

Snake handling

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Snake handling, also called **serpent handling**, is a religious ritual in a small number of Pentecostal churches in the United States, usually characterized as rural and part of the Holiness movement. The practice began in the early 20th century in Appalachia and plays only a small part in the church service. Practitioners believe serpent handling dates to antiquity and quote the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Luke to support the practice:

And these signs shall follow them that believe: In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues. They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. (Mark 16:17-18 (<http://tools.wmflabs.org/bibleversefinder2/?book=Mark&verse=16:17-18&src=KJV>))

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. (Luke 10:19 (<http://tools.wmflabs.org/bibleversefinder2/?book=Luke&verse=10:19&src=KJV>))

Another passage from the New Testament used to support snake handlers' beliefs is Acts 28:1-6 (<http://tools.wmflabs.org/bibleversefinder2/?book=Acts&verse=28:1-6&src=KJV>), which relates that Paul was bitten by a venomous viper and suffered no harm:

And when they were escaped, then they knew that the island was called Melita. And the barbarous people shewed us no little kindness: for they kindled a fire, and received us every one, because of the present rain, and because of the cold. And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand. And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live. And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm. Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly: but after they had looked a great while, and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds, and said that he was a god.



Snake handling at Pentecostal Church of God with Signs Following, Lejunior, Harlan County, Kentucky 15 September 1946 (National Archives and Records Administration). Photo by Russell Lee.

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History

Many writers have attempted to designate George Went Hensley (1880–1955) as both the progenitor and popularizer of Appalachian religious snake handling,^{[1][2]} but his role in initiating the practice has been disputed by academic studies. Kimbrough notes that claims of Hensley being the originator of snake handling are usually found to be unsubstantiated by research, and the origins of the observance are unclear.^[2] Hood and Williamson similarly argue that the beginnings of Pentecostal snake handling rites cannot be ascribed to a single person,^[1] and that the observance arose independently on multiple occasions.^[3]

There is no doubt among historians, however, that Hensley helped spread Pentecostal snake handling throughout the southeast United States^[3] and that coverage of Hensley's ministry was influential in prompting various churches to include the practice in their services.^[4] The media has focused on popular snake handlers such as Hensley, and the deaths of ministers due to snakebite have received particular attention.^[5]

George Went Hensley

George Went Hensley (1880–1955) is often credited with introducing snake handling practices into the Church of God Holiness, an association of autonomous Christian Methodist congregations, founding the Dolly Pond Church of God in Birchwood, Tenn. around 1910.^{[6][7]} He later traveled the Southeast promoting the practice, eventually resigning his ministry to start the first holiness movement church to require snake handling as evidence of salvation.^{[8][9]} If believers truly had the Holy Spirit within them, Hensley argued, they should be able to handle rattlesnakes and any number of other venomous serpents. They should also be able to drink poison and suffer no harm whatsoever. Snake handling as a test or demonstration of faith became popular wherever Hensley traveled and preached in the small towns of Tennessee, Kentucky, the Carolinas, Virginia, Ohio, and Indiana. Sister-churches later sprang up throughout the Appalachian region.^[10] In July 1955, Hensley died following a snakebite received during a service he was conducting in Altha, Florida.^[11]

Hensley's life was unusual for a clergyman. He had four wives (the first three marriages ended in divorce) and was frequently drunk. Practitioners of snake handling continue to view him as a great man. Kimbrough

recorded a discussion with an advocate of snake handling who dismissed Hensley's personal failings as slanderous fabrications.^[12] His advocacy, leadership, and – in particular – his personal charisma were important factors in the advancement of the movement.^[13]

Prevalence

Most religious snake handlers are still found in the Appalachian Mountains and other parts of the southeastern United States, especially in Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, West Virginia, and South Carolina. In 2001, about 40 small churches practiced snake handling, most of them considered to be holiness-Pentecostals or charismatics. In 2004, there were four snake handling congregations in the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia, Canada.^[14]

Ralph Hood, professor of social psychology and the psychology of religion at the University of Tennessee, who has studied the snake handling movement, indicated in 2003 that the practice is "currently at a fairly low ebb of popularity"^[15] A 2013 article by National Public Radio gave a figure of "about 125" churches where snakes are handled, but also indicated that "snake handlers are notoriously private".^[16]

Beliefs and practices

As in the early days, worshipers are still encouraged to lay hands on the sick, speak in tongues, provide testimony of miracles, and occasionally consume poisons such as strychnine.^[17] Snake handlers do not worship snakes, instead using the snakes to show non-Christians that God protects them from harm. In church services, when they feel the anointing of the Holy Spirit come upon them, these Christians reach into boxes, pick up venomous snakes and hold them up as they pray, sing, and dance. Gathering mainly in homes and converted buildings, snake handlers generally adhere to strict dress codes such as uncut hair, ankle-length dresses, and no cosmetics for women; and short hair and long-sleeved shirts for men. Most preach against any use of tobacco or alcohol.

Like their predecessors, today's snake handlers believe in a strict and literal interpretation of the Bible, and most Church of God with Signs Following churches are non-denominational, believing that denominations are human-made and carry the Mark of the Beast. Worshipers attend services several nights a week, where if the Holy Spirit "intervenes", services can last up to five hours; the minimum is usually ninety minutes. Those who die from snakebites are never criticized for lack of adequate faith; it is believed that it was simply the deceased's time to die.^[18]

The final twelve verses of Mark 16 are a point of controversy. Most scholars, following the approach of the textual critic Bruce Metzger, believe that verses 9-20 were not part of the original text.^[19] Chronologically, the Gospel of Mark was the first of the four gospels, and the last twelve verses of Mark are absent from the two earliest manuscripts. Early third-century theologians like Origen and Clement of Alexandria also make no mention of them.^[20] Because of patristic evidence from the late 2nd century for the existence of copies of Mark with the longer ending, it is contended by a majority of scholars that the longer ending must have been written and attached no later than the early 2nd century.^[21]

Condition of the snakes

Kristen Wiley, curator of the Kentucky Reptile Zoo, said that the risk of fatal bites from snake handlers' animals is significantly reduced by the familiarity of the snakes with humans and by the poor health of snakes

that are insufficiently fed and watered and kept in crowded areas.^[22] Snakes that are maltreated produce weaker venom and are less likely to strike, suggesting that deaths related to snake handling are more likely to occur when someone handles a newly captured snake, still in relatively good health, and then refuses medical treatment. Snakes owned by snake handlers only live an average of three to four months, whereas snakes well cared for in captivity can live 10 to 20 years.

Legal issues

All Appalachian states except West Virginia outlawed the snake-handling ritual when it first emerged. The states of Alabama, Kentucky, and Tennessee have passed laws against the use of venomous snakes and/or other reptiles that endangers the lives of others, or without a permit. The Kentucky law specifically mentions religious services; in Kentucky snake handling is a misdemeanor and punishable by a \$50 to \$100 fine.^[23] Most snake handling, therefore, takes place in the homes of worshipers, which circumvents the process of attempting to obtain a government permit for the practice. Law enforcement usually ignores it unless and until they are specifically called in, which does not usually happen unless a death has resulted.

Snake handling is legal in the state of West Virginia, as the current state constitution does not allow any law to impede upon nor promote a religious practice.^[24] Snake handling was made a felony punishable by death under Georgia law in 1941, following the death of a seven-year-old of a rattlesnake bite. However, the punishment was so severe that juries would refuse to convict, and the law was repealed in 1968.^[25] The American Civil Liberties Union has defended the religious freedom of snake handlers against various attempts to have the practice banned.^[26]

In 1992, Glen Summerford, a serpent-handling preacher, was convicted of attempted murder of his wife with a rattlesnake.^{[27][28]}

In "Salvation on Sand Mountain" Dennis Covington is a journalist that is seeking out his descendants, and finds himself going hand and hand with snakes that were from Glen Summerford's congregation. This congregation does not believe that Glen Summerford should be convicted because it is what they actually believe in snake handling. They fully believed that you need to handle the snakes if you feel led by the Holy Spirit, and if you got bit by the snake then it meant that you were not actually following that Spirit. To go even further, if someone got bit, then the congregation must pray over them. If they die, then God intended for that to happen. This congregation did not care to put themselves in harms way. Dennis Covington submerges himself into this congregation, and begins to care tremendously for their beliefs. That then forms into caring for Glen Summerford, himself.^[29]

In July 2008, ten people were arrested and 125 venomous snakes were confiscated as part of an undercover sting operation titled "Twice Shy." Pastor Gregory James Coots of the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus' Name (FGTJN) was arrested and 74 snakes seized from his home as part of the sting.^[30]

Jamie Coots (son of Gregory Coots) was cited in 2013 for illegal possession and transportation of venomous snakes when three rattlesnakes and two copperheads were discovered in his vehicle during a vehicle check in Knoxville, Tennessee.^[31] Later in 2013, Coots published an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal*, making an argument for US Constitutional protection regarding religious freedom, especially freedom to practice the unique variety of religion found in snake-handling churches.^[32] Coots died on 15 February 2014 from a snakebite.^[33]

Andrew Hamblin, who appeared alongside Jamie Coots in *Snake Salvation*, was cited for having dangerous

wildlife in 2014, but a grand jury declined to indict him.^[34]

Risks

The handling of venomous snakes has significant risks. Ralph Hood observes, "If you go to any serpent-handling church, you'll see people with atrophied hands, and missing fingers. All the serpent-handling families have suffered such things".^[15] Jamie Coots, a pastor who subsequently died from a snakebite, said, "Handlers get bitten all the time, and every few years someone dies".^[22]

Various figures for the total number of deaths from snakebite during religious services have been proposed:

- "over 100 documented deaths" (2003) by Ralph Hood^[15]
- "around 120" (2005) by Robert Winston.^[7]
- "about 100 deaths" (2013) by Julia Duin, a journalist who has covered snake handling churches and is writing a book on the subject.^[35]
- "91 documented snake bite deaths" (2015) by Paul Williamson, professor of psychology at Henderson State University and co-author of books with Ralph Hood.^[36]

Another source indicates that 35 people died between 1936 and 1973.^[37]

A number of non-fatal bites have been reported:

- In September 1992, Roy Vestal was bitten by a timber rattlesnake during a service at the Hi-Way Holiness Church of God, Fort Wayne, Indiana.^[38]
- In 1996, Spencer Evans was bitten by a timber rattlesnake during a service in a tent at Ephesus, Georgia.^[39]
- In May 2014, Cody Coots, whose father Jamie died from a snakebite three months earlier, was bitten by a rattlesnake.^{[40][41][42]}

Hood also notes that the practice does not present a danger to observers. There is no documented case of a non-handling member being bitten by a serpent handled by another believer.^[43] Those who handle are consenting adults and as few as ten to fifteen percent of congregants handle the snakes in services. Children do not participate, and those not handling the serpents sit apart from the ritual as it proceeds.

Media coverage

A number of films and television programs have been made about religious snake handling.

- *Holy Ghost People* is a 1967 documentary by Peter Adair. It is about the service of a snake handling Pentecostal community in Scrabble Creek, West Virginia, United States. This documentary has entered the public domain and is available at the Internet Archive.
- *Heaven Come Down* is a 2006 television documentary film about some unusual worship practices of some Pentecostal Christians in Appalachia, including snake handling.
- *Snake Salvation* is a 2013 series produced by the National Geographic Channel, comprising 16 episodes in a reality television format.^[44] The show featured modern two snake-handling pastors and their congregations. The show's focus was on Jamie Coots, who subsequently died of a snakebite. The other featured pastor was Andrew Hamblin, pastor of the Tabernacle Church of God in LaFollette, Tennessee.

Hamblin, a protégé of Coots, was worshipping at his mentor's church alongside Coots when the fatal snake bite occurred in February 2014.^[45]

Snake-handling churches

Alabama

- Old Rock House Holiness Church in Section (sometimes "Old" is omitted and/or Rock House written as a single word)^{[27][46][47]}

Georgia

- Church of the Lord Jesus Christ in Kingston^[39]

Indiana

- Highway Holiness Church of God in Fort Wayne (sometimes written as "Hi-Way")^{[34][38]}

Kentucky

- East London Holiness Church, London.^[48]
- Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name, Middlesboro^[31]
- Mossie Simpson Pentecostal Church, Jenson^[49]

North Carolina

- Unnamed church, Marshall^[50]

South Carolina

- Holiness Church of God in Jesus Name, Greenville^{[51][52]}

Tennessee

- Tabernacle Church of God, LaFollette^{[53][54]}

West Virginia

- Church of the Lord Jesus, Jolo^{[55][56]}
- House of the Lord Jesus, Matoaka^[57]

Deaths

- The first report of a death from a serpent bite occurred in 1922 at the Church of God Evangel.^[58]
- In 1955, George Went Hensley, the founder of modern snake handling in the Appalachian Mountains, died after being bitten by a rattlesnake during a service in Altha, Florida.^{[7][59][60]}
- In 1961, Columbia Chafin Hagerman died after being bitten by a timber rattlesnake during a service at the Church of the Lord Jesus, Jolo, West Virginia.^{[55][61][62]}

- In 1967, Jean Saylor, wife of a snake-handling preacher, died after being bitten by a rattlesnake in Bell County, Kentucky.^[63]
- In 1982, Rev John Holbrook died after being bitten by a rattlesnake during a service at the Lord Jesus Church in Jesus' Name in Mullensville, West Virginia.^{[64][65][66][67][68]}
- In 1983, Mack Ray Wolford died after being bitten by a timber rattlesnake during a service at the Lord Jesus Temple in Mile Branch, near Iaeger, West Virginia.^{[66][68][69][70]}
- In 1995, Melinda Brown from Parrottsville, Tennessee died after being bitten by a timber rattlesnake during a service at the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name in Middlesboro, Kentucky.^{[30][37][50][71][72]}
- In 1995, Kale Saylor (husband of Jean), a Pentecostal preacher, died after being bitten by a rattlesnake during a service at a church in Crockett, Kentucky^[63]
- In 1997, Daril Colins died after being bitten by a snake during a service in Bell County, Kentucky.^[63]
- In 1998, John Wayne "Punkin" Brown (husband of Melinda), a snake-handling evangelist, died after being bitten by a timber rattlesnake during a service at the Rock House Holiness Church in rural northeastern Alabama.^{[37][73]}
- In 2004, Dwayne Long, a Pentecostal pastor, died after being bitten by a rattlesnake during a service in Jonesville, Virginia^{[74][75][76]}
- In 2006, Linda Long died after being bitten by a timber rattlesnake during a service at East London Holiness Church, London, Kentucky.^{[48][77][78][79]}
- In 2012, Mark Randall "Mack" Wolford (son of Mack), a Pentecostal pastor, died after being bitten by a timber rattlesnake while officiating at an outdoor service at Panther Wildlife Management Area, West Virginia.^{[70][80]}
- In 2014, Jamie Coots died after being bitten by a timber rattlesnake during a service at the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name in Middlesboro, Kentucky.^{[45][72][81]} Coots starred in the TV series *Snake Salvation* and his death was widely reported.^[82]
- In 2015, John Brock died after being bitten by a rattlesnake during a service at Mossie Simpson Pentecostal Church in Jenson, Kentucky.^{[49][83][84][85]}

In popular culture

- In 2013 during the fourth season of FX's *Justified*, actor Joseph Mazzello played Preacher Billy,^[86] a fearless snake handler, who hosted evangelical tent revivals in Harlan County, Kentucky.^[87]
- Gospel singer Wendy Bagwell's song "Here Come the Rattlesnakes" describes his Gospel band, Wendy Bagwell and the Sunliters, performing in a small, remote Kentucky church that practiced rattlesnake handling.^{[88][89]}

See also

- Church of God with Signs Following
- Mark 16
- Heaven Come Down
- Holy Ghost People
- Nag Panchami
- Ophites, an early Christian Gnostic sect that handled snakes

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External links

- Daily Mail article with numerous photographs (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2153933/Revealed-The-secretive-deadly-church-services-Appalachias-serpent-handlers-lift-rattlesnakes-heads-drink-poison-God.html>)
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- Vice Magazine interview with Andrew Hamblin (http://www.vice.com/en_ca/read/snake-handling-pentecostal)
- Chattanooga Times Free Press article on snake handlers (<http://projects.timesfreepress.com/2014/02/02/serpents/index.html>)
- MA thesis on Appalachian snake handling (<https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/wcu/f/Williams2013.pdf>)

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Categories: Charismatic and Pentecostal worship | Christianity in Appalachia | Culture of the Southern United States | Snakes | Anthrozoology | Animals in religion | Christian new religious movements

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