



12-2013

COBB CREEK CHURCH: CHANGING PERSPECTIVES IN A SERPENT-HANDLING CONGREGATION IN EAST TENNESSEE

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Michael Noel Reid entitled "COBB CREEK CHURCH: CHANGING PERSPECTIVES IN A SERPENT-HANDLING CONGREGATION IN EAST TENNESSEE." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Anthropology.

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We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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COBB CREEK CHURCH: CHANGING PERSPECTIVES IN A SERPENT-HANDLING
CONGREGATION IN EAST TENNESSEE

A Thesis Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Michael Noel Reid

December 2013

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my loving parents

Richard and Debbie Reid,

who have always believed in me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have been very fortunate throughout this process to have the support of so many individuals. Despite moving out of town after my coursework, I was able to commute back to the University in order to meet with my committee members. I would like to specially thank my Advisor Dr. Gregory Button for his patience and guidance throughout this endeavor. I must also thank Dr. Gregory Button, and my committee member Dr. Bertin Louis for their assistance in developing the research questions for this study and their constant feedback throughout the writing process. I would also like to thank Dr. Rosalind Hackett for her insight and guidance in the areas of religious studies and the law.

I would also like to thank the congregation of Cobb Creek Church of God (here and throughout this text I use pseudonyms for the church, the town, and the congregants) for their welcome attitude and cooperation with me during interviews, church visits, and throughout the research process. Despite the media circus surrounding this congregation, they have always taken time for me and made me feel very welcome. Thanks to the many other serpent-handling congregations that continued to welcome me to their services, allowing me to be a part of their worship services. Religious worship is a very intimate setting, and to be allowed access to these services was very gracious. This study would not have been possible without all of their eagerness to share their tradition and their lives.

This study would not have been possible without the love and support of my friends and family. I would like to thank my parents Richard and Debbie Reid for their

unwavering faith in me. My two sisters, Nina and Nicole Reid have also continued to support me during this journey. I would like to especially thank my beautiful fiancé, Hilary Pace, who has endured the stressful process of finishing up this paper, and has been there to assist in whatever capacity.

Thanks to my friends Karmen and Alan who were always ready to discuss the issues in this study and help generate new ideas and approaches. I also want to thank my friend and brother, Nate for all his technological assistance, and his enduring support.

ABSTRACT

In the last year, the traditional practice of handling venomous snakes in Pentecostal church services has returned to the forefront of popular media attention. With the death of renowned handler Randy “Mack” Wolford in West Virginia in May, the news has been rife with stories of the century-old tradition. New, younger groups of handlers have also been instrumental in raising attention to the practice. One congregation in particular has been a key focus for media outlets around the nation. The Cobb Creek Church of God has been featured in *The Tennessean*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and National Geographic in only a six month period. This twenty-one year old pastor has displayed his serpent-handling on social media outlets, been accommodating of any news or documentary team that wants to visit, and has even stood before the County Commissioner, pleading against the ban on the practice. In a tradition that has historically been much more closed off to this is a significant digression from the norm. This ethnographic study explores the ways in which this new congregation is taking up the banner of an older tradition, shaping it to exist in the modern era. While still largely holding to tradition, Cobb Creek Church of God has already defied many of the stereotypes associated with serpent-handlers. Their willingness to accept outsiders as well as their openness via social media outlets and local politics already sets them apart from many serpent-handling groups. I examine how a group of recent converts to the tradition are shaping the tradition to fit their current needs. This study examines the way in which this young group has laid claim to an older tradition, yet managed to shape it to fit their generation, helping to ensure its survival into the future.

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**Part 1: Serpent-Handlers, Pentecostalism, and Anthropological trends
in the study of Christianity and Handling**

Chapter 1: Historical Context of Holiness and Pentecostal Movements in United States

1.1: Introduction

My interest in serpent-handling churches began during my undergraduate studies in Anthropology. As many students have mistakenly believed, I thought anthropology had to be the study of something exotic, and serpent-handlers met that description. Having grown up in the mainstream Pentecostal tradition, and hearing much about these congregations, I decided that I would visit. My first foray into the world of serpent-handling occurred as part of a research assignment for an ethnographic field methods course. Upon my first visit to the Rock House Holiness Church on Sand Mountain, Alabama, I was convinced that I wanted to study these believers in more detail. The way these believers had always been portrayed to me was not what I witnessed on my first visit. At the Sand Mountain church, I saw a group of sincere rural believers, who practiced their religious rituals with faith and conviction. Although I was looked at skeptically at first, I experienced a lot of genuine warmth from these people, and was made to feel very welcome. This warmth and humanity had been left out of the stereotyped and biased accounts of these believers that I had always seen. The disconnect between what I experienced and the common stereotypes of these believers fueled my desire to study them in greater depth. My hope was to bring to light the believers that I came to know. Over the course of the last few years I have gone from “that sinner boy in the back row” to a welcomed visitor at church services. My interest and fondness for these believers has only grown since then.

After I began my initial study of serpent-handling, I stumbled upon a newly formed serpent-handling congregation, one that had taken up the practice of handling deadly snakes with a renewed fervor. I discovered this congregation in the unlikelyst of places; a social networking website. On this twenty-one year old man's homepage were descriptions of his church, photos of serpents being handled and described interests such as reading the Bible, handling serpents, and Jesus. Upon contacting this new pastor, I was invited to come visit, and discovered a congregation of young adults, taking up a tradition usually dominated by older people, and normally passed down from generation to generation. The uniqueness of the congregation was motivation enough to make it the primary site for my fieldwork, but I also found in it the opportunity to examine the same questions of cultural survival and change. This congregation consists of young adults continuing an old tradition in a novel way.

Throughout Appalachia, the religious tradition of serpent-handling has survived despite the high cost of its participation, and its alienation from the religious culture at large. These churches ritually handle venomous snakes as a part of their worship. Handling of snakes is done in accordance with what is seen as a Biblical command, taken from the Book of Mark; "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, King James Version). Based upon a literal interpretation of this passage, a group of Independent Holiness churches has arisen, and persisted for over a century. Holiness churches are those characterized by a strong Wesleyan theology that emphasizes personal holiness, or obedience to scriptural

laws. These independent churches follow the five signs, as listed in Mark, and pride themselves on being the only group to practice all five. Whereas speaking in tongues and laying hands on the sick are mainstays of most Pentecostal churches, handlers are the only group to handle serpents and drink “the deadly thing” (usually strychnine: a toxic pesticide, poisonous to humans). The ‘man behind the movement’ that is most widely recognized is Charles Went Hensley, who based on what he saw as divine revelation, handled his first rattlesnake around 1906 (Collins 1947:32-35). From there he preached the doctrine of serpent-handling throughout Appalachia, gaining supporters in the Church of God, Cleveland, TN. Though brief, the connection of serpent-handling to the Church of God informs serpent-handlers’ personal history and identity as believers.

Today, these churches most likely number in the hundreds, with some estimates of around 2,000 members, although accurate member counts remain uncertain to the isolated nature of these churches and their lack of formally kept written records (Kimbrough 1995). These churches are located throughout Appalachia, including Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and West Virginia. There have even been reports of serpent-handling churches in Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana, but the large majority remain where the movement was born; the Appalachian Mountains of the Southeastern United States (Hood & Williamson 2008:230). These churches regularly handle venomous snakes, open flames, and drink toxic chemicals as part of their obedience to the five signs listed in Mark.

The survival of these small independent churches is characterized by the way in which they view themselves in relation to the larger religious and social culture around

them. The theme of “us vs. them” regularly appears in serpent-handling church sermons, and serves to unify the group, bracketing them against the rest of the community providing them a feeling of “specialness” (Williamson & Pollio 1999). Whereas success of religious movements has often been viewed in terms of growth, these serpent-handling churches have been overlooked in studies that focus on the success of adapting a Pentecostal/Holiness religious framework to their preexisting mountain culture until recently (Hood & Williamson 2008:57-59). The body of work surrounding serpent-handlers pre-1990s has largely been an examination of pathology and psychophysiology, an exposé of the bizarre, and a relegation of such behaviors to issues of poverty, and isolation (see La Barre 1969; Kane 1982).

Although research on such a geographically and culturally isolated group of religious extremists may seem obsolete, it became more apparent during the course of my research that serpent-handlers were receiving a good deal of recent media attention. The impetus for much of this media exposure was the death of notable serpent-handler Randy “Mack” Wolford in the 2012, the year of my field research. Wolford died after being bitten by a Timber Rattlesnake during a church service in West Virginia (Washington Post: May, 31st 2012). Other news outlets have recently focused on criminal prosecution of serpent-handling believers. Shortly after my field research, one of my serpent-handling contacts was prosecuted for transporting venomous snakes across state lines. Although he acquired the serpents legally in Alabama, and keeps them legally in his home state of Kentucky, he was prosecuted and fined for transporting rattlesnakes and copperheads through Tennessee (Knox news, February 2013). Popular media have also characterized serpent-handling communities quite recently.

Last year, *The Campaign* film was released in theaters. The Jay Roach comedy features a scene where a political candidate attends a serpent-handling church in order to win votes. He subsequently gets bitten by a rattlesnake and comically pretends not to be affected as the venom visibly affects him (*The Campaign* 2012). The very next year, the FX TV show *Justified* aired an episode that depicts a serpent-handling revival taking place in rural Kentucky (*Justified: "Truth and Consequences"* 2013). In both of these mass media outlets, serpent-handling is utilized as a backdrop for its sheer entertainment value; comedy in the first instance, and drama in the second. The Cobb Creek Church, which served as the primary site of my field research was also subject to documentary filming during the time of my participant observation. The filmmakers were from The National Geographic channel, filming for their upcoming series on serpent-handlers.

With the renewed media exposure of this small group of believers, it is apparent that the wider public understands little about these congregations. The largest amount of exposure that most people get to the lives and religious ritual of serpent-handlers is tainted by the effort to entertain, and it is largely negative. Films and television paint distorted and unflattering depictions of these congregations and news reports of serpent-handling believers only need report the death or arrest of serpent-handling believers. It is partly to remedy some of these misconceptions that I have chosen these believers for my study.

This study also seeks to explain the way in which a new generation of serpent-handling believers has adopted and adapted the practice. I examine the key elements that I observed at The Cobb Creek Church that have given it appeal to a younger group

of congregants. I also examine the ways in which this new generation has altered traditional aspects of the practice, while still maintaining its cultural authenticity. The ways in which this young congregation has breathed life into an old tradition, yet still retaining its cultural roots may unlock the ways in which such traditions survive and evolve. In order to properly contextualize this study of serpent-handling churches, we must look at the way anthropology has treated this type of religious movement.

1.2: Appalachian Culture Studies

The emphasis of this study is the specific regional variant of this form of Pentecostal Christianity in the Appalachian region of the Southeastern United States. A brief review of the literature on this region and culture is helpful to contextualize the specific study of serpent-handlers in the region. Appalachia is the name used for the region spanning from Ohio and West Virginia, down to Georgia and Alabama. It follows the Appalachia Mountain Range, running North-South in the Eastern United States. This region consists of many States, ethnicities, religions, and cultural backgrounds. Despite the diversity of geography and culture however, there is some homogeneity among people who identify with the word 'Appalachian' (Cooper, Knotts, and Livingston 2010). There is a specific Appalachian identity and culture that has long been stereotyped and maligned by the media for many of its perceived characteristics. Bill O'Reilly, reporter for FOX News, for example, laid out all of these perceived evils of Appalachia in a FOX News Program in February of 2009. In his rant against Appalachia, O'Reilly cited sexually active youth, drugs, poverty, and alcoholism as common problems among people in the Appalachian region of the Southern United States.

There is much in the popular media to suggest an inherent bias against this region of the United States and its residents. Movies such as *Deliverance* (1972) and *Wrong Turn* (2003) represent a cultural perception of “backwoods” people as frightening, pathologically insane, sexually deviant, or inbred. Despite this cultural bias, many scholars have begun to study Appalachian culture and identity in terms of answering some of these unfair characterizations (see Billings et. al. 1999; Lohmann 1990). Appalachia has been described many different ways by many different people, but it is on studies concerning the value of this distinct rural white culture that I focus on for this particular study.

One of the most iconic works in the study of Appalachian culture is the collected articles of *Firefox Magazine*, which began as a school project in the sixties. Eventually the articles were compiled and published in the form of twelve books. These books cover many of the distinct cultural qualities of the Appalachian region, and their profits have been used to establish a museum and a research fund to continue studies in Appalachian culture (The Foxfire Fund INC).

There are many scholars that have worked against many of the longstanding biases against Appalachian culture. The premiere work in this area is a compilation of articles combating the stereotypes of the region, *Back Talk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes* (Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford, eds., 1999). One such longstanding issue that has been a source of much bias towards this region is poverty. As Lohmann describes it, the larger culture tends to focus on images of rural landscape, barefooted children, and soot-covered coal-miners in order to justify the position that Appalachia is a poor and backwards place. This bias has been

reflected in previous scholarly works on Appalachia. As he breaks down the four main scholarly positions explaining the nature of Appalachian poverty, he concludes with the notion that these theoretical explanations are outdated and misplaced. Though assumptions of Appalachian poverty are no longer entirely relevant, and many of the scholarly theories regarding the phenomenon have since been abandoned, the relic of cultural bias remains (Lohmann 1990).

Another common characterization of Appalachian culture is an association with oppressive gender norms and a predominance of rape and domestic assault. Swank, Fahs, and Haywood conducted one study however, that showed their Appalachian research base as showing no remarkable differences when rated on scales assessing sexism or gender roles. This study rated Appalachia college students on the Feminist Perspectives Scale, the Modern Sexism Scale, Attitudes toward Rape Victims Scale, and the Sexual Experiences Scale, and found no marked difference from other regions (Fahs, Haywood, and Swank 2011). Such a study would suggest a cultural myth associated with Appalachian culture that assumes a predominance of sexual assault, rape, and an enforcement of oppressive gender roles. Other studies have examined the characterization of parenting in Appalachia. One such study used personal narratives from mothers to attempt to dispel notions of abuse and neglect. Fish, Amerikaner, and Lucas interviewed seventy Appalachian mothers, concluding that corporal/physical punishment of children was used with similar frequency as parents in other regions of the United States (Fish, Amerikaner, and Lucas 2006).

Yet other studies have looked at the larger cultural bias against Appalachian language. It need not be endlessly demonstrated that specific Appalachian dialects are

synonymous with ignorance and cultural backwardness in American popular culture. Studies on the distinctiveness of Appalachian English have shown a marked uniqueness in intonation, vocabulary, and grammar (Wolfram & Christian 1976). Luhman's study on the cultural acceptance of Appalachian English, however, yielded interesting results. His study showed that there is not as much prejudice against Appalachian English speech samples as would be expected of Standard English speakers (Luhman 1990).

An interesting and growing body of literature on Appalachian culture looks at the often unacknowledged impact of African American culture on the region. African traditional roots are clearly evident across Appalachia, including things that are commonly associated with rural White Southern culture, like the banjo in Appalachian mountain music. There has been much scholarly work emphasizing the African American cultural presence in this region that has long been overlooked in favor of White rural stereotypes (see Conway 1995; Epstein 1977; Inscoe 2001). Appalachia is a region rich in both ethnic and cultural diversity. Popular media, scholars, and pundits have long perpetuated unkind stereotypes about the culture of this region, emphasizing a homogenous culture of white, rural poverty, sexual oppression, abuse, and ignorance. Recent studies have worked to show such generalizations false. Not only has Appalachia been treated unfairly, but much of the rich diversity of the region has been overlooked in favor of long standing stereotypes.

Any survey on the literature of Appalachian studies would be incomplete without the academic work on the coal industry, and its impact on rural Appalachian communities. The environmental and economic devastation as a result of the coal

industry has been well documented in academic study. As one of the largest coal-producing regions of the United States, the Appalachian region has been one of the worst-affected areas nationwide in terms of environmental devastation. Studies have shown the adverse effects that the coal mining has had on the water supply in these areas. Water basins in Appalachia have been adversely affected, showing an increase in pollution levels as a result of coal mining (Minear & Tschantz 1976). The coal industry has also caused the transformation of landscapes in terms of deforestation.

Appalachian regions, rich in coal deposits, have been systematically deforested.

Buckley's study examines the way in which a West Virginia Valley had been turned from lush forest to a "vast field of ugly stumps" due to the coal mining operation in the area (Buckley 1998:182). Trees are the first obstacle in the pursuit of mineral deposits in the earth, and have systematically been removed in the mining operation. In addition to the forests and rivers in Appalachia, the mountains themselves have taken a hit in the quest for coal. Mountaintop removal has become a key issue in Appalachian communities that have long centered on the coal industry. Numerous studies have looked at this egregious environmental devastation that has taken place at the hands of Big Coal (Fox 1999, Clark et. al. 2012, Wickham et. al. 2013). Some recent studies have looked not only into the environmental impact of coal, but also on the devastating effects on the social capital of rural Appalachian communities (Bell 2009). Bell's study specifically uses Bourdieu's theory on social capital to explain the way in which the coal industry in Appalachia has removed these small rural communities' ability to access economic benefits and rights associated with their region. Big coal has removed their access to their own rights regarding the land, and its resources (Bell 2009). The coal industry

represents yet another way in which the Appalachian region has been marginalized and exploited in the name of national advancement and corporate profit.

There has been an increasing movement in both scholarly work, and popular culture that aims to recapture the dignity of Appalachian culture, music, art, and folklore. The relevance of such work to this study is great considering the serpent-handling community's similar treatment and stereotyping in the mainstream culture. As a subset of Appalachian culture, serpent-handlers have long lived with many of the ignorant misconceptions associated with the region at large. This study aims to join a growing body of literature that challenges such preconceived notions about Appalachia, its people, and their way of life.

1.3: Psychological and Physiological Approaches to Serpent-Handling

The bias against Appalachian culture has been echoed in early academic work in serpent-handling. The academic body of work on serpent-handling seems to fall into one of two categories: an outside interpretation of believers psychologically and phenomenologically, and a retelling of insider perspectives which allow for meaningful practices among followers. This study does not agree with a psychological or a pathological approach to serpent-handling as a ritual practice. Whereas other academic works has focused on the specific ritual acts of handling a venomous snake, drinking strychnine, or handling fire, I have chosen to emphasize the way in which a particular congregation is adapting to the pressures of the larger national culture, and exercising their religious ritual in the attempt to construct meaning.

The psychological/pathological approach to studying serpent-handlers is best exemplified by Weston La Barre's anthropological work, *They Shall Take up Serpents*. In this study, La Barre paints a stereotypical image of a pathological 'Fate-tempter' who by psychopathy, continues to gamble with his life by handling poisonous snakes. It is in ignorance that the believer ascribes personality or meaning to this "Fate" as La Barre describes it. La Barre also uses psychoanalytic theory to determine the symbolic nature of the serpent. In cross-cultural comparisons from Africa, the Middle-East, the Americas, and Greece he arrives at the conclusion, "Where is the snake *not* a phallic symbol?" (La Barre 1969:74). La Barre takes this symbolic interpretation of the serpent further in his analysis of Reverend Beauregard Barefoot, a rural serpent-handling preacher in Florida. La Barre sees in Barefoot a subtle expression of rebellion in the act of handling serpents. His religious upbringing presents him with notions that masturbation, and sexual expression at all is evil. This repressed sexuality finds new avenues of expression in fondling serpents (La Barre 1969). Rouselle also resorts to the sexual nature of the serpent as a symbol. In his 1984 article he compared serpent-handling churches in Appalachia with the Ancient Greek cults that handled nonvenomous snakes. He arrives at the conclusion that handlers are simply expressing their repressed sexual desire through symbolism (Rouselle 1984:477-489).

Although La Barre's attempt at rationalizing the handling of serpents is stereotypical and possibly extreme in terms of its reliance on Freudian symbolism, there have been other attempts to uncover the symbolic nature of the serpent, without resorting to phallic imagery. Some scholars claim the serpent also represents the vagina (Minton & Minton 1969:143-175). Although not as obvious as phallic imagery, there is

room in psychoanalytic theory to allow opposites to be used in symbolism (Hood & Williamson 2008:97-98). Hood and Williamson differentiate between the sign value and symbolic value of the serpent with respect to serpent-handlers. Symbolic interpretations of penis, vagina, and even death and resurrection are “legitimate scholarly attempts that fail if they deny the obvious sign value.” (Hood & Williamson 2008:101) The serpent is a natural sign of danger and death. Indigenous cultures around the world, as well as most primate species innately associate snakes with death, regardless of whether or not a snake is venomous or not. In human populations, this value attributed to snakes may have its root in the birth of agriculture, where more human societies regularly interacted with snakes in the clearing and tending of fields of crops (Mundukur 1983). In nonhuman primates, there are many experiments proving some type of instinctual fear of snakes (see Mineka et al. 1984; Joslin et al. 1964). Hood and Williamson use this sign value for snakes to reinforce the idea that serpent-handlers acknowledge the potential danger in handling venomous serpents. The serpents handled in these services are not tamed, milked, or defanged. In short, the danger is very real. The ritual act of handling serpents is seen by Psychologists Ralph Hood and W. Paul Williamson as the combination of sign and symbol values for the snake. These churches, “acknowledge overtly (as a sign), what is unconsciously affirmed (as a symbol): to handle serpents is to confront death.”(Hood & Williamson 2008:99-100).

Other research on serpent-handlers focused on the physiological responses to serpent-handling, anointing, and fire-handling. Kane for example looked at the bodies physiological response to what believers call the “anointing”; a ritual possession by the Holy Spirit. This belief in the possession of the spirit is not unique to serpent-handlers,

but a common thread of the Pentecostal/Holiness movements, dating back to the Azusa Street Revival. This anointing is defined by Kane as a belief that, “the Holy Ghost ‘moves’ upon the believer and takes possession of his faculties, imparting to him supernatural gifts, which qualify him for service to the Lord.” (Kane 1974: 296) Kane associates this anointing with trance states and altered states of consciousness. As a trance, it is characterized by a loss of voluntary motor control, changes in bodily and environmental perception, outbursts of emotion, and lowered inhibitions (Kane 1974). It is these trance states that allows for believers to handle fire, in various ways, without apparent harm. His conclusion is that the central nervous system at subcortical and cortical levels has the ability to suppress the body’s reactions to noxious stimuli (Kane 1982:378). This trend in the study of serpent-handlers follows the traditional scientific inquiry of the past, but without the insistence on pathology. Kane rejects pathology as an explanation of the ritual possessions of serpent-handling believers. Instead he explains these trances as a complex social behavior, sanctioned and structured by the community. There are structured ways in which to enter into these trances, as well as acceptable expressions of this possession (Kane 1974:296-299).

Other work has looked to explain the phenomenon of glossolalia, or ‘speaking in tongues’, a trademark of the Pentecostal movement. Academics have sought a functional interpretation of glossolalia since its rapid spread in the early 1900s. Initial interpretations relied on schizophrenia and other pathologies to explain away the behavior. Alland, an Anthropologist who studies religion, argued against such interpretations, citing their normal social behavior in all other areas of life as proof against pathology. He claimed glossolalia and religious trance to be socially learned

behavior (Alland 1961). Throughout the seventies, many psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists attempted to unearth the inherent differences between those who perform glossolalia, and other church members who did not approve of the practice, with many different results (See Kildahl 1972; 1972; Samarin 1972). Hutch examines the findings of three academics, and their assumptions based on their academic field. His proposed approach to glossolalia is to do abandon theories based on assumptions of pathology or aberrance, but to focus on the ritual nature of the act, and its benefit within the group (Hutch 1980). Some of these studies even included serpent-handlers specifically. Gerrard and Gerrard for example, after spending time with serpent-handlers came to the conclusion that the handlers were not emotionally disturbed or psychotic (Gerrard & Gerrard 1966).

1.4: Oral Histories and Family Narratives

Much of the current work on serpent-handling churches looks more at the social connection these people have to their past than to the phenomenology of their behaviors within a worship service. Traditions of family and oral history are very important features of Appalachian culture. Recent work capitalizes on this theme, providing a more 'emic' anthropological perspective of these believers. These works fall into two main categories; story-telling and family histories. These kinds of scholarly work are important to bring to light a more personal, human side to people often stereotyped as crazy or bizarre. There is an unfortunate reliance on sensationalized media reports of these groups, and the only chance they have at a "fair hearing" is for people to be willing to understand why they do what they do. They may not agree or accept it, but

they can make those judgments with reason and understanding (Hood et. al. 2000:225). Scholarly works that accentuate the family-centered, tradition-bearing serpent-handlers that are regular people simply trying to make sense of the world are an important step towards eradicating prejudice out of ignorance.

Sociologist, David Kimbrough's 1995 work on eastern Kentucky handlers follows the family history of the Saylor's, a notable serpent-handling family in the region. He draws on the historical conditions as they evolve in the region, as well as personal accounts from the Saylor's about handling and family (Kimbrough 1995). Brown and McDonald follow three of the most prominent serpent-handling families, relating their views on handling, family, and life. Their work is more of a compilation of family histories, where modern serpent-handlers trace their lineage in the tradition back to its beginnings in the early twentieth century (Brown & McDonald 2000).

Other works focus on painting a picture of believers' lives outside of the act of handling. These works rely on storytelling to reveal more of serpent-handlers' lives outside of church. Dennis Covington, as a journalist, follows the trial of Glenn Summerford who allegedly forced his wife to be bitten by a snake in attempted murder. Covington ends up becoming a serpent-handler himself for a time, relating his experiences within that community, from weddings to brush arbors, which are outdoor church meetings (Covington 1995). Despite criticisms that Covington stereotypes believers (Hood & Williamson 2008:100), Covington's work provides an inside perspective of these congregations that is rarely seen. He paints a picture of a kind and generous people, who eventually reject his modern perspectives on the role of women in church (Covington 1995). Another unique work in the oral history of serpent-handlers

is a joint effort of serpent-handling Pastor Jimmy Morrow of Newport, Tennessee, and Dr. Ralph Hood Jr. Hood and Morrow present an oral history of serpent-handling as told by Morrow, who has collected serpent-handling lore for many years. As the editor, Hood warns of the limited historical value of the work, but realizes that the oral history of serpent-handling as told by handlers is important. This kind of personal history reveals much of how handlers view themselves in a greater social and cultural context. Morrow relates stories of his family, well-known handlers, important deaths by snake-bite, and vibrant handling communities as they sprang up in Appalachia. Morrow traces his Jesus Name tradition throughout this oral history (Morrow & Hood 2005). Jesus Name churches believe that Jesus Christ is God, and no other. They reject the Trinitarian view of a triune God in the form of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

1.5: Public Opinion and the Law

Much of public opinion regarding serpent-handling churches is grossly misinformed. Media accounts of serpent-handlers have presented a bizarre cult, an exotic fringe religious group, or a reckless endangerment to others. The Glenn Summerford trial of 1991 is a prime example of public bias towards serpent-handlers. Summerford, arrested on charges of attempting to murder his wife Darlene using a rattlesnake, was sentenced to ninety-nine years in prison (Covington 1995). Although the innocence of Summerford cannot be affirmed or denied, it proves that media attention has focused on the exception, not the rule. Deaths by snakebite make better news. Hood, Morris, and Williamson (2000) conducted a study with people ignorant of the practice of religious serpent-handling. Two groups were shown a videotape, wherein

they were shown church members handling, along with explanations of the practice from within the tradition. The third group was shown a tape that did nothing to explain why they handlers performed such a ritual. The results showed a marked decrease in prejudice in the group that had been introduced more thoroughly and accurately to the practice (Hood et al. 2000).

The media attention given to serpent-handlers, namely the deaths of serpent-handlers in the thirties and forties gave rise to numerous state laws against the practice. By 1950, six states had laws against serpent-handling on the books; Kentucky (1940, Georgia (1941), Virginia and Tennessee (1947), North Carolina (1949), and Alabama (1950). All of these laws had similar threads, aimed largely at controlling the manner in which serpent were handled (Burton 1993:81). North Carolina and Georgia have the strictest of laws against serpent-handling. In both states, it is not only illegal to handle, but it is illegal to “induce” others to handle as well. This makes any preaching on the five signs in Mark technically illegal. In Georgia, handling snakes is a felony, the strictest of all the states (Burton 1993:81; Hood & Williamson 2008:215).

With the rewriting of state codes over time, many of the state laws against serpent-handling have been omitted. English professor and scholar on serpent-handling groups, Thomas Burton discusses the nature of these laws, as well as the impracticality of law enforcement to carry out such sanctions; “Arresting people who are religiously adamant in their actions in order to protect them against themselves is impractical in many local situations and seems ultimately futile.” (Burton 1993:84) Although there have been police raids in many churches and many arrests, it seems clear that even though it is common knowledge in the community that snakes are handled at certain churches,

there is no real motivation to arrest church patrons unless handling becomes a problem, usually after someone dies from a snake bite (Burton 1993). Hood and Williamson discuss the unconstitutionality of the state laws against handling. The rationale behind these laws is that although people are still protected by their First Amendment right to unconditional religious belief, the practice of these beliefs is protected, but not unconditionally guaranteed (Hood & Williamson 2008:215-217). The practice has been deemed dangerous, and it is the duty of the state to protect the lives of its citizenry (Burton 1993:77). Some scholars disagree, claiming that the statutes against handling are unconstitutional. For Holiness believers, believing without practicing makes little sense. Handling is a religious movement of experience, not of theology or doctrine. It has also been argued that the state expressed an unnecessarily keen interest in a small number of religious groups with regard to their safety, while allowing activities, “from hang-gliding to rock-climbing to football to NASCAR racing” to continue. (Hood & Williamson 2008:224)

The academic literature shows a significant movement towards legitimate, unbiased study of Christianity, Appalachian culture, and serpent-handling churches. This study falls in with this newer context of academic work, emphasizing the legitimacy of serpent-handling as a social and religious activity for rural Appalachian Christians. I seek to explain this cultural group outside the context of social deviance, poverty, or education.

From here I discuss the methodology and results of my field research among a newly formed serpent-handling congregation. The objective of this study is to put this newly formed congregation in the broader perspective of the movement’s history and its

historical treatment in the academic literature. This new congregation is yet another piece in the pattern of how such a devote sect of believers maintains their tradition in spite of social pressure against it.

Part 2: Ethnographic Study of Serpent-Handlers

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1: Research Objectives

One of my main objectives in this study is to contribute to the academic literature on serpent-handling congregations. As I have shown, much of the literature on these groups has been written by journalists, psychologists, or scholars of religion. Very little anthropological work has been done on serpent-handling churches. My aim in this study is to examine these believers through the lens of anthropological theories of cultural change. I borrow heavily from Joel Robbins' intellectualist approach to studies of religion (Robbins 2004a). Robbins' theoretical approach, based on his fieldwork with the Urapmin in Papua New Guinea, seeks to explain why people convert to a different religious system. Robbins seeks to explain this in terms of agency and choice. People choose to adopt a new religious paradigm in order to make meaning out of their lives (Robbins 2004a:6-10). I borrow from this intellectualist approach in order to examine the way in which the Cobb Creek Church has chosen this controversial ritual in order to make meaning in their lives.

I also aim through this study to contribute to the growing body of work on the anthropology of Christianity as a whole. There has been a shift in the academic literature, granting Christianity legitimacy as a religion in its own right. The anthropology of Christianity has been largely characterized by either a denial of Christianity's status as a relevant cultural institution of its own, or by its negative association within a larger framework of Western colonialism and homogenization. Robbins cites two major

“fallback” solutions typically used in the social sciences in dealing with Christianity’s transformation of native cultures; intense missionary efforts backed by Western capitalist imperialism, and radical socioeconomic dislocation (Robbins 2004b:2). Christianity has long been viewed as a cultural ‘muddying of the waters’, with anthropologists seeking to exclude it from studies where it corrupts the authenticity of indigenous cultures (Taussig 1993). Barker’s work in Melanesian ethnography points out that it has been traditionally easier in anthropology to disregard Christianity altogether due to a discipline-wide bias that refuses to see Christianity as cultural, let alone culturally legitimate (Barker 1992). Underlying this trend in the anthropology of Christianity is the inability to legitimize people’s religious experiences. Harding also argues that anthropologists have largely excluded Christianity from study. According to her, Christian culture represents a “repugnant cultural other” that scholars do not wish to address (Harding 1991). The Comaroff’s work on the Tswana in Africa is a premiere example of such anthropological thinking towards Christianity. They saw Christianity as a Westernizing force, backed by all the power of colonialism, capitalism, and homogenization. The people were not seen as constructing meaningful experiences out of this influx of missionary efforts. The Comaroffs saw the message of the missionaries was “ignominiously ignored or rudely rejected” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:199). In this way both typical anthropological dealings with Christianity are exemplified; both as a Western capitalist force and insignificant cultural feature.

More recently, scholars have begun to accept that Christianity has a large part to play in cultures the world over, especially Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity. Robbins gives a safe estimate of around 250 million adherents to Pentecostal-charismatic

Christianity worldwide (Robbins 2004b). Others claim that Pentecostal Christianity is the fastest growing form of Protestantism, and will more than likely surpass Catholicism as the predominant form Christianity in the twenty-first century (Casanova 2001:435). With Pentecostal forms of Christianity playing such a large role on the stages of cultural change around the world, it seems inevitable that it can no longer be anthropologically ignored. I aim to place this study into the larger context of Christian studies, agreeing with the current trend in this field that Christianity deserves equal treatment within academia and should not be seen as either too domestic to be studied, or merely as a Western hegemonic force.

Once I started my initial study of these congregations, I stumbled upon a newly formed serpent-handling congregation, one that had taken up the practice of handling deadly snakes with a renewed fervor. I discovered this congregation in the unlikelyst of places: a social networking website. Upon contacting this new pastor, I was invited to come visit, and discovered a congregation of young adults, taking up a tradition usually dominated by older people, and normally passed down from generation to generation. The uniqueness of the congregation was motivation enough to make it the primary site for my fieldwork, but I also found in it the opportunity to examine the same questions of cultural change. This congregation helps to unify my attempts to display the sincerity and warmth of these believers, as well as address larger anthropological questions about surviving and evolving cultural traditions. This congregation consists of young adults reinventing an old tradition in a novel way.

I was fortunate when I began studying serpent-handling churches to discover a new congregation. The Cobb Creek Church of God in Thomasville, Tennessee was less

than a year old during my research, having just begun to practice the serpent-handling as a part of their religious ritual. Many serpent-handlers believe that Jesus and the Apostles handled serpents as part of the early church, based on the simple logic that Jesus would never ask his followers to practice something that he was not willing to do. The question of how this type of small religious sect can survive against the sociocultural and legal pressures around it is an important one that has been asked by many other scholars of the tradition. This study looks at the newest generation of serpent-handling believers, and how they are clinging to, and in some ways reinventing, an old tradition. A congregation that averages much younger than do many serpent-handling churches also provides the opportunity to see an exaggerated example of the current social pressures against such a dangerous and exotic practice.

2.2: Research Methods

The primary methods of field research for this study were participant observation of church services and events, and interviews with congregation members of the Cobb Creek Church of God in Thomasville, TN. The church conducts services on Sunday afternoons and Friday nights. Members file in and out during the three or four hour meetings in a very informal manner. Typical of most serpent-handling churches, the service consists largely of musical worship, with a brief sermon being preached by a pastor, either from the home church, or a visiting church. The sermons are typically short, lasting around twenty minutes. I attended services regularly, arriving before the start of the service, until well after. My field research began in early May and lasted until late August of 2012. During this time I observed many average services, and a

homecoming service, with visiting serpent-handlers from the area. During my field research I observed many snakes being handled during church services. The members have handled copperheads, cottonmouths, timber rattlesnakes, and canebrake rattlesnakes. The larger rattlesnakes have been handled one at a time, or two at a time. The copperheads, being smaller, have been handled in tangled balls of five or six snakes at a time. I have witnessed the church members handle fire, which is also a common practice among serpent-handling churches. The church has a couple of kerosene lamps made from old soda bottles, as well as a propane powered torch. These flames have been applied to hands, arms, feet, legs, and the necks of the participants. One man even placed the kerosene torch between his shirt and his denim overalls. Throughout my participant observation I witnessed one bite from a serpent. The head pastor Paul was struck on the leg by a canebrake rattlesnake during service. Although Paul was ill for a couple days, he recovered without medical attention. The serpents have been handled mainly by men, but also by a select few women in the church, including Pastor Paul's wife Sadie. In order to protect the privacy of church members, I never audio recorded or photographed any of the services I attended. The names of the town, church, and congregants have been changed in this study in an attempt to further protect the privacy of participants.

In addition to the participant observation of church services I also conducted interviews with church congregants. Having visited regularly for a period of about five months, I was well acquainted with many of the congregants. Having been introduced to many of the congregation by Pastor Paul, I began to interact casually with the members before and after services. In these interactions, I discussed the purpose of my study,

and from this discovered the willing participants for semi-structured interviews. In addition to the members of the Cobb Creek Church, I also interviewed the pastor of a well-known serpent-handling church in nearby Kentucky, who mentored Pastor Paul in the tradition. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, usually at the church building either before or after service. Interviews lasted anywhere from thirty to ninety minutes. I conducted interviews with the Pastor, some younger members of the congregation, as well as elder members of the church. The variation in age and experience with the practice of serpent-handling provided a unique array of perspectives regarding the practice, its direction for the future, and an insider perspective on the pressures against the ritual from the outside culture. There was little racial or ethnic diversity within the congregation however, consisting predominantly of Caucasian members. I also visited two other serpent-handling churches in order to establish a point of reference by which I would compare the Cobb Creek Church. One of these churches is located near the Cobb Creek Church, across the state line in Kentucky. The pastor of this church served as mentor to Pastor Paul as he began his foray into the tradition. The other church I visited outside of the Cobb Creek Church is located in eastern Tennessee. Three of the interviews that I conducted were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interview transcriptions were then analyzed for themes, and are presented in the latter chapters of this study with regard to my original research questions. Due to the illegal nature of the practice, as well as the stigmatization and scorn received by many serpent-handlers historically, some of my interviewees preferred not to be recorded. I took notes on these particular interviews, and analyzed

those notes against themes I found in the context of my other interviews. I also spoke candidly with numerous church members and visitors without recording.

The interviews with the congregants were analyzed through an intellectualist lens; specifically for values that either solidify traditional norms, or displayed an incongruence with these norms. I analyzed interviews I conducted with serpent-handlers from other churches as well as the literature on these groups to construct a norm for values and themes for these groups. I also analyzed the interviews I conducted with members of the Cobb Creek congregation. The results from this analysis yielded key areas in which the Cobb Creek church categorized and prioritized values differently than the constructed norm. These congregants then actively worked to affect change within their group in order to create a greater dialogue with the wider culture.

Chapter 3: Population of Study: Cobb Creek Church of God

3.1: Appalachia to Thomasville

Thomasville, Tennessee is situated ideally in the center of the Appalachian region. It is located a few miles south of the Tennessee-Kentucky state line, placing it squarely in between the northern and southern regions of Appalachia. Although they share much cultural and geographic similarity, I make the distinction based on its relevance to the serpent-handling community. Today, most serpent-handling churches are located within Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, and West Virginia (Hood & Williamson 2008). Thomasville is located near the midway point between the northern groups in West Virginia, and the southern groups in Alabama. Thomasville is also closely located to major interstates going East-West and North-South, granting ease of access to fellow serpent-handling churches across Appalachia. Thomasville is geographically positioned where the Ridge-and-Valley Appalachian range bisects the Allegheny Appalachian Mountains and the Blue Ridge Mountains. The city itself is located in a valley created by the meeting of the Appalachian ridge and the Cumberland Plateau. Even the geography of the place represents a bisection of northern and southern Appalachia.

The city of Thomasville is an average rural East-Tennessee town by all appearances. Of the roughly 7,400 people living in the city over 96% of them are Caucasian according to 2011 census estimates. The percentages of other ethnicities are also much lower than the state average. Around 43% of this population lives below

the poverty line, with an individual average annual income of \$11,000. The number of people with a high school diploma or a bachelor's degree are significantly lower than the state average for Tennessee. Much of the industry represented within the town of Thomasville comes from retail stores and food service (Census Bureau 2011). The main street through town in Thomasville consists mainly of strip-malls and fast food restaurants, and is only about five miles long.

The Cobb Creek Church is located just outside of the commercial center of town. It sits on a ridge with an open view of the mountains on one side, and a hayfield on the other. In order to get to the church one must drive out past the main stretch of the town below, and follow a winding hill up through a residential area. The farther back from the main road, the smaller the houses become. A few miles off of the main highway, there is a little brick church house behind a few mobile homes. It is here that venomous serpents are handled in the name of faith every Friday night.

The church building itself has a long and varied history. It was originally built as a Baptist church, then later used by the Church of God, and is now home to an independent group of serpent-handlers. Thomasville is largely made up of Baptists citizens; about 70% according to recent census estimates, with the second largest group being Church of God members (Census Bureau 2011). The brick building is a one room church house on top of a basement, with a single bathroom located near the front door. The room is divided down the center, with about eight rows of pews on each side of the center aisle. At the front of the pews there is an open area, leading to a small altar at the front. Beyond the altar, the floor is raised, and mostly walled off from the front open area by means of a waist-high partition wall, with openings on either side of the

main pulpit. It is here on this raised and somewhat divided stage that the serpents are handled, the message is preached from the pulpit, and the music is all played. There are pews along the wall of the stage for musicians and elders to sit during the service. Located comfortably behind the stage partition, underneath the front pews, one can distinctly hear the rattling of snakes from their plexiglass boxes.

3.2: Profile of Pastor Paul

Pastor Paul has received a large level of public attention on the basis of his age and outgoing personality and is a lanky, clean shaven white male who keeps his hair buzzed very short, accentuating his boyish facial features. He has acquired a name for himself around his small hometown for being very friendly, talkative, and always inviting people to come to church with him. Paul is twenty-two years old, married, and a father of four children. He has worked as a bagger at the local grocery store and also receives government assistance checks in order to support his growing family. Paul comes from a family of Christians, with his grandfather being a pastor, and has grown up in church his whole life. During the fifties and sixties his family moved from the Baptist tradition, to the Freewill Baptists, and eventually became pentecostal. The church building that Paul's church uses now was built in 1994, and was a Church of God church pastored by his grandfather. When Paul was around 15 years old he saw serpent-handlers on a television program, and decided it was something that he wanted to do. Paul says that he prayed and sought the Lord for a year over whether or not to start handling serpents. During this time he visited serpent-handling groups in the nearby area. Around a year after first witnessing this tradition on television, Paul handled his first copperhead in the

church of his mentor Brother Brian. Brian's church is across the state line in Kentucky, and is where Paul was mentored in the tradition by second and third generation serpent-handlers like Brian, whom he maintains a close relationship with even still.

3.3: Congregation Demographic

According to Pastor Paul, there are around thirty full time members that attend his church. While membership is not as formalized as it would be in a larger Protestant church, Paul counts anyone that he can "count on to be there week in and week out" as a member of his congregation. During my field research, I was there very regularly, prompting Paul to jokingly introduce me as a member to the rest of the church. Apart from these thirty people that Paul claims as members, I witnessed around fifteen others who would semi-regularly attend, as well as any number of reporters, filmmakers, and local skeptics that could be in attendance any given Friday night. This being said, any typical Friday night service would on average contain around twenty-five people. The one homecoming service I attended had upwards of fifty people present in the small one-room church.

The membership demographically represents the average for Thomasville as a whole. The majority of the congregation is Caucasian. During my field research there, I only witnessed two non-white people present. Peter, the former associate pastor at Cobb Creek, and a woman we will call Beth who are both African American. Apart from these two congregants, there is little ethnic or racial diversity in the congregation. Another striking feature about the congregation that I will expound upon later is the average age. Of the thirty or so members, there are a few people above the age of sixty.

There are realistically only around six people above the age of fifty in the entire congregation. The majority of the congregants are between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five. The small number of elders is uncharacteristic of a serpent-handling congregation. In a tradition that has been passed down largely through families since its beginnings in the early twentieth century, it is rare to see more young people than elders. This brings me to another interesting point about the congregation of my study. The serpent-handling tradition has survived, but not greatly grown since its inception in 1910. This is largely due to the continuation of the practice by people raised within the tradition. The Cobb Creek Congregation has a large majority of members that have not been raised within serpent-handling. Pastor Paul himself was raised Church of God, and had never handled serpents before. According to his personal testimony, he witnessed the practice on television as a teenager. He prayed and “sought the Lord” over whether he should institute this practice into his planned ministry as a pastor. Paul says this time of prayer lasted “one year, almost to the day” from the first time he witnessed serpent-handling at a nearby church in Kentucky. After this one year, he handled his first serpent within that same Kentucky church, and decided to institute the practice in the new church he was forming out of the old church building his grandfather used to preach at. One of the few deacons/ elders at the church was also raised outside of the serpent-handling tradition. I met only a handful of members that had ever handled serpents before coming to Paul’s church. Some members were not even raised within a Christian tradition at all, let alone a serpent-handling one. One young married couple, whom I will discuss at greater length, came to visit Paul’s church as non-Christians. They came mostly to mock the serpent-handlers and possibly see someone get bitten.

After their first visit, they were moved by Paul's preaching and converted to Christianity that night, and have attended regularly since.

3.4: Church Service Structure

The Cobb Creek Church has services on Friday nights and Sunday mornings. The Sunday morning services tend to be more formalized, with fewer serpents being handled. During my field research, I attended only Friday night services. I was able to attend somewhat regularly over the course of about six months, attending around twenty-five services. These meetings started around 7:30 PM, and could last anywhere from two to four hours. The atmosphere is very informal, with members filtering in at all times; whenever they could get to the church. The structure of the services follows the basic template for a serpent-handling service, as laid out by Hood and Williamson. The Pastor begins by welcoming visitors and members, and the music begins. The service is mainly music, with only around twenty minutes being used for a sermon. These sermons are usually extemporaneous, with the speaker preaching whatever they feel God lays on their minds to preach at the time. Sermons are rarely, if ever prepared. After the brief message, the music will resume. It is during the music that serpents are handled, people lay hands on and pray for others, and all other manifestations of Holy Spirit possession are displayed (Hood & Williamson 2004).

Pastor Paul began each service by greeting each visitor and member by name with either a hug or a handshake. Every service begins with opening prayer, asking God for his divine guidance throughout the service. In the serpent-handling tradition, obeying the prompting of the Lord is one of the most important acts of faith. The belief is that

God will guide the believers through the service, urging them towards handling serpents, preaching a certain message, singing a certain song, or any other activity that may take place during the service. Pentecostalism is a very experiential religion, and serpent-handling is no exception. One will often hear the exhortations from the Pastor or elders at a serpent-handling church, "Obey the Lord." According to their belief, members need to wait on God's prompting before enacting any of the manifestations of Pentecostal spirit possession. To disobey can mean a snake bite, a burn, or even death.

After the welcome and prayer, the service typically enters into the first musical portion of the evening. This can often happen somewhat slowly and informally. It is up to members to sing a song that the Lord "lays on their heart" to sing. If nobody immediately steps up with a certain song, then a few moments of random instrumental filler can occur. These services often include such moments of "waiting on the Lord". There is no seamless transitioning from planned song, to planned song. The congregation waits silently until someone is moved to sing. The music will eventually build, and the tempo of the service is sustained for close to an hour. It is during this time that serpents or torches may be handled. The members engage in the ritual of entering into Holy Spirit possession during these musical portions of the service. The atmosphere during the full swing of the music is truly electric. The small one room church is filled with the twang of guitars, tambourines, an electric organ, and the rhythmic stomping and clapping of all the congregants.

As the natural tempo of the service begins to slow, the pastor typically begins his sermon. These sermons are extemporaneous ones, being that they are not prepared beforehand. Most of Paul's sermons were about the saving power of Jesus Christ, or

the “salvation message” as it is known within Protestant Christianity. A typical sermon will normally only last around twenty minutes. In some instances however, a sermon can stretch to as long as an hour. During my fieldwork, Paul himself did most of the preaching, but there were a handful of guest preachers from other churches who took the pulpit during my time with the congregation. The associate pastor, Peter also gave a sermon one Friday night.

After the sermon, the music would begin again, and service would continue until the well into the night. At the end of this second musical portion of the service, the Pastor would get up and thank everyone for coming, and ask visitors and special guests if they would like to testify. Often Paul would ask every single person there to testify. Most of these testimonies were a simple “Glad to be here tonight”, or “I wanna thank the Lord for letting me be here”. Some members would use this time to testify at length about their faith, and the role God has played in their lives.

Typical services were not the only interaction I had with Pastor Paul and his church. I was able to attend a special Homecoming service at Cobb Creek, as well as spending time with some members outside the context of services altogether. One of the most interesting contexts for conversation with members was often outside of the church building while service was going on. As these services can last for up to 4 hours, many congregants drift in and out of the building during church. I would often go outside of the church during long services and talk with the members who would step outside to smoke cigarettes or simply chat with other congregants. It is interesting to note that while smoking is considered sinful by many believers, it exists in a precarious state of acceptance by many church members in many of the churches I have visited. One man

put it this way, “Smoking won’t send you to hell, but it’ll make you smell like you’ve been there”. During these informal moments outside, members would talk freely about the church, handling serpents and fire, and their relationships with fellow congregants and other church groups in the area. One such moment included a young man teasing his sister who had handled fire just previously inside the church. She was complaining about having slight burns on her hands, to which he replied, “Well I guess you shouldn’t have rushed it then”. The implication there being that she had not waited for the Lords protective anointing before she grabbed the kerosene torch in her hands. This type of joking is common among serpent-handlers, often teasing about particularly mean snakes, or snake bites. One visitor from another church was outside teasingly telling Pastor Paul that one of his particular snakes was too mean because it bit him the last time he handled it, to which Paul replied, “It’s not my fault you missed it that badly!” There is a lot of this joking and teasing with one another outside the church. It stands in interesting juxtaposition to the seriousness within the church during service.

3.5: Outside of Service

In addition to attending many services with the Cobb Creek congregation, I was able to attend services in Middlesboro, KY and Newport, TN. These other congregation served as a reference point against which I compared the Cobb Creek Church. The church in Kentucky is one of the larger “hubs” as Hood as called them. He describes these hubs as central points in the network of serpent-handling groups across Appalachia. These hubs are often linked with influential serpent-handling families, that have a strong heritage in the tradition (Hood & Williamson 2004:231). The other

serpent-handling church I visited was a quite a bit smaller, having decreased in size of the last few years. The pastor there, however is very adamant about his serpent-handling tradition, and has been a part of it since he was fifteen years old (Morrow & Hood 2005).

I also had the opportunity during my field research to spend time with Pastor Paul alone outside of a church setting. During one such instance, we went to a fast-food restaurant to get a burger after a long interview session. While we were at the restaurant, we ran into two local politicians. Members of the County Commissioner's Office had recently voted against Paul's petition to remove the law against serpent-handling. These two men exemplify the diverse spectrum of opinion concerning serpent-handling. One of the men was one of the County Commissioners in Thomasville. He was the only person who voted in support of Paul's petition, claiming that people should be able to do whatever they thought was right in church, as long as they were safe, and practicing serpent-handling of their own free will. The other gentleman made it clear that he did not agree with the practice, stating that he just wanted the practice kept at the church, far from the rest of the town. This man even went so far as to jokingly explain what he would do if any of these people showed up near him with a snake. For him, it was as simple as getting his shotgun out and killing each and every snake. It was informative to see the diverse public opinion in this small town regarding the church that was getting an increasing amount of public attention.

The person who mentored Pastor Paul in the serpent-handling tradition is a well-known serpent-handler from nearby Kentucky. During my study I was invited to visit their church, and the Pastor's family home after the service was over. I visited with many of

the Kentucky congregants, many of whom I had previously met while they were visiting Paul's church. I sat in the Miller's house after church, and discussed the Miller family's rich history in the serpent-handling tradition, their influence on Pastor Paul's decision to include serpent-handling at his newly established church, and the future direction of the movement.

Part 3: Research Results and Discussions

Chapter 4: Introduction

When I began my field research on serpent-handling churches I was armed with a couple of noteworthy books on the subject, a background in Pentecostalism, and my personal bias. My initial research questions revolved much around what I expected to be the norm for these congregations: traditional, backwards, and isolated. This initial bias was largely informed by my experiences at other serpent-handling churches along with the influence of the media. I originally set out to study the way in which these churches network with one another across Appalachia, because it seemed that my list of potential contacts with these believers grew exponentially with every conversation I had with a serpent-handling believer. In short, everyone seemed to know many of the other established serpent-handlers across Appalachia. I referenced the Sand Mountain congregation in Alabama that I had visited before to a Pastor in Newport, Tennessee, and he knew them personally. The Pastor I spoke with in Middlesboro, Kentucky was a close friend of serpent-handling believers in Tennessee and Georgia. It occurred to me that despite their isolation from the mainstream religious culture, and the popular culture at large, they were very well connected with other serpent-handlers across Appalachia; some of them States away. My bias led me to the assumption that however they accomplished this broad social network must in some way be deeply 'anthropological' and exotic.

Upon hearing of this newly formed serpent-handling church, I immediately contacted the Pastor, informed him of my study, and was invited to come and visit. As I spoke with Pastor Paul, I began to notice that their use of social networking websites

was not the only thing unique about this congregation. This church did not fit the characterization assigned to them either by popular prejudice or academic study. This church was profoundly different than most serpent-handling churches across Appalachia, thus becoming my primary site for fieldwork for the next six months.

As I began my fieldwork attending the Cobb Creek Church with Signs Following in Thomasville, Tennessee I found that many of my initial research questions had become irrelevant. Since they were based largely upon a stereotypical characterization of serpent-handling Pentecostal churches and my own ignorance, many of these initial research questions were abandoned. My personal expectations of this congregation, having attending several other serpent-handling churches, were also largely irrelevant. The themes that I expected to draw from my field notes and interviews fell into two distinct groups; themes that I expected to come across at the church, but were unique in the manner in which they were presented, and themes that I never expected to see in a congregation like this. In the end, my initial research questions regarding networking across Appalachia and serpent symbolism were not proven entirely irrelevant, but the unexpected themes I observed were far more interesting. Issues of social networking, openness to outsiders, and the legality of the practice remained an important aspect of my study, but they were addressed in a way that is uncharacteristic of a traditional serpent-handling congregation. With most of the congregation having never handled serpents before, Cobb Creek has addressed these issues in a unique and dynamic way. Understanding how Cobb Creek differs from more traditional congregations in these areas serves to inform the greater conversation of religious traditions as a whole and the processes by which a younger generation seeks to preserve traditional aspects of

the religion, but also to redefine it according to a different paradigm. In a religious tradition that has evolved and persisted for over a hundred years, this is quite interesting.

The themes observed at the Cobb Creek Church fall into two distinct categories: those that subtly redefine the issues that have been associated with serpent-handling churches since their conception, and those that have more dramatically altered from the traditions of serpent-handling, and even Pentecostal/Holiness churches. The issues of openness to outsiders, the illegality of the practice, and social isolation have long been studied in terms of these congregations, but are being addressed in a novel way by this young congregation. The unexpected, more intriguing alterations from the serpent-handling norm encompass a theological softening of the church, and an emphasis on evangelism not often seen in the holiness tradition at large, let alone in the serpent-handling sect of mountain holiness. Whereas the strictness of holiness churches has often been addressed in study, the Cobb Creek Church has softened its stance in certain ways, while still retaining an emphasis on personal holiness. It is these five themes that most clearly demonstrate Cobb Creek's effort to redefine and reshape certain elements of serpent-handling norms and expectations.

Chapter 5: Openness to Outsiders

5.1: Stigmatization and Isolation

Since I first became interested in serpent-handlers, I was warned about the closed-off nature of these churches. They are largely suspicious of outsiders, probably due to the stigmatization they have received from popular culture, media, and government institutions over the years. My very first visit to a serpent-handling church in Alabama exemplified the nature of this suspicion. I was asked repeatedly if I was a reporter, when acknowledged at all, and referred to only as 'the sinner boy'. Having grown up in a similar Pentecostal background, I was better-suited to overcome this suspicion and earn the acceptance of many different congregations. One such church in Newport, Tennessee had practically ignored my presence for two weeks. Upon my next visit I brought my mandolin with me (a small stringed bluegrass instrument). When the pastor asked if anyone felt lead to sing a song, as is often the practice in these churches, I volunteered. Despite my mediocre singing voice, and my even worse mandolin playing, the congregation enjoyed my song immensely. From that point on I had access to many conversations with church members that had ignored me, and even received invitations to visit neighboring churches. While my background in Pentecostalism served to help me gain entry into many of these churches, the standard remains that they are often closed to outside visitors.

Serpent-handling churches have long existed in social, and often geographic, isolation. Much of this isolation is by choice, with believers preferring to see themselves as 'set apart' from the world. They derive much of their inspiration for this philosophy

from scripture. They recite many different portions of the Bible that convey a mandate to be different than 'the world', or that which is outside of the church. Hood and Williamson, having analyzed over a hundred sermons see this 'specialness' as a consistent major theme among serpent-handlers. Believers see themselves as unique, even among other Christians. Whereas other denominations also practice things such as glossolalia, laying hands on the sick, and being slain in the spirit, serpent-handling believers are the only group that does in fact handle snakes and drink strychnine, a toxic pesticide usually used to kill rats. Believers relate to this 'specialness', claiming that they are the only ones who practice all the Biblical signs of Mark 16 (Williamson & Pollio 1999).

There has been a pattern of stigmatization of these believers from the public, the media, and government institutions since their inception that may be partially responsible for the closed off nature of these groups. While the specific nature of this prejudice is not the focus of this study, it informs the suspicious nature of serpent-handling churches across Appalachia. Popular culture has stereotyped and ridiculed serpent-handling believers for their bizarre practices. News media has also played a large role in stigmatizing serpent-handling congregations. Newspaper articles from the early forties on have characterized serpent-handlers as dangerous. These reports portray a strange and dangerous religious practice, highlighting the exotic nature of these services. Such articles describe the almost primal droning of the music, the strange trance states of believers, and the manner in which these serpents are held, fondled, or draped around necks.

It is not only the exotic and dangerous language used to describe these believers; it is also the types of stories presented that portray prejudice. Articles regarding serpent-handling churches seem only to appear after death or legal action. The Chattanooga Times ran a story about the death of a serpent-handler in Middlesboro, Kentucky who was bitten. Her five children were temporarily removed from the family's home (Chattanooga Times: 1995). More recent news media has included a patronizing sense of pity in their newscasts. I watched a report on the local news syndicate in Thomasville on the Cobb Creek Church that was given between giggles and eye-rolls about the new congregation.

The state governments may have also played a part in this mistrust. Although it is not common in recent years, there were raids on serpent-handling churches that occurred in the 1940's, where believers were arrested, and their snakes taken outside and killed by law enforcement officers. It is a strong part of believers' cultural memory that outsiders have often come into their churches to mock, ridicule, arrest, or degrade them. I have not met a serpent-handling believer that does not have a story about people coming into their churches to goad, mock, or argue theology with them. Pastor Paul of the Cobb Creek Church has told me many stories of people coming to serpent-handling churches with bags of snakes and throwing them into the church during services. Whether these events were witnessed first-hand, or simply heard about is not as important as the shared belief among believers that outsiders pose a threat to the sanctity of their worship practices. Many of the shared stories of persecution and ridicule even defy credulity, but they have become a part of a shared cultural persecution that may be responsible for the suspicious nature of these congregations

toward outside visitors. There are accounts of visitors being asked if they were from *Hustler*, the adult magazine, being told that the periodical had wanted to do a piece on them (Covington 1995:203). While this is unlikely, it shows the deep mistrust associated with reporters, and the media at large.

Academia has also treated these believers unfairly in the past, completing the spectrum of prejudice against these congregations. La Barre's study of serpent-handlers portrays a pathological group of daredevils that handle serpents to defy death. La Barre also credits the phallic nature of the serpent as the driving force behind the practice. He depicts a group of sexually repressed religious zealots who handle serpents in an act of sexual diversion (La Barre 1969). Other academics agree that the suspicious, closed-off nature of serpent-handlers may be well warranted; "Our overall view is that serpent-handling believers have not been fairly treated by academics, scholars, or the media" (Hood & Williamson 2008:3). It is difficult to say whether the 'set-apart' or 'special' view which serpent-handlers have of themselves has resulted in a social isolation from the larger culture, or if a rejection by the larger culture fuels an ersatz self-view of specialness. While it is not the focus of this study, it is clear that there is a cyclical pattern wherein believers are stigmatized, and thus withdraw from the larger cultural context. This withdrawal promotes further misunderstanding and misrepresentation of their beliefs, which prompts yet further withdrawal. It was with the expectation of this suspicious and closed-off type of congregation that I began my field research at Cobb Creek.

5.2: Cobb Creek's Acceptance

Cobb Creek Church defied my initial expectation with regards to its openness. The church remains open to any visitors, so long as they do not come to disrupt the service. I have seen documentary film-makers, reporters, students, scholars, and the curious public in attendance during my fieldwork. Each of these visitors was welcomed to the church. Pastor Paul makes an effort to remember everyone's name, and spends time speaking with each visitor that comes. At the end of each service, it has been Paul's practice to invite each visitor to testify. Visitors are all warned of the nature of the service and asked to keep off of the stage area where the serpents are exclusively handled, but encouraged to participate in the service from their seats. I have seen visitors come who were not dressed according to traditional Pentecostal/holiness standards, but they were not sent away or asked to leave. A camera man arrived in cutoff shorts and a t-shirt during one service, but was allowed to stay. A young female college student also came to visit, wearing jeans and a t-shirt, which is considered inappropriate for a Pentecostal woman, but she was not asked to leave. I mention the visitors' dress only because it is grounds for being denied admittance in other serpent-handling churches, and even other holiness churches. One of the deacons of the church, Brother Jared, spoke with me about the openness of Cobb Creek. He told me of churches that he knew of that would send people away for not dressing according to traditional holiness standards of modesty. Jared emphasized that the more important issue is having these people come to church, not the way they are dressed.

There are exceptions to this universal acceptance, however. During one service, a woman began to prophecy to the congregation. Her fifteen minute speech toward the

congregation targeted the 'unholy' visitors, and how they were a danger to the group. Other congregants also opened up to me about their discomfort with the constant stream of visitors, cameras, and journalists. They found it greatly distracting to their worship. These disgruntled congregants still respected Paul's decisions regarding the church, but were openly discontent at times. The difference lies in the purposes that the members and the pastor seem to have for their church. While the members seem to mainly want to worship in peace with their own group, Pastor Paul seems more interested in membership and growth. The unique quality here is that despite some tension, the church has remained very open to outsiders, seemingly to continue to grow and increase their membership.

One of the most glaring examples of Cobb Creek's openness to outsiders is their allowance of film crews within their services and their day-to-day lives. During the course of my research with the church, a film crew began to arrive fairly regularly. Upon speaking with the cameraman, I discovered that they were from the National Geographic Channel, collecting stock footage. I asked if they were going to do a special on serpent-handling, to which they replied that they did not know. After I wrapped up my field work I heard of a new reality television show on National Geographic all about serpent-handlers. The program is called Snake Salvation, and has run 16 episodes at the time of this paper (<http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/channel/snake-salvation/>). The reality show follows the lives of Pastor Paul and his church, as well as the Coots family in nearby Kentucky. It depicts these believers worshipping, handling serpents, hunting serpents, and even depicts a congregant being bitten in the Coots' church. The program also depicts individual congregants' struggles with finances, divorce, and

drugs, and depicts the two pastors attempting to bring them back into the fold of the church. The show is advertised as a reality show, which is very different from any other type of television program. The fact that it is not being billed as a documentary, or any other type of educational program, is important. The program adds to a growing collection of television programs that portray marginalized countercultural groups for entertainment purposes. The affect that this type of media attention has yet to be fully understood as it has only recently begun to air regularly. The T.V. show does do an adequate job depicting Paul's struggle to get the ban on serpent handling lifted.

The way the congregation has responded to the National Geographic cameras, as well as the constant stream of visitors is also very interesting. While the congregation is very welcoming and friendly during church services, amongst themselves they share a common complaint. I was privy to a conversation outside of church one evening where a group of believers expressed their frustration in trying to focus on worship amid the distraction of cameras and visitors. Despite this frustration, Paul has continued to allow and welcome visitors to his church, gaining and increasing amount of media attention.

There is a very open atmosphere that I experienced at Cobb Creek. Pastor Paul has invited any who would come online, in person, and on the local news station in town that did a story on him. The diversity of visitors that have been welcomed is interesting in and of itself. Reporters, students, curious locals, and photographers have all been welcomed in to the church. The openness that I observed at Cobb Creek does not simply apply to people being allowed to visit the church, but in some way influences or informs all of the other themes I observed there. The church's open nature exists

despite media stigmatization and legal prosecution, and informs their emphasis on evangelism and activism.

Chapter 6: Illegality

6.1: History of Serpent-Handling Ban

One of the most studied aspects of serpent-handling is its illegality. In almost all of the Appalachian states that serpent-handlers call home it has been banned in State codes, with West Virginia being the only exception (Hood & Williamson 2008). In 1940, Kentucky was the first State to ban the practice, specifically banning the handling of snakes in a religious context, “Any person who displays, handles, or uses any kind of reptile in connection with any religious service or gathering shall be fined no less than fifty dollars no more than one hundred dollars” (Hood & Williamson 2008:211). Georgia was the second State to ban serpent-handling. Not only was it written into the State Code in 1941, but it was made a felony offense (Hood & Williamson 2008). Georgia and Alabama both made serpent-handling a felony. North Carolina and Tennessee also eventually made the practice illegal. North Carolina and Georgia went further than other states, not only making handling illegal, but also including an ‘inducement to handle’ clause. Under this clause, preaching the ‘signs of the gospel’ could be considered inducement to handle, and thus would be illegal (Hood & Williamson 2008). While a detailed history of the legal action taken against serpent-handlers is not the purpose of this study, a brief summarization of the way both State and Federal courts have reacted to serpent-handling is useful for providing context to the situation of the Cobb Creek Church.

The governmental response to the practice since the passing of these laws has followed an alternating pattern of intense enforcement and a peaceful, if uneasy,

coexistence. State institutions have, at different periods of time, either chosen to 'look the other way' when it comes to serpent-handling, or pursue prosecution of these believers. Where law enforcement officials fall on this spectrum seems largely dictated by the number of recent deaths by snake bite in these nearby congregations. This is not surprising given that increasing numbers of deaths were the impetus for the formation of these anti-serpent-handling laws in the first place. Hood and Williamson blame the sensationalism of the media for much of the legal prejudice against the practice (Hood & Williamson 2008). The media served to sensationalize and stigmatize the practice in two key ways; the kinds of stories reported about serpent-handling and the manner in which the practice was presented. Both of these reporting methods serve to create a stigmatization that influenced legal action regarding these believers (Hood & Williamson 2008). Most of the media coverage of serpent-handling churches has chosen to cover the deaths, and the alleged endangerment of children. In Georgia, an eight year-old girl had been bitten right before the passing of the law against the practice. The story was highly publicized, emphasizing that the parents did not seek medical attention on behalf of their daughter, something that is still widely practiced among many different types of Pentecostal/holiness believers (Hood & Williamson 2008). Tennessee, the alleged birthplace of serpent-handling also witnessed an increased number of deaths from snake bites around the time the law was passed against the practice. Burton traces the increasing number of deaths in Tennessee in the eighteen months following the 1947 passing of the law prohibiting handling (Burton 1993). In this brief period before the law was unanimously passed, five documented deaths from snake bite occurred in East Tennessee (Burton 1993:74). The media attention given to instances of death or injury

at these churches has been held responsible for the legal recourse taken by State governments (see Burton 1993; Hood & Williamson 2008; Vance 1975). A more recent example of this phenomenon is the death of serpent-handler Randy 'Mack' Wolford of West Virginia in 2012. Shortly after his nationally publicized death by snake bite, local newspapers featured a story concerning a 'second look' at the lack of enforced laws against the practice.

6.2: Enforcement of Laws

The laws against serpent-handling have been enforced according to a broad spectrum of strictness. In the years following the passing of many of these laws against handling, many believers were arrested, churches raided, and snakes seized or killed by law enforcement (Burton 1993; Hood & Williamson 2008). Many court cases across the Appalachian States convicted handlers under the newly passed laws. Misdemeanor breach of the peace charges, felony attempted murder charges, criminal convictions, and civil convictions have all been levied against believers (Burton 1993; Covington 1995; Hood & Williamson 2008). The decisions of the State courts were upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court, establishing a legal precedent affirming the state's right to restrict religious practices, most notably in the case of *Lawson v. Commonwealth*. In this case, Tom Harden, a notable serpent-handler, along with many other believers was convicted under the Kentucky law prohibiting handling. The appeal went to the Supreme Court, where the conviction was upheld. The logic behind the decision was that although the Constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief, the government reserves the right to restrict religious practices (Hood & Williamson 2008: 211). Scholars like Hood and

Williamson question the Constitutionality of these rulings, blaming the innate ignorance of serpent-handling beliefs and practices for rulings against believers (Hood & Williamson 2008).

In more recent years serpent-handlers have been pursued with less legal fervor. Many local governments are aware of serpent-handling churches in their area, but seem to refrain from interfering unless someone is bitten and dies. I was told a story by a serpent-handler in Tennessee that best illustrates this type of legal avoidance. This particular handler was driving to visit a neighboring serpent-handling church when he was pulled over by a police officer. As is common when visiting other congregations, he had a few of his own snakes in the back of his van in the signature plexiglass snake boxes used by believers. As the police officer begins to talk to him about his driving, he notices the rattlesnakes through the back window. The officer asked him where he was going with rattlesnakes, to which the believer responded by telling him he was headed to church. The police officer looked at him for a moment, handed him back his ID, and advised to him to drive more carefully. This personal account seems to describe an attitude wherein serpent-handling is an offense that is more comfortably avoided by law enforcement. Even though many States have since rewritten their codes, omitting specific references to handling serpents, believers can still be charged under different laws. Alabama, for example omitted the law that made serpent-handling a felony when it rewrote its State code in 1975, but can still charge handlers under a misdemeanor reckless endangerment law, or a broader menace law (Hood & Williamson 2008). Despite the wide array of legal options for prosecuting serpent-handlers, the tendency to avoid prosecution seems to predominate. There is evidence to support the notion that

in some of these rural populations where serpent-handling congregations tend to exist, juries of local citizens are less inclined to convict handlers (Hood & Williamson 2008).

Serpent-handlers have responded unanimously and consistently to the varying legal pressures of the state. Their attitude is best summarized by the statement made to me by a serpent-handling pastor in Alabama, "God's laws are higher than man's laws." Many serpent-handlers across Appalachia believe that there will always be serpent-handling churches, just as there have always been serpent-handling churches. The response is one of calculated rejection. Believers cannot refrain from taking up serpents, for it is seen as a Biblical mandate. The literal interpretation of scripture dictates, "These signs *shall* follow them that believe" (Mark 16:17-18 KJV, emphasis mine). The declaration of the U.S. Supreme Court to protect freedom of religious belief, but not religious practices is contrary to Holiness logic. As Hood explains, belief and practice cannot be separated by Holiness believers. Theirs is an experiential religion, based on a literal interpretation of what is seen as a sacred text. The belief and the practice cannot be distinguished (Hood & Williamson 2008). An indifference to the legal pressures against serpent-handling should come as no surprise. The history of the serpent-handling movement shows a similar indifference to the social pressure to abandon such high-cost behaviors in order to fall in with the mainstream Pentecostal movement. This mainstream denomination has since worked to distance itself from the practice of handling serpents. Church historians have even gone so far as to write their importance out of the official history of the mainstream church, writing it off as an aberration within the denomination (Conn 1996).

6.3: Cobb Creek's Activism

The Cobb Creek Church seems to defy the norm in terms of their attitude towards the legal pressures against serpent-handling. Whereas believers have traditionally remained indifferent to this pressure, Cobb Creek has shown some signs of activism. Working to get the laws changed has never been a priority for believers, due to their determination to continue the practice regardless of its illegality. Pastor Paul at Cobb Creek has taken a different stance. Paul has declared his intention to see the ban on serpent-handling lifted in his lifetime. He believes that it is an issue of misunderstanding. Paul has been addressed with questions and accusations about his beliefs that prove a well-known fact; the general public has many gross misconceptions about what serpent-handlers believe and practice. It is to dispel this misunderstanding that Paul has made his church open to anyone who wants to visit. Interestingly enough, scholars have proposed a similar idea. Hood and others see ignorance as the root of much of the media and legal prejudice against serpent-handlers. In a series of experiments, these researchers showed that people's perception of serpent-handlers changed when more informed about both the practice and the believers themselves (Hood et. al.:1999; Hood et. al. 2005; Hood & Williamson 2008). Pastor Paul has received a great deal of media attention at the local, state, and national levels for his newly formed church. This would seem to serve his purpose of spreading the word about serpent-handlers. The problem with this however, is that it leaves the task of portraying believers in the hands of the media, which has traditionally chosen to accentuate the dangerous and exotic aspects of serpent-handling.

The most interesting way in which Cobb Creek has defied the typical indifference toward legal pressure is in Pastor Paul's appearance before the County Commissioners office in Thomasville, petitioning to have the ban lifted. The petition was almost unanimously denied, receiving only one vote in its favor. The next day, the local paper portrayed the event in a cartoon, depicting Paul standing before the commissioners with a Bible in one hand, and a rattlesnake in the other. The reaction to Paul's efforts has been mixed even among handlers. One pastor in Kentucky that I spoke with saw the effort as ill-planned and naive. While he agreed with Paul's intentions for the petition, he saw it doomed to fail if a group of other believers was not also prepared to protest the law. As the serpent-handling pastor who mentored young Paul in the tradition, he sees many of his potential troubles stemming from his youth and exuberance. Interestingly enough, this older pastor shows no interest in protesting the ban on serpent-handling himself. Another potential cause for the almost unanimous vote against Paul is the recent death of well-known serpent-handler Randy 'Mack' Wolford.

The reaction of local politicians in the area to Paul's petition is also interesting. After an interview with Paul one evening, we went to a local fast-food restaurant to eat dinner. While there, we ran into two of the local politicians from the commissioner's office, which recognized Paul immediately. One of the men was responsible for the one vote cast in Paul's favor. During the course of this conversation it became clear that even though the result was not in Paul's favor, the local government showed no interest in enforcing the ban at Cobb Creek Church. The local sheriff was even cited during the conversation as having told Paul that as long as they were being safe, nobody would bother them. In short, even though the effort of Paul to get the ban lifted was

unsuccessful, it did capture the attention of the media, giving Paul and his congregation at Cobb Creek a greater platform for spreading their plea.

The Cobb Creek Church is not entirely unique in appealing the laws against serpent-handling. Many congregations over the last sixty years have appealed charges before state and federal institutions. Churches in Dolley Pond, TN, Pineville, KY, and Sand Mountain, AL have all appealed state court decisions regarding serpent-handling. The Pineville conviction was even appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court (Hood & Williamson 2008208-216). What is unique about the Cobb Creek Church however is that none of the congregants had faced charges for handling at the time Paul petitioned the County Commissioner's Office in Thomasville. To date, there has been no legal interference with the Cobb Creek Church or any of its members. Paul initiated the conversation with local authorities about serpent-handling, drawing attention to what his church believes and practices. This is a seemingly risky endeavor considering the illegality of handling. The risk has temporarily paid off for Cobb Creek though, resulting in greater understanding between believers and local authorities. According to Paul, he has been guaranteed a certain amount of autonomy within his church. The local sheriff assured him that the congregation would be left alone so long as they were 'safe'. The history of legal prosecution against serpent-handling believers would suggest that this truce will be broken in the case of a congregant being killed as a result of a snake bite.

At the time of this study, no member of Cobb Creek had been the subject of legal action regarding serpent handling, despite its illegality in Tennessee and Paul's openness about his church's practices. As I wrapped up my study with this congregation however, Paul was cited for having many venomous serpents in his possession. In

November of 2013, Paul's church was raided by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) and over fifty snakes were confiscated and distributed to local zoos (<http://www.tennessean.com/article/20131107/NEWS01/131107023/>). Paul pleaded not guilty to the charges, and cited freedom of religious belief, drawing yet more attention to his plea against the ban on serpent-handling. The timing of this recent charge against Paul begs the question of the National Geographic shows involvement. Whereas Paul had openly addressed local politicians and media outlets regarding his church and their practices, it was only after receiving national attention through their reality show that his church was raided, his serpents seized, and he was cited for keeping venomous snakes. Whereas the national media attention may have brought his church under fire, it has also given him a larger platform to plead what he sees as the unconstitutionality of the ban on serpent-handling. The long-term effects of this level of exposure have yet to be seen, but Paul has adamantly declared that he will continue to handle venomous snakes in his church.

In short, Pastor Paul and his congregation have displayed a unique level of concern and activism regarding serpent-handling bans. They have actively worked to change the context of the laws under which they live, which differs from more traditional believers who seem content to continue to practice their belief outside of the law. The activism of Cobb Creek also shows a greater openness to the larger social/political culture of their local area than is typical in these congregations. The petition against the ban is a concentrated effort to rectify to gap between believers and a larger culture that has long misunderstood them. He spent time outside of restaurants and shops speaking to the general public about serpent-handling. Although Paul's efforts were unorganized,

and ill-timed, they portray a particular way of thinking that differentiates them from most serpent-handling congregations to date.

Chapter 7: Evangelism

7.1: Conversion Emphasis

One of the most interesting themes I observed at the Cobb Creek Church was an unusual emphasis on evangelism. Although evangelism is not a novel concept within Christianity at large, it is unique to see such strong emphasis placed on it within the Holiness tradition, especially in a serpent-handling church. Evangelism, in this case is being used as the concentrated effort of the church to convert people to Christianity, or see them 'get saved'. Paul has openly stated that one of his primary goals is to see people come to his church and find salvation. Traditionally, serpent-handling churches have placed more of an emphasis on personal holiness, which stems largely from the Wesleyan roots of the Holiness tradition. This emphasis is related to the closed-off nature of many of these churches. Nonbelievers are seldom seen at these church services, thus the already converted are the target audience. The closed nature of many of these congregations excludes the possibility of nonbelievers attending and becoming converted. This is not to say that serpent-handling believers do not theologically support the converting of nonbelievers, it simply does not often receive priority for believers. Serpent-Handling has always been a tradition passed down within families and small bodies of believers, largely immune to surges in membership. Handing serpents is for believers only, almost an exclusive membership that engenders feelings of specialness among congregations. Hood noticed this theme in his analysis of sermons from many different serpent-handling churches (Hood & Williamson 2008). It is for this reason that

many of the sermons heard at serpent-handling churches revolve around maintaining holiness and avoiding sin, and most of the sermons I have personally witnessed have also revolved around these themes. The idea of being special or chosen is often preached, creating a sense among believers that that they are among the happy few who accept the entire Bible whereas other churches have abandoned serpent-handling. Whether due to an image of specialness or the inaccessibility of nonbelievers to convert, serpent-handlers have as a rule not emphasized conversion/salvation within their churches as much as other mainstream denominations tend to. It is interesting to note that there is a seeming inconsistency of belief in terms of outside visitors and serpent-handling. I have been told by numerous congregants that the handling of serpents is done as a sign to nonbelievers of the power of God. This seems unlikely given that many serpent-handling churches remain closed to outside visitors. Many of these churches across Appalachia have in fact opened their doors to outside visitors, and many welcome the opportunity to reach out to people beyond their own congregation. I am not implying that these churches refuse to preach the 'salvation message' to nonbelievers. There does however, seem to be a pattern of emphasizing personal holiness and clean lifestyle over conversion of unbelievers.

7.2: Preaching Salvation Messages

The priority of converting nonbelievers is where Cobb Creek Church is unique. Although Cobb Creek strongly emphasizes personal holiness for its members, the church also emphasizes a desire to see people converted. The general openness of the church to outside visitors is especially conducive to this type of evangelism. While I

have visited churches that allow visitors, it seems more to target misunderstandings about what handlers believe and practice. These churches seem to target the ignorance about serpent-handling more so than a concentrated conversion of nonbelievers. Cobb Creek has outwardly declared an intention to convert people to Christianity, and expressed this intent in the form of altar calls and salvation messages.

Pastor Paul's sermons have covered a wide array of topics during the course of my fieldwork. One theme however began to stand out in terms of consistency and intensity. Many of Paul's sermons focused on what Christians call the salvation message. These sermons lay out the necessary steps of converting to Christianity. Paul's sermons focused on the benefits of having a spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ and the tortures of Hell in the afterlife for those who do not believe in him. Many of Paul's sermons also focused on the benefits to a Christian lifestyle in the present life. He has preached about how believers do not have to worry about stress, sickness, or financial worry because as Christians, God is in control of what happens in their lives, and they can rest assured that he will help them. The fear of an eternal afterlife in Hell is a common theme among Holiness Christians at large, and was also utilized by Paul in his conversion messages. Hell is described as a horrible place of suffering and loneliness, reserved for those who do not profess a faith in Jesus according to Christian doctrine. The most common theme in Paul's salvation messages was the intimate relationship Christians may have with Jesus. According to Christian doctrine, Jesus rose from the dead after being crucified. He is seen as alive and available to interact with in spirit. Paul emphasized this theme above all others in his salvation sermons that I observed. He would often describe at length the intimate friendship he has with Jesus,

and his assurance that he will never be abandoned, even though earthly relationships have failed in the past.

The intensity with which these messages are preached, both by Paul and by others who preached at the church is also important in emphasizing Cobb Creek's focus on evangelism. Paul preaches with a great amount of emotional intensity, often shouting, pacing, jumping, crying, and speaking in tongues. This heightened emotional state is not unique to Paul or others at the Cobb Creek Church. In fact, this emotional style of preaching is characteristic of the Pentecostal and Holiness movements, going back to the Methodist circuit preachers of the early 1800s (Kimbrough 1995:65). The emotional preaching style that Paul uses is part of a larger tradition and thus is not unique in and of itself. What is important is the intensity with which Paul preached salvation messages over any other sermon I observed. One sermon in particular stood out as the most emotionally charged. Paul was preaching about the love of Jesus, how close a friend he was, and the merit of knowing him as a believer, and he was quite charged. He began to shout, speak in tongues, and cry. As the sermon progressed he proceeded to climb towards the back of the church over the backs of the pews. I was sitting in the front, and was climbed over during the height of his sermon. It is interesting also to note the explicit connection made between the emotionally intense preaching and worship of the church with the salvation message. Serpent-Handling churches are known for their emotionally expressive worship, but Cobb Creek made efforts to connect the two. Paul, in preaching about the joy of salvation, would often purposefully relate his intense excitement to his salvation. A song I heard at Cobb Creek summarizes his

message well. The lyrics read, “People call me a Holy-Roller. What they say is true. But if he did for you what he’s done for me, you’d be rollin’ too!”

Another interesting method by which Paul has focused on converting unbelievers is by using what are called altar calls. An altar call is the natural follow up after a sermon on repentance and salvation where the Pastor invites nonbelievers to the altar to repent of their past life and profess a new faith in Christianity. This type of sermon wrap up is common to many Christian denominations, and has been used in varying degrees. Serpent-Handling churches also call people to the altar, but it is more for the sake of deeper prayer, reflection, or the laying on of hands by the congregation to pray for specific needs. It is unusual to see a serpent-handling church invite people to the front with the expressed intention of converting nonbelievers. Pastor Paul would regularly have an altar call at the end of service, where he would ask those who don’t know Jesus to come forward.

Cobb Creek has shown an intense emphasis on converting visitors to Christianity. Paul has mentioned in many times in conversation, continued to open his doors to visitors, and displayed greater fervency and consistency in preaching the ‘salvation message’ than any other sermon or theme. Cobb Creek stands relatively unique among serpent-handling congregations in this emphasis due to the isolation and suspicions of more traditional congregations who have less reason to preach conversion to their own members.

Chapter 8: Youth

Another striking feature of the Cobb Creek Church is that its congregation is very young. Of the twenty-five regular attendees/members, only around five are over the age of forty. There are a few elders within the church, and an even greater number of young children, but the majority of the congregation falls between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five. Not only is the congregation young on average, but the leadership of the church is very young. The pastor himself is only twenty-two years old. The former associate pastor Peter is also twenty-two years old, although he no longer attends the church. A telling example of this young leadership is the seating arrangement at the front of the church. At most serpent-handling churches, there is a raised area at the front where the pulpit stands. This staged area is also where musical instruments are played, and serpents are kept. In most of the churches I have attended there are also a couple pews set up behind the pulpit area. These seats are usually taken by the older men in the congregation, church elders, and leaders. Since this area is where the serpents and fire are handled, it is occupied by those that handle the most, often seen as spiritual leaders of the church. At Cobb Creek, these seats are also taken by the leaders of the church. The difference is that Cobb Creek's front seating area consists of a handful of men all in their twenties, with a few exceptions. While Paul does have mentors and deacons that he relies on, the majority of his usual entourage consists of younger men. One of the few deacons at the church, Jared, commented on the age disparity during an interview I had with him. He believes that as one of the few elders, it is his responsibility to protect the younger generation. This is not terribly unique for an elder to say in regard to young people. What is interesting however is that Jared made

no mention of his spiritual guidance and leadership. Because serpent-handling is a tradition that is typically passed down through family groups, elders are often venerated for their spiritual wisdom. In a young congregation like Cobb Creek, the pattern is slightly different. Paul shows much respect and deference to Jared in terms of his age and experience, but Jared also has a level of respect for Paul's spiritual wisdom and leadership, despite his young age. The youth of this congregation and its leadership may account for much of the fervor the church displays towards handling serpents, social networking and openness, and challenging the laws against their practice.

Brian, the pastor of a nearby serpent-handling church has known Pastor Paul for a few years and was his mentor in the serpent-handling tradition. Brother Brian is in his fifties and has been in the serpent-handling tradition his entire life. Paul began his interest in serpent-handling after seeing a documentary about it on television, and despite his Church of God upbringing, decided that he wanted to participate in the practice. Paul says he fasted (abstained from certain foods) and prayed about his decision to handle serpents for an entire year, at the end of which time he began handling serpents in Brother Brian's church. As his mentor, Brian has reproached Paul numerous times, cautioning him about his fervor for handling serpents as much as he does. Brian takes a calmer, more traditional approach to serpent-handling. At Brian's church, as with most other serpent-handling churches, serpents do not necessarily have to be handled at every service. Handlers admonish one another to obey God, and only handle if divinely moved to do so. While speaking with Brother Brian, he related much of Paul's fervor in handling, and petitioning the local government to his youthful excitement. Paul himself acknowledges his fervor for handling serpents. For him it is the

desire to continue to feel the way he feels when he handles. Paul describes a great amount of pleasure and joy associated with handling a serpent under the anointing of the Holy Spirit. He often tells stories of many snakes being brought in for special services, and how he 'flipped the lid' on every single one of them; a reference to flipping open the lid on the snake boxes and handling each snake. Brother Brian also relates Paul's youth to his fervent desire to get the ban lifted on serpent-handling.

Another area where the youthfulness of the congregation has impacted their unique approach to serpent-handling is in their use of technology to both publicize their practice, and network with other congregations. Paul and many of the members at Cobb Creek are on social media websites such as Facebook, posting pictures of serpents being handled at church. Congregants list such interests as Jesus, serpent-handling, and the Bible on their personalized pages. It is through such social media that Cobb Creek has come to the attention of National newspapers and documentary filmmakers, both of which visited the church regularly during my fieldwork. While the effectiveness with which Paul and his congregation have utilized these online networking tools to increase greater understanding about their faith remains low, it shows a level of connectedness to the larger culture that is rarely seen among believers. Paul's openness in social networking websites and in both local and National media has increased the number of visitors to his church, and subsequently the amount of direct interaction with the public. Just during my fieldwork, I observed visitors from many different walks of life from all over the country. The visitors at Cobb Creek were very diverse, including journalists, scholars, students, filmmakers, and the curious local public. It would seem to Paul and his church that the reasons these people visit is not as

important as the fact that they are visiting. These visitors provide an opportunity for Paul to preach salvation and for the congregation to represent a welcoming, friendly group that contrasts with much of the public's preconceived biases about them. I would argue that an increase in true understanding about serpent-handling practices, and a familiarity with these believers outside the context of handling would result in a decrease of prejudice.

The youth of the Cobb Creek Church also seems to inform how they have created social networks with other serpent-handling churches. Cobb Creek regularly has visitors from other serpent-handling congregations. These visitors bring/exchange snakes, play musical instruments, sing, and preach at Cobb Creek. Paul's church has received serpent-handling visitors from across Appalachia, with believers visiting from Kentucky, Alabama, the Carolinas, as well as nearby Tennessee believers. Cobb Creek also maintains close ties with Brother Brian's nearby church. The young congregation has managed to remain close with these other congregations despite theological differences. When I asked Bro. Brian why he thought this was the case, he specifically mentioned the young people of Cobb Creek. According to Brian, issues that have divided serpent-handling groups for years are lost with this new generation. Old disputes do not matter to the younger people in these churches. He believes that young people are generally more sociable than the older generations, leading to networks across traditional differences. I would agree that the relative youth of Cobb Creek has served to create relationships with other congregations that would not interact otherwise.

Chapter 9: Shallow Holiness Roots

Another factor that seems to cause Cobb Creek to be so unique among serpent-handlers is their relatively shallow roots in the tradition. Paul himself was raised in the Church of God, with family history in the Baptist tradition. According to Paul, none of the congregants had handled before joining his congregation. Brother Jared, one of the few elders of the church came from the Church of God tradition as well. Jared used to be a Church of God minister, and was responsible for building the church that now houses Cobb Creek. In addition to those who came from other Christian denominations, there are many other congregants that have no personal history in any Christian denomination. One young couple joined the church after the first service Paul held there. Paul preached the salvation message and gave an altar call. Although the young couple was not Christian, and had originally come just to witness the spectacle of serpent-handling, they ended up joining the church and have attended ever since. Now they have both handled serpents and Kyle handles fire regularly. I would argue that this shallow history in the tradition of serpent-handling is responsible for many differences between Cobb Creek and other, more traditional congregations. In many ways, Cobb Creek has a much more lax attitude toward issues that are usually strictly defined in serpent-handling congregations. I observed two key issues where Cobb Creek is much less severe than other congregations; modesty in dress, and trinity v. oneness theology.

Modesty in dress has always been important in the Holiness tradition as a whole. Serpent-Handling churches generally follow a similar dress code. While it is not universal, most churches prefer to see men wear long slacks, and long-sleeved shirts. In some congregations men are expected to be clean shaven as well. Women are

generally expected to wear ankle-length dresses or skirts, and long-sleeved shirts. Women are also expected to refrain from jewelry or makeup in some churches. In contrast to the traditional emphasis on appropriate dress, Cobb Creek has never shown much rigidity in their dress code. Many male members attend in designer t-shirts and jeans. I have also seen many female congregants wear short sleeves, knee length skirts, jeans, and a fair amount of makeup. While it is not unheard of to see such clothes at such a church, dress codes at serpent-handling churches have traditionally required more modesty. There are members of the church, including Paul, that dress more modestly and formally. The emphasis here is on the fact that it is not addressed. The only reference made about inappropriate dress was by Deacon Jared. He was explaining to me that in the course of traveling to other churches, he has seen congregations that will turn people away at the door if dressed inappropriately. He did not agree with such a strict enforcement because it kept people out of the church. This laxity of dress code seems to fit with the general openness of the congregation. Many visitors have attended Cobb Creek that were not dressed appropriately by traditional standards. One female college student visited in jeans and a t-shirt. Another man, who came as part of a documentary film crew, came wearing cut-off shorts and a t-shirt. It would seem as though Cobb Creeks desire to remain open to outside visitors has served to curb the emphasis placed on dress code. I would argue though that the primary cause for this laxity is that hardly any of the congregants were raised within this tradition.

The second indicator of Cobb Creek's doctrinal softening comes from their passé attitude toward the Trinitarian/Oneness dispute. Serpent-Handlers across Appalachia

have long been divided over this one key issue; the Trinitarian nature of God. For many mainstream evangelical denominations, the triune nature of God as Father, Son (Jesus), and Holy Spirit is accepted as part of their doctrine. Among serpent-handlers there are congregations that only accept Jesus Christ as God. For these 'oneness' or 'Jesus only' believers, Jesus is God alone. They derive their interpretation of the nature of God from certain key scriptures. Whichever theological camp believers fall in can typically be determined based upon their church name. Edwina Church of God in Jesus Name in Newport, TN for example, is an oneness church. This singular issue seems to have caused more division among serpent-handlers than any other. One church I visited in Kentucky best illustrates this tension. A young man took the podium to testify during a Friday night service. During his testimony he began to condemn other congregations. He cited a recent visit he had made to a Trinitarian serpent-handling church nearby. His references to 'them Trinitarian boys' was unflattering. With the approving shouts of fellow congregants, he continued his speech against the other congregation and their lax theology and discipline. It is interesting to note that despite the difference in theological perspective, many serpent-handlers will still visit among churches of the opposite doctrinal belief. Despite this occasional intermingling, it would appear that congregations consider themselves truer believers because of their devotion to one doctrine or the other.

Some have claimed a certain geographical orientation to these churches, with Trinitarian congregations remaining further south where serpent-handling was connected originally with the Trinitarian Church of God in Cleveland, TN. According to Edwina's pastor Jimmy Morrow, the Jesus only tradition came from Virginia and West

Virginia, where he believes serpent-handling originated (Hood & Morrow 2005). The geographical distribution of these two 'denominations' of serpent-handler is interesting. Other scholars have noted the potential of serpent-handling arising independently in the northern Appalachian states of West Virginia, Virginia, and Kentucky, apart from Hensley and the Church of God (Kimbrough 1995). Regardless of origin or geographic distribution of the two serpent-handling groups, it has traditionally been one of the key doctrinal issues that separate a relatively united serpent-handling religious sect.

Cobb Creek has downplayed the importance of this doctrinal dispute. During the first conversation I had with Pastor Paul, I asked which perspective his church had in regards to the nature of God. Paul was quick to downplay the question, claiming that such issues led to division within the church. He believes that this type of division unnecessarily causes division within what he sees as a unified body of Christian believers. During one particular service where a visiting pastor preached, it became clear that many in the congregation were displeased by his theological leanings. Many of the Cobb Creek congregation ended up smoking outside during the majority of the visiting preacher's sermon. I went outside myself to take a break from the three hour service. Many of the young congregants were talking about the visiting preacher's style and beliefs and how they did not agree, thus they were outside during his sermon. Pastor Paul concluded the service by speaking against any dissension. He exhorted his church to love, regardless of differences in belief, and even encouraged them to go and visit at the other preacher's church, as he had been so kind to visit Cobb Creek. Paul argued that even though believers may not always see eye to eye on every issue, they had much more in common. For Paul, these common beliefs far outweighed the few

doctrinal differences. There does seem to be some disagreement between some of the congregants and Paul. Many of the members have spoken out against visiting preachers, or simply having too many visitors. Despite this occasional tension, the congregants continue to grant Paul ultimate authority over the church. This is just one of many examples of how the Cobb Creek congregation has loosened its stance on traditionally key issues, becoming more mainstream in their faith than serpent-handling congregations have been in the past. Seeing as how many of these theological divisions arose long before many of the Cobb Creek members were born, they have shown a lessened interest in maintaining theological boundaries that divide serpent-handlers from one another. Being young in age, and young in the serpent-handling movement as a whole, the Cobb Creek church has less of a vested interest in maintaining traditional disputes that work against a greater sense of community and social networking that they have tried to accomplish.

Chapter 10: Conclusions

I undertook this study on serpent-handling communities with two objectives: to address many of the misunderstandings concerning these believers, and to try and explain ways in which a tradition with such a high cost of participation can survive despite the social, cultural, and legal pressures against it. I was able to spend a considerable amount of time with the members of the Cobb Creek Church in Thomasville. While I was there, I experienced a far different culture than what has been represented in the media. As I have elaborated on before, television, movies, and news media have treated serpent-handling believers unkindly. Believers have often been regarded as bizarre, psychotic, backward, or outdated. Academia has also taken its turn at misrepresenting serpent-handlers in an attempt to explain their religious rituals, often seeking to categorize their beliefs as pathological, thrill-seeking, or the result of poverty and ignorance. Even during the course of my research, I have found that the general public has many uninformed views about the religious tradition and its members. Many people have asked me about aspects of serpent-handling, ranging from the overtly prejudiced, to the simply misinformed. While speaking in an undergraduate course about my research, one student asked me why serpent-handlers throw snakes at congregants in the pews. I was even asked why serpent-handlers let their small children play with poisonous snakes. It is these gross misconceptions about what these people believe and practice regularly that inspired me to undertake this study. Even small misunderstandings of serpent-handler theology serve to insult the purpose and the faith with which these people practice their faith. Many people in my own life have questioned me on how serpent-handlers milk or defang their snakes beforehand. Others

have jokingly mentioned snake bites as being indicative of a lack of faith or divine favor for the believer. These simple misunderstandings of the tradition serve to cheapen the faith of serpent-handlers, who willingly place themselves in very genuine danger in order to exercise what they see as a divine mandate. The serpents are real, the danger is real and it is expected. Serpent-handling is not done to test the faith or holiness of the believer. Almost all long-time handlers have been bitten at some point in their lives, some have been bitten many times, and others still have died. They do this fully aware of the possibility that they may die. If a believer handles a serpent and is not bitten, it is seen as divine protection under the anointing. If a believer is bitten, but does not succumb, it is exemplary of God's divine healing. If however, a believer is bitten and dies from the bite, other believers recognize this as a God's divine will to bring that person to paradise. One serpent-handling pastor explained it like this, "When it's your time to go, it's your time to go. We all gotta die, I'd rather go doin' what the Lord told me to do". Some see this theology as a cop-out, but explaining why things happen the way they do in our lives is the substance of religion, regardless of which religious tradition it is. I have conducted this study in order to afford serpent-handling believers the same amount of legitimacy in academic study as any other religious tradition. Serpent-handling, for these believers is a way to make sense of the world around them, and should be approached as such, not as pathology, ignorance, or some deeply-rooted, subconscious Freudian symbolism.

My second objective for this research study was to examine the way in which the Cobb Creek Church has been able to revitalize the tradition and make it appealing for a younger generation. Research on serpent-handling believers has been largely

conducted by people in other academic disciplines besides anthropology. This study attempts to use anthropological theories on cultural change in order to explain the uniqueness of this particular congregation. In a tradition that has largely survived from within, it is interesting to note the way in which many outsiders have found a home within the serpent-handling tradition. Many of Cobb Creek's members, including the Pastor, did not grow up within serpent-handling, which has largely been the way that serpent-handling has continued since the early 1900's. Cobb Creek serves as an example of how a younger generation can become passionate about a tradition and continue it, even without being immersed in it all their lives. This congregation has found ways in which to make serpent-handling more appealing for a new generation, revitalizing the practice in their area without sacrificing the core values of the practice.

The most important factor in Cobb Creek's growth within the serpent-handling tradition has been Pastor Paul himself. Paul is a charismatic leader, passionately taking up the banner of a seemingly outdated tradition, and revitalizing it for a more modern audience. Paul's passion for the tradition, his faith, and his uncanny ability to make all those around him feel welcome have allowed for the growth and progress of his church. He took up serpent-handling due to what he saw as a divine calling, and has inspired others to do the same ever since, all with the passion of youth. Despite being what some would call naive, Paul's efforts have served his purposes thus far. Having a young, charismatic leader has led many young people to attend Cobb Creek. Paul's family and friends are the core group around which the church was formed almost two years ago. Introducing a younger generation to such a tradition is key to its survival, as the majority of those involved with the movement's origins have since passed.

The Cobb Creek congregation walks a thin line between tradition and revitalization, and has been criticized for erring on both ends of the spectrum. The associate pastor Peter left the church during my fieldwork. When I asked the Pastor why Peter left, he simply said, "I guess we just weren't holy enough for him". Other serpent-handling communities have criticized Cobb Creek's acceptance of visitors due to many longstanding ideas about dress code and modesty. On the other end of the spectrum, many still find Pastor Paul's church eccentric or fanatical. One nearby serpent-handling Pastor spoke with me about how excited Paul was about serpent-handling. He wrote Paul's enthusiasm off as mere youthful exuberance. According to this long-time serpent-handler, Paul handled serpents almost too often. Many believers would agree with him when he said, "I told [him], you don't have to handle every serpent, every service." Traditionally, the emphasis has been on waiting on God to prompt when and what serpents should be taken up. Critics on both sides of the matter serve only to shape an already poignant struggle for Pastor Paul and his congregation. It has always been important for Paul to retain the core values of the tradition. The congregation sings traditional Southern Pentecostal songs, the preaching style is congruent with serpent-handling Holiness churches across Appalachia, and the handling of serpents is practiced for the same reasons. Cobb Creek has maintained its traditional cultural identity largely through the large social network they preserve with the serpent-handling community across Appalachia. Many believers from other states have come to visit with Paul and his congregation for service. Paul also maintains very close ties with a nearby serpent-handling church in Kentucky. This social network has served to alleviate many of the pressures of maintaining a cultural identity. Although Cobb Creek does not

radically redefine serpent-handling as a religious practice or tradition, there are subtle ways in which they differ from the larger serpent-handling community. I would argue that these subtle distinctions from the more traditional serpent-handling congregations are what make Cobb Creek so unique, and have caused their growth among younger believers and nonbelievers alike.

Another important factor for Cobb Creek's successful efforts to revitalize the tradition for a new generation is its emphasis on creating awareness. The purpose behind the church's openness to outside visitors, reporters, and documentary film crews is to create a more informed awareness about the tradition, its members, and its practices. This has also been the impetus for Cobb Creek's active pursuit of seeing the legal ban on serpent-handling lifted. While most serpent-handlers do not enjoy the fact that their religious practices are deemed illegal by State authorities, they have largely remained silent on the matter. There has been no motivation for handlers to protest what they see as unjust laws, when they answer first and foremost to what they view as the laws of God. While some have written Paul's petition efforts off as misguided enthusiasm, I argue that it represents an important feature of the Cobb Creek Church. I would also argue that the petition against the ban on serpent-handling represents a conscious effort to gain legitimacy as a religious movement. Paul and his Cobb Creek congregation have consistently made efforts to spread the word about their faith and their practices. For this congregation, their faith represents something real, something good and powerful, and they are adamant about wanting to share that with others. Paul said it best, "I wish everyone in the world could feel what I feel when I handled serpents. If they could, they'd never doubt it."

In the end, the Cobb Creek Church raises interesting questions about the process by which a traditional religious movement, especially one that has persisted for over a century, can be constantly revitalized. The Cobb Creek church has found a middle-ground between the tradition they are so proud of, and the surrounding culture. This particular church may also provide insight into the ways in which such fringe religious movements can survive and adapt, while still retaining the core values they hold so dear. Often within the serpent-handling community, a small congregation will emerge, having been spun off from a larger serpent-handling community. As Hood and Williamson note, these small 'spin-offs' often do not survive, and are eventually absorbed back into the larger "hub" from which they came. Whether or not Paul's youthful church is a flash in the pan, or will survive has yet to be seen, but they remain an example of how a young generation can take a tradition and make it their own, without compromising its values. Cobb Creek's growth and survival lends some credence to the old serpent-handling adage, "As long as there is a King James Bible and someone that can read it, there will always be serpent-handlers."

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