and Jimmy Ray Williams, took strychnine during a worship service and died later that night; Buford in his car in the parking lot, and Jimmy in his home. It was the first time ingesting strychnine for both. Within hours, news of the situation had spread throughout the

small community, and the Carson Springs sheriff and deputies were on their way to the Williams home. Finding Jimmy gravely ill but still alive, they asked him if he wanted medical treatment. Jimmy refused, supported by his family and friends, and was thus unable to be forcibly removed to a hospital. Refusal of medical treatment by adults, even in the face of death, is a universally recognized legal right that could not be overturned in this case: Jimmy was conscious and cognizant of his decision, and no other considerations that could be used to protest his decision were present. It should be noted that this is not a unique feature of the sign followers movement, and occurs in other denominations of charismatic Christianity, as well as to some degree in the Church of Christ, Scientist.

The widely-publicized deaths focused negative attention on the mountain community, and local authorities were forced to take action lest the outraged public accuse them of not doing their jobs. In April, 1973, proceedings began against the Holiness Church of God in Jesus' Name, presided over by the same judge that had pardoned them three years previously. During the course of the trial, several exaggerated or simply false allegations were made against the church, including that strychnine consumption and serpent-handling were mandatory and that the church willingly endangered its members by encouraging tests of faith. In keeping with their policy of openness, the church seized this opportunity to refute these libelous claims and explain aspects of their faith that were misrepresented. The defense (led by the accused) was so convincing that they persuaded the coroner to change the causes of death listed for both men from suicide to accidental, an important victory in dispelling misconceptions about the intentions and faith of the believers. The church was ordered to discontinue their dangerous practices, and allow officials to attend services to ensure compliance. This was permitted and continued for a period of several months. Soon, however, the church returned to sign following and was called into court once again. The district attorney general in charge of the prosecution, a Mr. Henry F. Swann, represented the opinions of the majority of the public in stating that if this church and its unlawful practices were not crushed, the entire county would become infamous for snake handling.<sup>31</sup> Throughout the trial, the accused calmly accepted all charges made, listened to the testimonies of accusers while encouraging them to be truthful, and assented to the final ruling of a combined fifty days in jail and fines totaling \$250,

divided amongst two preachers. The sentence was ultimately carried out, with many church members offering to serve the jail time in their preachers' stead. In 1975, the case reached the Tennessee state supreme court (*Swann v. Pack*) where the congregation was finally conclusively prohibited from the practices of serpent-handling and poison drinking.

The legislation passed and penalties levied during this period have become the grounds of an ongoing legal battle for religious freedom in the Holiness community. While the First Amendment inarguably provides for freedom of religion for the American people, the precedent set by early serpent-handling cases provides the precedent to restrict this right when it is believed to endanger the public or be counterproductive to the aims of the state. The rationale most commonly provided by those supporting anti-handling laws is that a citizen is free to believe whatever he or she chooses; only when it is put into practice is it liable for legal regulation. In this way, freedom of religious belief is not infringed upon, only religious practice. As the judge in the 1973 Pack trial remarked to the Carson Springs congregation: "I'm going to do you boys the way I do the drunks. We leave them alone 'til they take a drink. We'll leave you alone 'til you pick up a snake."<sup>32</sup> The Pack trial is indicative of the policy of sign followers as a whole regarding governmental regulation: as soon as the mandated penalties are served, they immediately return to the forbidden activities. Members do not recognize the right of the government to interfere with their religious practices, and also cite the Constitution as the basis for their claims. One sign follower remarked: "Well, according to the Constitution of the United States, it seems to me like it gives us the privilege to worship the Lord according to our conscience".<sup>33</sup> The triumph of God's law over man's is inevitable, as followers "obey the law of the land only so long as it is pleasing to God".<sup>34</sup> Members of serpent-handling congregations understand they are breaking the law, but almost unanimously agree that such laws will not stop them from worshipping as they see fit.

In the course of this paper, we have explored the roots and practices of the Church of God with Signs Following, its basis as a uniquely southern institution, and public perceptions and litigation historically faced by this group. The story and trials of "them that believe" are illustrative of the nature of religious freedom in modern America, as well as the nature of tolerance of minority groups. The legacy left behind by the followers and those who have died in their beliefs is certainly worthy of study

and respect, even by those who seek to prosecute and halt the free exercise of their convictions. The disproportionate amount of attention received by this group has led to legal, psychological, and philosophical questions that are not easily answered: how far can the government go in regulating the religion of the people? Is religious practice permissible if some are harmed or killed? These moral dilemmas, and others, have kept the sign followers in the public attention for nearly a century, and will most likely be contested for centuries to come.

“Be not afraid, only believe.” (Mark 5:36)

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## Endnotes

- 1 Deborah Vansau McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995) p. 255.
- 2 Thomas Burton, *Serpent-Handling Believers* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993) p. 6.
- 3 Robert Kelvin Holliday, *Tests of Faith* (Oak Hill, WV: The Fayette Tribune, Inc., 1966) p. 96.
- 4 Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001) p. 265.
- 5 McCauley 297.
- 6 All verses from King James Version Bible, the text used by sign followers.
- 7 Bill Abbott, “Man Bitten by Preacher’s Snake Dies,” *Tampa Morning Tribune* 5 May 1936: 1, 6, quoted in Burton 150.
- 8 Burton 150.
- 9 Jimmy Morrow and Robin W. Hood, Jr., *Handling Serpents* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005) p. 2.
- 10 David E. Harrell, Jr. et al, *Religion in the Southern States* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983) p. 289.
- 11 Holliday 97.
- 12 Manfred O. Meitzen et al, *Religion in the Southern States* (Macon, GA: Mercer University press, 1983) p. 376.
- 13 Bill J. Leonard, *The Bible and Serpent-handling in Perspectives in American Religion and Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999) p. 236.
- 14 Steven M. Kane, *Snake-handlers of Southern Appalachia*, Ph. D. dissertation, Princeton University, quoted in Leonard 240.
- 15 McCauley 274.
- 16 Leonard 240.
- 17 Carden 69.
- 18 Karen W. Carden and Robert W. Pelton, *The Persecuted Prophets* (Cranbury, NJ: A.S. Barnes and Co., Inc., 1976) p. 19.
- 19 No author given, 18 Sept. 1914: 5.

- 20 Charles Pennington, 16 Sept. 1945:21.
- 21 Alex Corliss, 11 Dec. 1948: 1+.
- 22 No author given, 23 Aug. 1948: 3.
- 23 Joe Creason, 26 Oct. 1947, magazine sec.: 6-9.
- 24 Ed Edstrom, 15 Sept. 1939, sec. 3:12. All articles referenced in Burton.
- 25 Brad E. Kelle, "Snake Handlers", *New Georgia Encyclopedia* 7 Apr 2006, 2 Dec 2008 <<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-1581>>.
- 26 Carden 23.
- 27 Carden 43.
- 28 Matthew 5:39 "But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also".
- 29 Quoted in David L. Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents: snake handlers of eastern Kentucky* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995) p. 23.
- 30 Carden 168.
- 31 Carden 107.
- 32 Carden 108.
- 33 Holliday 66.
- 34 Holliday 115.