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THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY, PH.D., 1978

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1978
A SERPENT-HANDLING CHURCH IN A MIDWESTERN CITY:
A STUDY OF COMMITMENT

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By
Kenneth Paul Ambrose, B.A., M.Div., M.A.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1978

Reading Committee: Approved By
Professor Russell R. Dynes
Professor Alfred C. Clarke
Professor Christen T. Jonassen

Adviser
Department of Sociology
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Russell Dynes, for the help he has given to me during the course of this study; his help and suggestions were greatly appreciated. I would also like to thank Dr. Alfred Clarke and Dr. Christen Jonassen for their suggestions and support.

A study such as this could not have been accomplished without the sacrifices made by my wife, Sharon, and my two sons, Scott and Paul. The many days and nights they were alone while I was traveling with the serpent-handlers, attending the services, working in my office, or developing photographs in the darkroom can never be repaid, but I so greatly appreciate their support and patience.

My appreciation is extended to the members of the serpent-handling church. Without their willingness to permit me in their services, their homes, and their lives, this study could never have been accomplished.

While many may disagree with their beliefs and practices, their sincerity, love, and friendship for their religion, and for their fellowmen permeates their church and their daily lives. My thanks are extended to all of them.
VITA

January 3, 1940 . . Born - Lost River, West Virginia

1962 . . . . . . B.A., West Virginia Wesleyan College, Buckhannon, West Virginia

1965 . . . . . . M.Div., Duke University, Durham, North Carolina

1966 . . . . . . Post-graduate Work, University of Edinburgh, Scotland

1967 . . . . . . Minister of Humphreys United Methodist Church, Tornado, West Virginia

1970 . . . . . . M.A., Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia

1970-1972 . . . Teaching Associate, Department of Sociology, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

1972-1974 . . . Teacher, Mansfield Campus, The Ohio State University, Mansfield, Ohio

1975-1978 . . . Instructor of Sociology, Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia

PUBLICATIONS

Photographs have appeared in the following publications:


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Sociology

Studies in Sociology of Religion. Professor Russell R. Dynes

Studies in Urban Sociology. Professor Christen T. Jonassen

Studies in Social Stratification. Professor Alfred Clarke
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope of the Study</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions of Terms</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Study</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THEORY</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. APPLICATION OF COMMITMENT THEORY TO ASPECTS OF SERPENT-HANDLING CHURCH SERVICES</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental Commitment</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective Commitment</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Commitment</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. FUNERALS</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. SUMMARY OF THE DATA FROM THE INTERVIEWS</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# APPENDIXES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Interview Guide</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Types of Serpents Used in the Church Services and Symptoms of the Snake Bites</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Strychnine</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Notes From the Diary of a Serpent-Handler</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Sample of Field Notes</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Fundamentals and Government of a Serpent-Handling Church</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Application of Visual Sociology in a Serpent-Handling Church</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Man Handling Serpent During a Service</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The Serpent Was in the Process of Biting</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Group's Attention Immediately Directed Toward the Victim</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>The Members Supported the Victim Both Physically and Also With Their Prayers</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>A Group of the &quot;Saints&quot; Formed Around the Victim</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>A Minister Assesses the Seriousness of the Bite</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Prayers Offered for Victim</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Group of Saints Surround the Victim</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Surrounded by Saints, Victim Was Seated on the Right Side of the Church</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Victim Removed Outside for Fresh Air</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Victim at Nearby Home of a Member</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>The Urban Churches Were in the Downtown Area</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Storefront Church in Urban Ohio</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>This Photograph Communicates Various Aspects of Commitment</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>This Was the Beginning of a &quot;Press&quot;</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>The Prayer Cloths Were Brought to the Service Where Oil Was Placed Upon It</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Members Placing Their Hands on Prayer Cloths and Praying for Them</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Healing Occurred by the Laying on of Hands and the Prayers Offered. All Members Pray at the Same Time</td>
<td>143</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. In the Back of the Church the Children Will Imitate Their Parents by Dancing</td>
<td>144</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. This Boy Had Fasted for Seven Days in Preparation for This Event</td>
<td>145</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Footwashing Was Performed by Both Men and Women</td>
<td>146</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. These Three Men Traveled Three Hundred Miles to be on a T. V. Talk Show in Order to Testify to Others About Their Faith</td>
<td>147</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. This Woman Held Her Hand Directly Above the Flame for Fifty-Five Seconds and Her Hand Was Not Burned</td>
<td>148</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. This Man Held the Flame Near His Face and Was Not Burned</td>
<td>149</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Fire is Usually Placed on the Arms or Face, and a Few Will Place Their Feet in the Fire</td>
<td>150</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. This Photograph Illustrates That Not Everyone Received the Same Message From God</td>
<td>151</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Washing of the Serpents Usually Occurred Before the Service</td>
<td>152</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. At Times They Will Place the Serpents on the Bible and Continue to Preach While the Serpents Remain Coiled</td>
<td>153</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. In the Next Three Photographs You Will Note the Woman Who Handled the Serpent for the First Time</td>
<td>154</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. Note the Expressions on the Faces of the Others Who Surround the Serpent-Handler</td>
<td>155</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. Note the Calmness on the Faces of All of the Members</td>
<td>156</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. In This Photograph Note the Light Reflected in the Lens of the Camera Which Appeared Like a Halo Over the Minister</td>
<td>157</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. While There Are Few Blacks in the Serpent-Handling Religion, They Are Found in West Virginia and North Carolina</td>
<td>158</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. The Serpents Are Carried in Wooden Boxes Such As Those Above</td>
<td>159</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. The Following Photographs Will Demonstrate Some of the Serpent-Handlers Handling the Serpents</td>
<td>160</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. A Minister in One of the Churches Handling Serpents to Demonstrate His Faith to a Group of People Who Have Not Experienced Serpent-Handling Before</td>
<td>161</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. Some Members Will Place Their Feet in the Middle of the Serpents</td>
<td>162</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. This Minister Placed His Hand in the Middle of the Serpents on Several Occasions During the Study</td>
<td>163</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. The Members Achieved Status by Handling a Large Number of Serpents</td>
<td>164</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. This Minister Permitted a Rattler to Crawl Over His Face</td>
<td>165</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. This Minister Continued to Preach While Holding Seven Rattlers</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43. Some Serpent-Handlers Permitted the Serpents to Crawl on Their Body While Handling Others in Their Hands</td>
<td>167</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44. While the Quality of the Photograph Was Poor, One Can Observe the Size of the Rattler Which Bit and Killed This Minister Just Minutes After the Photograph Was Taken</td>
<td>168</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45. The Following Photographs Illustrate Some of the Bites Which the Members Have Sustained</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46. In This Photograph the Man Had Been Bitten About a Month Earlier</td>
<td>170</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47. This Member Had Been Bitten on the Foot, Came to Church and Continued to Play the Guitar and Handle the Serpents as This Photograph Illustrates</td>
<td>171</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48.</td>
<td>The Minister Was Bitten By a Large Eastern Diamondback and Died the Next Day</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49.</td>
<td>The Family Expressing Their Final Farewell to Father, Husband, and Son</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50.</td>
<td>Through This Photograph, One Notes the Commitment on the Part of the Members Who Are Willing to Continue the Practice in Front of the Casket of Their Minister Who Has Died From a Serpent Bite</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For generations, religion has been a vital influence in the lives of Southern Appalachians. Campbell stated that, "in no other part of our country will one find a more deep and sincere interest in matters of religion than in the Southern Highlands."\(^1\) Religion sustains this eminent position as illustrated in a recent survey by John Photiadis. Subjects were asked to rank the following items in order of personal importance: family, work, education, outdoor living, and religion. In five of seven regions, religion was ranked first; in the remaining two areas, religion was ranked second, and the family first.\(^2\)

While denominational churches usually maintain beliefs and practices similar to the larger society, some fundamental churches in the Appalachian area have unique beliefs and practices. One group based its practices on


the following scripture:

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.  

While some churches may incorporate one or possibly two "signs" into their services, those who handle serpents usually practice all "signs." This study is based on observations of serpent-handlers from the rural Southern Appalachia to the urban Midwest. The serpent-handlers have continued to practice their faith in urban areas despite persecution from neighbors, fellow workers and the law. Regardless of these difficulties, they remain committed to their church and faith.  

This study focuses on a single congregation and its purpose is to describe the services in a Midwestern serpent handling church and to examine the commitment of its members to a religion posing potential death in the rituals of serpent-handling and drinking of strychnine. In order to do this, the study:

(a) describes a typical church service and demonstrates how the service developed faith and commitment in members;

(b) describes the funeral services held for members who die from serpent bites which reinforced

\[\text{Mark 16:17-18.}\]
the commitment of the surviving members;

(c) discusses the members' commitment to the serpent-handling religion and an individual serpent-handling church. This last phase was ascertained through individual interviews based on Rosabeth Kanter's theory of commitment in her book, *Commitment and Community*.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Throughout history, people have been so committed to a way of life, a religion, a political cause, or an ideal that they have been willing to sacrifice their lives for their beliefs. Such commitment is still in evidence in many areas of society today.

For example, in September 1973, Lawrence Parkers of Barslow, California, was attending the local Assembly of God church where a visiting South American minister claimed to have healing power. Lawrence and his wife brought their eleven year old son, Wesley, to this church to be healed of diabetes. "We believe in faith healing," said the Parkers. "The preacher felt that he was healed and Wesley felt that he was healed."\(^4\) The Parkers were so certain that the cure was successful, that they disposed of his insulin. With the termination of treatment, Wesley died.

\(^4\)Time, September 10, 1973, p. 76.
In another context, in February 1974, Patty Hearst was kidnapped from her apartment by members of the Symbionese Liberation Army. Three months later she stunned her family and friends by announcing that she had renounced them and joined her abductors. Her anguished father exclaimed, "It's terrible. Sixty days ago she was a lovely child. Now there's a picture of her in a bank with a gun in her hand." The objectives of the Symbionese Liberation Army included destruction of all forms of racism, sexism, ageism, capitalism, and competitiveness. Six members were so committed to these causes that they gave their lives for the organization.

It was the first and perhaps the last real battle of the Symbionese Liberation Army. A holocaust of flame and gunfire mad enough to match the suicidal fantasies of any terrorist. In an hour-long fire . . . 400 police and F.B.I. agents exchanged 1,000 rounds of ammunition with besieged S.L.A. members in the Los Angeles ghetto last weekend. At the end of the battle, six bodies lay charred and unrecognizable in the ashes of a small stucco house . . . .

Killed in the shoot-out were:

- Donald Defreeze 30
- Pat Saltzsik 24
- Nancy Perry 26
- William Walk 23
- Angela Atwood 25
- Camilla Hall 29

Still in another context later that same year, Walter Sitton lost a daughter through religious commitment. Sitton belonged to the Church of the First Born in Cortez, Colorado. He maintained his faith in God, even though his

four year old daughter, Christy, died of diptheria as he adhered to a belief in refusing medical care. "I believe God would have healed her if it was His will. . . . I'm sure it's difficult to understand, but to me it's simple. God has the power over all things. And I can't see why not just trust him with everything." 7

A similar scene was repeated in West Virginia on April 2, 1974, when a serpent-handling minister was bitten by a large Eastern Diamondback rattlesnake during a church service. The serpent had been handled by ten other members of the church. When he removed the serpent from a box a second time, it bit him on his left wrist. The service came to an abrupt halt, while prayers were offered for him. He was taken to a member's nearby home.

Family and church members gathered at the house to pray for him. He refused any medical attention. During this time, he was nauseated, his arm was cyanotic and so edematous that the skin split. The next afternoon, with family and friends around him, the minister died. He was thirty-three years old and left his wife with a four-week old baby daughter.

On Saturday, August 3, 1974, another minister was bitten by a rattlesnake at Scrabble Creek, West Virginia. He continued to handle the serpents for thirty minutes after he was bitten. He was taken to his home, approximately one

7Columbus Dispatch, November 4, 1974, p. 4B.
hundred miles from the church. He also refused medical attention and on the following Thursday he died from a secondary infection. On October 21, 1974, his son-in-law was bitten by timber rattlers during a service and died. Within two months his nineteen year old wife had lost both father and husband from serpent bites. During the funeral services, she reaffirmed her faith in the group by handling serpents in front of her husband's casket.

There have been other deaths from serpent bites and drinking strychnine, yet, church members continued to practice their rituals.

**SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

In this study of the serpent-handling churches, the author attended services over a ten year period in sixteen different churches in five states. Hence, the focus is on a Midwestern serpent-handling church where the majority of members were migrants from Southern West Virginia. They maintained strong ties with the mother church in West Virginia. While there were many interesting areas which could have been researched, this study is limited to the serpent-handling member's commitment to their religion and individual church.

**DEFINITIONS OF TERMS**

Because of the uniqueness of the religious group,
certain terms to be used throughout should be explained.

1. Serpent-handling members: This term referred to people who belonged to the serpent-handling church. Not all members of the serpent-handling church handled serpents, however, the majority did.

2. Serpents: The serpents which this church usually handled were indigenous to the area including: eastern diamondbacks, timber rattlesnakes, and copperheads. Occasionally they handled western diamondbacks, cottonmouths, coral snakes, and once an Asian cobra. (See appendix for a discussion of the serpents and their characteristics.)

3. Holy Ghost Speaking in Tongues: This phenomenon demonstrated that a person had the Spirit of God. The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible defined speaking in tongues or glossolalia as "... inarticulated, unintelligible speech issuing from Christians who, in a state of ecstasy believed themselves to be possessed by the Spirit." Some scriptural basis for this belief was in Acts 2:1-42; 10:44-48; 11:15-17; 19:2-7, and the sixteenth chapter of Mark. John Miles described the phenomenon in the following manner:

In order to speak in tongues, you have to quit praying in English . . . you simply lapse into

---

silence and resolve to speak not a syllable of any language you have ever learned. Your thoughts are focused on Christ, and then you simply lift up your voice and speak out confidently, in the faith that the Lord will take the sound you give him and shape it into a language. You take no thought of what you are saying; as far as you are concerned, it is just a series of sounds. The first sounds will sound strange and unnatural to your ears, and they may be halting and inarticulate.9

The author's purpose was not to explore psychological causes of glossolalia but rather to illustrate its social significance. Glossolalia signified the following to the serpent-handlers:

a. **Reception of the Holy Ghost**: Glossolalia demonstrated reception of the Holy Ghost. Following conversion and water baptism, the church emphasized this baptism of the spirit. After receiving the Holy Spirit, a person gained higher status in the church.

b. **Authority**: Glossolalia added authority to a preacher's message or a member's testimony, for this indicated that the message originated with the Holy Ghost. Leaders in the serpent-handling sect derived authority from the Holy Ghost rather than from education. "The mountain clergy, as a general rule, are hostile to book larin', for there ain't no Holy Ghost

---

c. **Social Control**: Glossolalia provided social control in certain churches. The author observed the use of glossolalia in the subduing of boisterous onlookers.

d. **Prophesy**: Glossolalia was used by members to prophesy the future of the church or an individual. While a church member was "down in the spirit" and speaking in tongues, another member interpreted the utterances, while still another recorded them. The death of one of the ministers was prophesied by this method.

e. **Singing**: One rare occasion the author observed and recorded one of the members singing in glossolalia.

f. **Devil**: On occasion, glossolalia spoken by strangers in the church was interpreted as the devil and not the true Holy Spirit.

4. **The Press**: The press was a phenomenon in which the congregation helped the Spirit to "fall upon the meeting." At the beginning of a service, music was played and the members of the congregation gathered closely at the front of the church singing and clapping

---

their hands. The press generated the desired phenomenon of glossolalia, the dance, drinking of strychnine, and the handling of serpents or fire. The press was also utilized in healing sessions.

5. **Commitment**: Commitment has been used in a variety of ways in the literature. In this study it will mean a social process, as defined by Kanter in her book, *Commitment and Community*. Commitment is:

   a means of the attachment of the self to the requirements of social relations that are seen as self-expressive. Commitment links self interest to social requirements. When a person is committed, what he wants to do (through internal feeling) is the same as what he has to do (according to external demands) and thus he gives to the group what it needs to maintain itself at the same time he gets what he needs to nourish his own sense of self.\textsuperscript{11}

**ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY**

The remainder of the study is organized in the following way: Chapter two deals with related research, conducted on serpent-handlers. Chapter three deals with the methodology used in the research; it illustrates the use of visual sociology in the study of this group. Chapter four deals with theory as it applies to this study. Chapter five discusses a typical meeting and demonstrates how the service develops commitment. Chapter six describes the funeral

services held for members who died from serpent bites, and how these services related to commitment. Chapter seven deals with major findings from interviews which this author conducted with thirty-nine members of the serpent-handling church in a Midwestern city. Chapter eight is a summary of the findings and conclusions drawn.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Serpent-handling is primarily a phenomenon of the Southern Appalachians. Newspaper accounts have often focused on the dramatic events without attempting to provide accurate information. Different types of literature promoted various observations. These were used as a basis of comparison to the author's field experience. In this chapter a review will be given of: (a) a sample of popular literature including newspaper and journal articles, (b) descriptive books, (c) psychological accounts, and (d) anthropological and sociological discussions of the serpent-handlers. These different perspectives yielded different conclusions. The popular writers depended on the dramatic and shocking value of their work. The psychologists sought to explain the serpent-handling ritual in terms of trances. The anthropologists were concerned with the symbolism of the serpent, viewing the serpent as a devil or evil. Sociologists were concerned with the recurrent social patterns, beliefs, and attitudes of the members.

Most newspaper articles offered superficial accounts of church services. Writers attended one or two meetings
and concentrated on describing the serpent-handling ritual. An early newspaper reporter, Keith Kerman, became interested in the serpent-handling church when three members were charged with a breach of the peace. The trial ended in acquittal for the members, but prompted Kerman to go to Harlan, Kentucky to observe their services. He stated, "The men took the snakes without hesitation or a sign of fear. They handled them familiarly, as if they were friends. Women seemed to be less at ease with the reptiles."¹ He experienced cultural shock when the church members greeted one another with a kiss. "It was odd to see rawboned mountain men kiss a newcomer when he joined our group."² He could not explain the phenomenon of members handling fire without injury. "I examined the hands, and aside from their being smoke-blackened, I saw no marks to show they had been in fire."³

Kerman had an interview with G.W. Hensley, the reported founder of the serpent-handling religion. He was the pastor of the East Pineville Church of God, near Harlan, Kentucky. "He said he had introduced the practice twenty-eight years before in Sale Creek, Tennessee; that he had been bitten 250 times and had been ill from a snake bite


²Ibid., p. 96.

³Ibid., p. 100.
only once."

Kerman ended his account with a statement that he could offer no explanation of the strange religious rites; why the fire did not burn them nor the snakes kill them.

Robert Holliday, a West Virginia newspaper publisher and State Legislator, wrote a book entitled *Tests of Faith* at a time when West Virginia was considering a bill to outlaw serpent-handling in the State. He described the beliefs and rites of the Church of All Nations, a serpent-handling church in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. It was a compilation of photographs and verbatim interviews with church members, not attempting to analyze the group or the services.

Pelton and Carden, free-lance writers, wrote a book which they called *Snake-Handlers: God-Fearers? or Fanatics?* It was similar to Holliday's book, in that it consisted mainly of photographs and interviews leaving many sociological matters and analyses untouched. Their work focused on churches in Tennessee.

One of the best popular treatments of the serpent-handlers was done by *Foxfire*, an Appalachian Journal, which devoted a complete edition to the churches and their services. A wealth of scriptural passages was included to justify each of the rituals in the church. It provided a realistic description of the services and had pertinent supplemental photographs.

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Numerous reporters have gone to the services and written articles with titles such as: "If It Kills You . . . Well, Glory to God," "Handling Snakes Doesn't Rattle Holiness Churches' True Believers," "Jail Before Compliance Vow of Snake-Handlers," and "Snake Victim Forced to Accept Treatment." Articles like these have been published by the Associated Press and New York Times as well as the local papers from the area. They exploited the dramatic effects of the service to increase sales and were not concerned with analysis of the group.

Psychologists have attempted to explain the serpent-handlers' behavior. Three Charleston, West Virginia psychiatrists were interviewed about the snake-handlers.

They agreed that the psychiatric term "hysteria" probably applies to such worship, but explained that it isn't hysteria in the ordinary sense. "Hysteria is a psychiatric entity with a variety of manifestations," one said. "Through it, a person can displace inner conflict onto their bodies, or into a type of amnesia, or into a 'fugue'... which is somewhat like an open-eyes sleepwalking." They said that, in this case it probably would be mass hysteria and contagious. "It likely involves a type of temporary dissociation from reality," another commented, "... and it could well be a mechanism of denial of impulses." "There seems to be a tremendous erotic quality about it," another said, referring to the "holy kissing" and convulsive dancing. Snakes frequently are cited as a Freudian symbol.5

Psychologists, Berthold Schwarz, M.D. wrote "Ordeal by Serpents, Fire and Strychnine, a Study of Some

Provocative Psychosomatic Phenomena." From psychiatric examinations of the serpent-handling members he stated,

In none of the saints who were examined was there any evidence of current neurotic, psychotic, or psychosomatic reactions, or of pathological dissociative behavior. In general, the individual psychopathology of Holiness people was not markedly different from that of people in other sects.⁶

Schwarz explained that they were able to perform these feats (handling the fire, serpents, and the drinking of poison) because they were in trances.

The fact can, therefore, be noted that when Holiness members are not entranced, they—like everyone else—suffer burns, are afraid of poisonous snakes, and possibly are more frequently bitten by them.⁷

Schwarz was baffled by the ability of the members to handle the fire and not be burned.

In many of these phenomena, common sense and the reported experimental data . . . would indicate that the temperatures of the flames that were used were high enough so that the exposures witnessed should have sufficed to produce serious burns. The question why these people are not burned on their bodies and their projected body images, when in their exalted states remains a mystery for future probing.⁸

Anthropologists LaBarre, Birckhead, and Kane studied the religious practices of several serpent-handling churches and made individual interpretations.

In his book, They Shall Take Up Serpents, Psychology of the Southern Snake-Handling Cult, Dr. LaBarre discussed


⁷Ibid., p. 417.

⁸Ibid., p. 418.
the symbolism of the serpents throughout history: from African and Near Eastern cults to Southern Appalachian serpent-handlers. The Midwestern study disagreed with LaBarre's interpretation of the serpent as a phallic symbol. The study did not note the emphasis on sexuality stressed by LaBarre.

Anthropologist James Birckhead, who wrote, "God's Not Dead, He Is Still Alive--A Study of Reality Management In a Southern Appalachian Serpent-Handling Church," investigated how a group of serpent-handlers cognitively and semantically organized their world. He discussed the methods they used to explain death within their group. He supported the thesis that in the minds of some members, the serpent symbolized the devil or evil.

Steven M. Kane investigated the trances into which members worked themselves. Kane was concerned about the anointing and the sensory anesthesia of the people in their possession state. He emphasized that the people were not psychologically abnormal.

It must be emphasized that dissociation among serpent-handlers is not a random, haphazard affair, but a learned and culturally patterned response that occurs.

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9Weston LaBarre, They Shall Take Up Serpents, Psychology of the Southern Snake-Handling Cults (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1962).

according to more or less well-defined rules within the specific and rather highly structured context of religious ceremony. We are dealing here not with the privately constructed, idiosyncratic fantasy and action systems, of neurotics and self-insulated psychotics, but on the contrary with a vigorous and enduring institutionalized system of ritual and belief whose symbols are public, socially shared, and sanctioned.11

Sociologists have studied a variety of serpent-handling churches. Each has focused on a particular aspect of the church: such as resistance to change by members, dysfunctional aspects of the church for the larger society, emotional health of church members, and congregational reaction to death from a serpent bite.

A study by Alice Cobb examined the serpent-handlers' resistance to change. Her hypothesis was:

Among isolated rural people, the largely unorganized holiness sect movement may be a manifestation of an internalized "religious attitude" which acts, covertly and overtly, to protect the socio-religious norms against any imposed social change including social (change) initiated by organized religion.12

There were some similarities between Cobb's study and that of the Midwestern study: attitude toward education was one example. "The protest against formal education (was) a norm of the Holiness church, embodied in the slogan which amounted to ritual, 'Book learning shuts the door to the


Holy Spirit." This attitude was reflected in the Midwestern serpent-handling church; church members stated that "true knowledge" came from the Holy Ghost and that all the degrees in the world would not save you on judgment day. The two groups shared similar attitudes toward the law. "Where snake-handling was concerned, the Holiness sect obeyed a higher law." In the Midwestern serpent-handling church, when asked if they would continue to practice serpent-handling if it were against the law or if the law were strickly enforced; the majority stated that they would obey God's law over man's law.

Cobb observed that there was no social concern for others because the serpent-handlers had individual prayers, spoke in unknown tongues, heard God speak to the individual, and were concerned about their individual salvation. "The desire for personal being seems to be a primary motivation, and leads to the conclusion that the holiness faith in Mutton Valley is not a social religion."

A researcher must study the culture of an area to establish the people's relationship to one another and their relationships to various organizations. The Appalachian culture has respected the freedom and independence of the

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13 Ibid., p. 31
14 Ibid., p. 49.
15 Ibid., p. 80.
individual. The culture has its roots in the Scotch-Irish tradition. "A fierce independence was part of the heritage which the settlers brought with them to the region. It proved to be an absolutely essential trait." Each man had the responsibility for providing for his family, protecting them, being the doctor, dentist, and law. "Hence the mountaineer came to admire the man who was most independent both economically and socially." This concern for individual independence did not mean that there was unconcern about the well-being of other members in their community. They would not, however, directly invade this independence. Dr. O. Norman Simpkins suggested that the Appalachian individual cannot put up a front nor play roles in a secondary setting. "They haven't learned to build up a front to protect their ego . . . They see other people as whole individuals, unlike the city person who tends to see other people as objects." The cultural value of independence was preserved in their religious institutions. In the conversion process of the serpent-handlers, the individual was generally not directly confronted to be saved, so he was able to remain independent and save face. The situation was the


17Ibid., p. 30.

same for serpent-handling; the person was not forced to handle the serpent; it was their decision if they "took up a serpent."

In his analysis of the serpent-handlers, Milton Yinger agrees with LaBarre's view of the serpent-handlers. Yinger described them in the following manner:

The effort of a deeply deprived and sexually repressed group to deal with the guilty terror embedded in their repressions. By handling the snakes, they act out their unconscious, built laden, but powerful sexual needs. He (LaBarre) sees no therapy in the cult, but only a kind of bitter necessity... because of the pressures of their sadly neurotic and archaic and unhappy culture these people have to have what satisfactions they can without any knowledge of who they are, and what they are like, and what they are really doing.19

Yinger expanded upon this theme and stated that while the serpent-handling religion may stabilize the system itself, he could see no value for the larger society; he even suggested that it would be better if the system were "smashed." The serpent-handling church in the Midwestern study did provide many social services for their members and nonmembers, emotional support, and emotional release for their members, as well as motivation for the members. While Yinger viewed the group as one which should be smashed, the author believed this judgment was made with insufficient evidence of the group and its functions.

Bryan Wilson, in Religious Sects, mentioned the

serpent-handling sect under the heading of thaumaturgical sects. Wilson suggested that they would take up the serpents and not be harmed. The serpent-handlers stated that the scripture told them to pick up the serpents, and it was "any deadly thing" which would not harm them. Wilson further stated that the serpents represented the devil and that the ritual had sexual connotations for the people.

These people were described as follows:

... semi-literate people in culturally retarded areas are concerned only with the manifestation of miraculous power. The excitement, the reassurance, and the sense of superiority it provides can transcend and reinterpret life-circumstances that are otherwise restrictive and harrowing. By a miraculous agency, their poverty and ignorance are transformed into greater blessings than are offered by all the material, social, and cultural advantages of cities.²⁰

The author agreed with the description of the Holy Ghost as being more important than money, status, and education. The author observed, however, they were more concerned with their relationship with God and their fellowman than with power.

Nathan L. Gerrard conducted a study of the serpent-handling church in Scrabble Creek, West Virginia. He studied their services and was interested in the differences in the personality of the serpent-handler from that of the conventional church member. He administered the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory "... to fifty

serpent-handlers and also to ninety members of a conventional denomination church twenty miles from Scrabble Creek. What we wanted to find out was how these two groups differed."21 Gerrard discovered significant differences between the two groups: the serpent-handlers had less anxiety about death, their health, and less alienation between the parents and their children than did the middle class members.

Another sociological study was done by Peggy Sullivan and Kirk Elifson who presented a paper to the American Sociological Association in 1976 on the topic, "Death by Serpent Bite Among a Religious Sect: A Sociological Interpretation." On the basis of twenty-five visits to the church services and their interviews, they discussed the reasons why a person was bitten and discussed how the congregation reacted to the bite and a death from it. They did not observe any of the funerals of those who had died, but interviewed the church members who did attend.22

The work done by Ambrose in the five Southern Appalachian churches described the differences between the rural and the urban churches, compared the attitudes and beliefs of the Southern Appalachian Region with those of the


22 Peggy Sullivan and Kirk W. Elifson, "Death by Serpent Bite Among a Religious Sect: A Sociological Interpre-

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serpent-handlers. Among the many findings were that serpent-handlers participated more actively in their services, emphasized calling rather than training for their ministers, and perceived the church as isolated from community activities. This study did not deal with the problem of commitment of serpent-handlers to their religion and their church.23

SUMMARY

A sample of the literature used as a basis for comparison to the author's field experience has been presented. Different authors presented various interpretations of the serpent-handlers. Newspaper articles and popular books, such as the works of Pelton and Carden, and Richard Holliday, presented superficial descriptions with limited analysis of the serpent-handling churches.

Psychological accounts suggested that church members were able to perform feats of serpent-handling, fire, and drinking of poison because they were in hysterical trances.

Anthropologists and sociologists have studied the religious practices of several serpent-handling churches and have made various interpretations. LaBarre and Wilson viewed the serpent as a phallic symbol; Birckhead and Wilson

viewed the serpent as representing the devil or evil. Kane investigated the possession state of the serpent-handlers and emphasized the institutionalized system of the rituals. Cobb examined the serpent-handlers' resistance to change. Yinger could find no value in the serpent-handling religion for the larger society; Gerrard, on the other hand studied the emotional health of the serpent-handlers and asserted that they were emotionally more stable than middle-class church members. Ambrose described the serpent-handling services and compared the attitudes and beliefs of the serpent-handlers to those of other Southern Appalachians.

In the study of Midwestern serpent-handlers, the author could find no support for the serpent representing the devil nor the sexual implications which some authors suggested. The majority of the above studies lacked the longitudinal perspective of this study.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Various methods of data collection were used in the study of the serpent-handlers. These methods and the rationale for their use will be presented in this chapter.

The primary method used was participant observation in which extensive visual records were kept. In *The Urban Villagers*, Herbert Gans discussed some problems of participant observation. He suggested that there were three types of participant observation: (1) where the researcher acts as an observer, (2) where the researcher participates, but as a researcher, and (3) where the researcher participates. ¹ These methods were incorporated into his research. On some occasions, he merely recorded what he observed; at other times his participation was directed toward particular areas of interest, and finally there were times when he temporarily "abdicated his study role and became a 'real' participant."²

Gans demonstrated some of the problems inherent in participant observation; one was the identification with the

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²Ibid., p. 339.
people.

Every participant-observer becomes emotionally involved not only in his study, but also with the people, since it is through their willingness to talk that he is able to do his research. And this involvement does have some advantages: it allows the observer to understand the people with whom he is living and to look at the world through their eyes. At the same time, it can also blind him to some of their behavior patterns, and thus distort the study. 3

The author became so involved with this group that he found it very difficult not to interfere and offer aid to those who were bitten by serpents. It was painful to observe the suffering which many of them experienced, and especially hard to witness the deaths. He witnessed fifteen or more bites during this period and numerous wounds the day or week after the bites had occurred.

Gans further stated that the identification was more intense " . . . if the people being studied are suffering from deprivation, and if they are a low-status group whose point of view is not being taken notice of in the world outside." 4 He suggested that there was an effort made to correct the stereotypes about the people being studied and the author found himself attempting to correct many misconceptions about serpent-handlers.

Gans was limited by the size of his population, which was three thousand; he interviewed one hundred fifty individuals. The population in the present research study

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3Ibid., p. 343. 4Ibid.
was much smaller. The church studied had a membership of thirty-eight, which enabled the investigator to know and interview all members. This author has been acquainted with approximately two hundred serpent-handlers over a ten-year period.

Gans ended his discussion on methodology with the following statement:

Participant-observation is the only method I know that enables the researcher to get close to the realities of social life. Its deficiencies in producing quantitative data are more than made up for by its ability to minimize the distance between the researcher and his subject of study.5

Participant-observation provided the most useful information for this research study.

William Whyte's work, Street Corner Society, suggested that it required time to really understand a group of people. In his study it took a long time

... because the parts of the study that interest me most depend upon an intimate familiarity with the people and situations. Furthermore I learned to understand a group only through observing how it changed through time.6

It was interesting to note the changes that occurred in the serpent-handling churches. For example, one church did not practice the kiss of charity (greeting one another with a kiss regardless of sex) until after the death of one of its

5Ibid., p. 350.

ministers. Many who have studied the serpent-handlers for short periods of time missed this type of change and its importance to the group and organization.

The author observed the socialization of new members into the church and the way in which social control was maintained. The author attended services when several hundred people attended and on occasions there were only ten. He was with them during a variety of circumstances to observe their behavior. In the same way that Whyte "had to balance familiarity with detachment or else no insights would have come,"7 this author had to reach that state where he could objectively study the group, but at the same time be familiar with them so that the various information could be derived.

There were advantages and disadvantages with participant observation. One problem was the effort made by the members to convert the author to their religion.

Participant observation represents the avowed commitment on the part of the investigator to participate as intimately as possible in the experiences of those he studies. This demands that he learn their language and understand the actions surrounding their valued social objects. The meaning of their styles of dress and modes of gesturing must also be grasped. The observer must to the extent of his abilities learn to view the world of his subjects from their perspective. Preconceptions and stereotypes must be forsaken; a flexible and relativistic stance must be adopted.8

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7Ibid., p. 357.

Members place their hands on the author's head and said, "Lord, disturb his mind to the point that he cannot rest until he comes into this way." Others spoke in tongues, interpreting it to mean that the author would become a follower. They offered him serpents to handle and at times he felt he could, but because of the meaning they placed on it, however, he did not. Members did this out of their concern for him and the hope that he would be saved.

On one occasion, the author was traveling in a car with one of the members. He asked the driver if he would continue to practice his religion if the state would outlaw it? When he started to answer, he went into the Spirit and began to speak in tongues, shout, and removed his hands from the steering wheel. His faith was stronger than the author's, who quickly changed the topic.

The advantages of participant observation far outweighed the hazards of the role. The author was able to enter their homes, learn about their lives in the community and the church, and obtain information to which he otherwise would not have had access. Some confidential information shared with the author was not included in this study, but tapes and written records were kept.

Becker suggested that analysis was continually included in participant observation:

Analysis is carried on sequentially, important parts of the analysis being made while the researcher is still gathering his data. This has two obvious
consequences: further data gathering takes its direction from provisional analyses; and the amount and kinds of provisional analysis carried on is limited to the exigencies of the field work situation, so that final comprehensive analyses may not be possible until the field work is completed.⁹

Becker further stated that the three stages of field analysis were the selection and definition of problems, concepts, and indices; the check on the frequency and distribution of phenomena; and the incorporation of individual findings into a model of the organization under study.¹⁰

Eugene J. Webb suggested that a variety of methods should be used in the study of a group.¹¹ Methods used by the author included participant observation; records; diaries; interviews with the members; interviews with non-members, police, and fellow sociologists; various unobtrusive measures; and finally, in-depth interviews with the church members.

One method used in the collection of the data was photographs and films taken of the serpent-handlers. It has been the tradition within our society that the "written and spoken words have been the primary media of research, teaching, and learning."¹² thus:

⁹Ibid., p. 400. ¹⁰Ibid., pp. 400-412.


Western thought and ideology itself was developed and communicated in words, for language was the most rational means of expression. The social institution that emerged to cultivate this development—the university and the educational system—has been built up on this verbal bias. It was in the great 'libraries' where knowledge was sought, stimulated, and stored. . . . Even intelligence has been defined and measured as verbal facility and abstractive aptitude. The three R's are basically verbal and abstract.  

Clarke and Curry suggested that visual data has been overlooked and the sociologist has relied "almost completely upon information obtained via the use of interviews, questionnaires, or notes from participant observation." They gave examples of the way visual information was used more frequently in our society and stated that,

In view of these realities, a more sophisticated use of visual data can provide a rich source of information for the sociologist as he grapples with new dimensions of new problems.

While the visual-verbal dilemma existed, the author felt that the visual data and methods could be utilized as a research tool in the study of the serpent-handling churches. The use of the photographs and film in this study was "a supportive and powerful supplement to verbal conclusions." Banrdt suggested that visual sociology

. . . has the most to offer serious research of both traditional and emerging sociological concerns; the

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13 Ibid., p. 2.
15 Ibid., p. 1.
16 Barndt, op. cit., p. 12.
camera as a rapport-builder, data-recorder, observation-sharpener; film data as feedback, as self-revealing, as interview stimulus; and continued observation or slow motion analysis as theory-generating, model-constructing or destroying.\textsuperscript{17}

Barndt, Clarke, and Curry advocated the appropriate use of visual sociology; it should not be used for a sensational impact on the reader. "Visual methods are to be used as means, when helpful, rather than as ends, for solving research problems."\textsuperscript{18} This research method was relevant to the study of serpent-handlers.

The author used both still photography and Super-8 movies to record the services. Because of the prohibitive cost of movies, still photographs were used most frequently. The following were advantages of still photography:

From a technical and financial perspective, still cameras are usually cheaper (including film) and easier to carry and operate . . . but still photographs . . . freeze an image that would otherwise be fleeting. This allows then continual inspection of one moment in time, for extraction of many levels of information. Of course, the "no-time slice" is also a kind of distortion, because reality never stands still, and we are left without the time context, that which comes before and after the moment.

Collier suggests that still photographs deal with life elements as artifacts, and thus are valuable for the purpose of measuring, counting, qualifying, and comparing. But they miss the rhythm of life and the emotional drives underlying behavior. Byers notes their advantage for viewers who have a longer time to interpret a still image, and thus have more control over the meaning they draw from it.

\textsuperscript{17}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 12.

\textsuperscript{18}Curry and Clarke, op. cit., p. 20.
There are some obvious points in a research process where stills may be preferable: in developing rapport with subjects, as gifts to informants to accompany field notes, in inventories, for projective interviews where specific information is sought, for documentation of results in publications, for communicating the "essence" of a scene or concept in condensed form.\(^1^9\)

Collier stated that still photography missed the rhythm of life and the emotional drives underlying behavior; yet the author was able to recapture this by the photographs taken over a period of years. The commitment of the serpent-handlers was illustrated by photographs taken of them during the services, handling serpents, as they were bitten, and in death. The appendix contains photographs demonstrating the various parts of the service; Chapter 7 demonstrates the formation of a group and the support it gave the person following a serpent bite.

John Collier's book, *Visual Anthropology: Photography As a Research Method*, provided helpful suggestions in the use of a camera. One was to photograph the environment of the people. Most churches were in lower-economic areas. The photographs illustrated the majority of urban churches to be storefront churches in poor repair; rural churches were more soundly constructed, and contained more modern furniture and carpeting.

Collier suggested that the researcher . . . can safely approach human organizations by

\(^{1^9}\text{Barndt, op. cit., p. 42.}\)
operating in a logical sequence, from the public to the most private, from the formal to the informal, in a reasonable fashion from the outside in. The rule of thumb might be: photograph first what the natives are most proud or... As the communities trust of you and an intelligent appreciation for your research increase, the natives will have a growing tolerance for what you photograph. After all, what you photograph is their image and the nonverbal image often tends to be more emotionally charged than the one they express verbally and intellectually.

Photographing the members during their services expanded into other subject matters. As rapport was established, photographs were made in their homes, where they were praying for the victims of the serpent bites. This trust of the photographer extended to funeral services for members who died from serpent bites.

The author had to move in and out of the various events of the services. Paul Byers stated that,

It takes an extremely skillful person to record an event photographically without serious disturbance of the natural rhythms and smooth flow of events... We tend to suppose that cameras are inherently frightening or interfering instruments whereas notebooks, pencils and observing anthropologists are not. It is not the camera activity itself that interferes or disturbs, it is the photographer using one, who has not learned to put his camera activity into social situations easily and comfortably. If the photographer feels that the camera is a privacy-invading machine, the subjects will respond accordingly.

On only one occasion did the author feel that the camera was


an invasion of their privacy; this was during the funeral of a minister who died from a serpent bite. The author experienced cultural shock when asked to photograph a baby in the casket, and again when the family paid their last respects to the body.

The camera was used in this study as a means of developing rapport with church members as well as recording events and rituals. Some observations made from the photographs were:

1. The complete seriousness on the faces of the members handling serpents. While there was humor in some other parts of the service, none was seen in the serpent-handling.

2. Photographs illustrated that men handled serpents more frequently than did women; when women handled them, the men remained close to them for protection.

3. Photographs demonstrated that children were so accustomed to the serpent-handling, that it frequently failed to capture their attention.

4. Photographs demonstrated the techniques used in handling the serpents; they never squeezed the serpents, but allowed them to move freely in their hands.

5. Photographs demonstrated the segregation of men and women in the church as well as the members and non-members.
6. Photographs demonstrated how a group formed around the victim of a serpent bite and the ritual which occurred after a bite.

SUMMARY

The chapter presented the methods used in the Midwestern study of the Serpent-handlers. The primary method was participant observation. The advantages of this method (getting to know the people extremely well, being able to observe changes within the church, and the socialization of the new members as well as being able to photograph their funeral services) far outweighed the disadvantages of it.

Other methods were also incorporated into the study, including written records, diaries, in-depth taped interviews with members, nonmembers, police, and unobtrusive measures.

Extensive visual records were kept with photographs and films. Clarke and Curry suggested that visual data had been overlooked by sociologists. This chapter discussed some of the visual-verbal dilemma which existed. The advantages of visual sociology were given by Barndt, Clarke, and Curry. Collier suggested that one photograph what the "natives" were most proud of and then move into other areas. Through the establishment of trust, the author was able to photograph the members in their homes following a serpent bite, and finally the funerals.
The photographs accurately depicted the serpent-handling practices and the group behavior at various stages of the services.
CHAPTER IV
THEORY

One primary focus of this study was on commitment to a religion. Commitment has been used in a variety of ways in sociological literature. Glock had defined commitment in relation to the dimensions of belief, practice, knowledge, experience, and consequences. Howard Becker had stated that commitment was linked to the concept of "side-bets." He said, "The committed person has acted in such a way as to involve other interests of his, originally extraneous to the action he is engaged in, directly in that action."\(^1\) The individual has more to gain or lose by following a consistent course of action.

Whenever we propose commitment as an explanation of consistency in behavior, we must have independent observations of the major components in such a proposition: (1) prior actions of the person staking some originally extraneous interest on his following a consistent line of activity; (2) a recognition by him of the involvement of this activity. . . . The side-bets may be made for a person (1) through the generalized cultural expectations which provide penalties for those who violate them; (2) by the operation of impersonal bureaucratic arrangement; (3) through the process of individual adjustment to social position; and (4) through the process of social processes . . . commitment to the side-bets may be a conscious decision.

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\(^1\)Howard Becker, "Notes on the Concept of Commitment," *American Journal of Sociology* (July 1960) :35.
or one by default arising through a series of acts, one of which is crucial, but which taken together, constitute for the actor a series of side-bets of such magnitude that he finds himself unwilling to lose them.²

The more a person invested of themselves into an organization, the more difficult it became to leave it, and the more committed they were to it. Underlying all commitments was the system of values to which the individual and the group ascribed. The values of the serpent-handlers were very different from those of the larger society. Their value system permitted a person to die in the faith from a serpent bite because eternal life with Jesus was more important than their life on earth.

Several studies attempted to test Becker's theory. Ritzer and Trice worked with the personnel managers of the American Society from Personnel Administration. The results of their study led them to conclude, "In sum, it is concluded that the side-bet theory of commitment should be rejected."³ Alutto, Herbinjak, and Alonso used the same theory and method with school teachers and hospital employed nurses. They found that the side-bet theory operated as a structural phenomenon in explaining commitment to the organization as well as occupation.⁴ Other studies, such as Mary

²Ibid., pp. 36-38.


⁴Joseph A. Alutto, I.G. Herbinjak, and R.C. Alonso, "On Operationalizing the Concept of Commitment," Social
Sheldon in her article, "Investments and Involvements as Mechanism Producing Commitment to the Organization," supported Becker's theory.

The commitment theory used in this study was developed by Rosabeth Kanter in *Commitment and Community*. While her concern dealt with 19th Century communes, her theory can also apply to the study of the serpent-handlers. She defined commitment as

A means of the attachment of the self to the requirements of social relations that are seen as self-expressive. Commitment links self-interest to social requirements. When a person is committed, what he wants to do (through internal feeling) is the same as what he has to do (according to external demands) and thus he gives to the group what it needs to maintain itself at the same time he gets what he needs to nourish his own sense of self.  

The survival of the serpent-handling church was dependent upon the ability of the organization to develop commitment within members. Any exodus of members would have had a disastrous effect upon their small organization. Within the organization, socialization must produce commitment involving (1) retention of members, (2) group cohesiveness, and (3) social control. An organization may have any of these as paramount to their organization, but had to include all

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Forces (June 1973):448-454.

5Mary Sheldon, "Investments and Involvements as Mechanism Producing Commitment to the Organization," Administrative Science Quarterly 16 (June):143-150.

if the organization was to survive. The table on the following page by Richardson, Harder, and Simmonds summarizes Kanter's model of commitment. The following paragraphs will examine each type of commitment: instrumental, affective, and moral. (See Table 1, page 43.)

The idea that one would continue to participate in the social system was dependent on a person's cognitive or instrumental orientations. The costs and profits of remaining in the system or leaving it were related to the costs and the profit that could be gained through the system. "In a more general sense, this kind of commitment can be conceptualized as commitment to a social role. It may be called instrumental commitment." Commitment to relationships, to group solidarity, involved primarily a person's cathetic orientations; ties of emotion bind members to each other and to the community they form, and gratifications stem from involvement with all members of the group. This quality can be called affective commitment and would yield little or no infighting and high solidarity.

Commitment to uphold norms, obey the authority of the group and support its values primarily involved the evaluative orientations of the individual. When demands made by the system were evaluated as right, moral, just, or expressing one's own values, "Obedience to these demands

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\(^7\)Ibid., p. 67. \(^8\)Ibid., p. 69. \(^9\)Ibid.
becomes a normative necessity, and sanction by the system is appropriate." This quality was known as a moral commitment.

TABLE 1

BASIC ELEMENTS OF KANTER'S MODEL OF COMMITMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Mechanisms</th>
<th>Effects of Mechanisms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental Commitment</td>
<td>Sacrifice</td>
<td>Detaching</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Investment</td>
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<td>Affective Commitment</td>
<td>Renunciation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Communion</td>
<td>Attaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moral Commitment</td>
<td>Mortification</td>
<td>Detaching</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transcendence</td>
<td>Attaching</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Richardson, Harder, and Simmonds, Organized Miracles, p. X-3.

This study will utilize Kanter's model to examine how the serpent-handling churches instilled a commitment within members, thus enabling them to function within a society which was not in agreement with their values.

SUMMARY

Commitment has been used in a variety of ways in sociological literature. Becker linked commitment to the concept of "side-bets." The person invested so much of himself into the group that he could not withdraw from it.

10Kanter, op. cit., p. 69.
Kanter's Model of Commitment, see Table 1, page 43, was used in this study. Kanter stated that commitment will link the self-interest to the group-requirements. There were three basic types of commitment: (1) instrumental, (2) affective, and (3) moral. The commitment building mechanisms were sacrifice, investment, renunciation, communion, mortification, and transcendence. While a group could only have one of these, a successful group might have more, and one successful group had a combination of all three. The serpent-handlers incorporated instrumental, affective, and moral commitment—as will be demonstrated in the following chapter.
CHAPTER V

APPLICATION OF COMMITMENT THEORY TO ASPECTS OF SERPENT-HANDLING CHURCH SERVICES

Church services, lasting three to four hours, were held three times a week. Members gathered at the church between seven and seven-thirty, where they greeted one another with a kiss of charity. Amplifiers were set in place, discordant instruments were tuned and music began. The volume and pace of the singing and rhythmic dancing increased as church members "pressed" forward around the pulpit and serpent box. Frenzied members shouted glossolalia and danced in the Spirit. As the frenzy mounted, poisonous serpents were taken from the box and held aloft. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how various parts of a service instilled commitment into the members. Kanter discussed the following commitment mechanisms which applied to the serpent-handling sect.

Instrumental Commitment

Instrumental commitment was comprised of sacrifice and investment of several types, which are briefly described below.
Sacrifice

The serpent-handler's sacrifices mad their religion important to them. Kanter stated that "the more it costs a person to do something, the more valuable he will consider it to be in order to justify the psychic expense and remain internally consistent." Many sacrifices ranged from minor ones, such as dress, to the ultimate sacrifice of life. Abstinence was required from alcohol, tobacco, drugs, movies, dances, and various popular dress styles. Norms prohibited pre-marital and extra-marital sexual affairs.

The practice of serpent-handling which distinguished this group from other fundamentalists caused them to be persecuted within their communities and work settings. Their own families frequently ostracized them for involvement with this church. Persecution and ridicule were stoically accepted by the members.

During the rituals of serpent-handling and drinking of poison, the potential for sacrificing one's life always existed. The physical suffering of a serpent bite was frequently accompanied by loss of income and increased ridicule from fellow workers.

Investment

The investment of the members into the church was

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the second mechanism Kanter discussed. She suggested that "the process of investment provided the individual with a stake of the fate of the community. He commits his 'prof­ its' to the group, so that leaving it would be costly." The chief investment of the serpent-handlers was time. The majority of members spent twelve to fifteen hours per week in church services (excluding travel time). Members not only invested time in formal church services, but also in daily devotions. Some took their Bibles to work and read during breaks and lunch hours. One man went to a factory roof near heavy exhaust fans and prayed aloud and shouted to God. Families traveled between one and two hundred miles to attend services, in many instances.

Physical participation was another investment. Members participated by playing a musical instrument, singing, preaching, testifying, handling fire or serpents, or drinking strychnine. Strangers who attempted to handle the serpents were denied because they were not known to the congregation.

Financial investment was demonstrated through members' tithing of one-tenth of their income to the church. In addition to tithing, members provided goods and services to those in need within their community. When one of the ministers was placed in jail, for practicing serpent-handling in another state, the church collected part of his

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2Ibid., p. 80.
bail. They also invested their resources in the expenses of travel to services and distant cities for special meetings. They even forfeited several days wages to be with a fellow member who had suffered a serpent bite.

They invested a great deal of energy in church services. Again, the ultimate investment would be the life they were willing to give to their religion. Those families who lost a son or daughter to a serpent bite, or to strychnine ingestion, had a large investment in the church.

The irreversibility of investment was in time and in the feeling that they had come into the true church and could not leave it. All members had a personal investment in the success of their church and their religion.

The Affective Commitment

Renunciation and communion were important aspects of affective commitment.

Renunciation

"Renunciation involved the relinquishing of relationships that are potentially disruptive to group cohesion, thereby heightening the relationship of individual to group." Potentially dangerous relationships were those family members who attempted to dissuade serpent-handlers from church membership. Members were frequently ostracized

\[3\text{Ibid., p. 82.}\]
by their families and former friends and labeled as religious fanatics. "They don't want anything to do with us. We just don't speak the same language anymore," was often repeated by the serpent-handlers.

The renunciation of the world was encouraged during sermons. Preachers attacked television, movies, dances, customs of the world, politicians, and other churches as being "of the devil." The outside world was viewed as evil and wicked. While in Cleveland for a special serpent-handling meeting, the comment was made to the author that, "Boy you can feel sin all around you." The label was applied not only to deeds, but to geographical regions. While no geographical isolation from the world existed; social isolation was present. They were separated from the outside world to a degree by their dress, their jargon, and the absence of special holidays. Some members did not celebrate Christmas, because that was "of the world." They also celebrated the Sabbath on Saturday and requested this time off from work.

With renunciation of the other groups, individuals were dependent upon other church members.

Structural arrangements which ensure that the individuals will give up relationships outside the group and with any unit less than all members of the total group and concentrate not only his loyalties and allegiances but also his emotional attachments and gratifications on the whole group. His potential for satisfaction within the group increases as his options for relationships elsewhere are decreased, and he must make his peace with the group because he has, in fact, no
Communion

Communion occurred when persons attached themselves to others, developing a "we" feeling. This was necessary for the church to face the obstacles which confronted the church and its members. Because they had renounced their old way of life—a life of sin—they had much to gain through the power which was associated with the group. "Communion mechanisms develop equality, fellowship, and group consciousness, which leads to the formation of a cohesive, emotionally involving and affectively satisfying community."^5

With the serpent-handlers there was a homogeneity, as most of the members came from the Southern Appalachian area in Southern West Virginia. Their socioeconomic backgrounds were similar with the same values and customs. Frequently members knew one another or their families before joining the church.

Regular group contact existed among members. Not only did they meet for regular worship services three times a week, but a few worked together in the same plants. They visited with one another throughout the week and had phone contact.

^4Ibid., p. 83.  ^5Ibid., p. 93.
They shared the common experiences of persecution because of their association with the serpent-handling church. Some of their songs reflected this persecution and provided them with hope and encouragement; such as "One More Valley:

When I'm tossed on life's sea
And the waves cover me,
And the dark clouds won't let the sunshine through
Then a voice seems to say,
"Child, there'll be another day,
Don't allow the clouds to hide Sweet Heaven's view.

For you've got one more valley, one more hill,
And you've got one more trial, one more tear,
One more curve in life's road;
Maybe one more mile left to go,
You can lay down your heavy load when you get home."

Other songs reflected their theology, such as "I'm Jesus Only," "My God Can Do Anything," "When I Wake Up in Glory," "The Devil's Mad and I'm Glad, Cause I've Got Religion," and "It's All Right."

The ritual which established ultimate commitment to the group was the practice of handling one of the signs; serpent, fire or strychnine. The main emphasis was upon the handling of a serpent. A person had to be annointed in order to handle the serpents. They suggested that "there was death in the boxes and one should not go into the boxes unless it really was God." They were careful not to endanger visitors at the services

**Moral Commitment**

Moral commitment was comprised of such factors as
mortification, sanctions, and transcendence.

**Mortification**

Mortification provided the individual with a new self image.

Mortification processes provide a new set of criteria for evaluating the self; they reduce all people to the common denominator and transmit the message that the self is adequate, whole, and fulfilled only when it lives up to the model offered by the community.6

The norms and values of the serpent handlers became the standard for the new converts. Individuals had to think of themselves as equal to others and humble in their actions. The group rather than the self determined norms for action.

No formal confession of sins was required for membership in the church. Persons often prayed several months for forgiveness before they received it. Individuals informally confessed their sins before the congregation and renewed their religious faith.

Mutual criticism was involved in some meetings. One church leader was building a new house and missed several meetings. When he returned, the assistant minister preached about responsibility, duty, and the spiritual blessings the individual missed. The leader received the criticism and said, "You're right. Pour it on. That's true." On several occasions the members have confronted one another

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6Ibid., p. 103.
regarding deviation from the norms of the group. In another service the attention of the congregation was directed toward a young child who was playing and the minister admonished the congregation to "quit looking and paying attention to the child, for what he was saying could keep them from going to hell, but watching the child could not." Free speech was endorsed by the church. During the service members could tell others of their faults, but not behind their backs. Campbell stated that "the Highlander holds no resentment against the outsider who tells him to his face of his shortcomings, but woe betided the foreigner who talks of his shortcomings behind his back."  

One ritual which emphasized the humility of one member to another was foot washing. This was an enactment of the scripture where Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. While this was done infrequently, it was vital in the mortification process.

Sanctions

The congregation was tolerant of deviants within their congregation and prayed for their return to the fold. One backsliding church member who could not give up the cigarettes continued to receive the prayers of the church members. One minister was expelled from the church when he

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refused to practice serpent-handling in his church.

Spiritual differentiation existed within the church. The older members who had handled the serpents for many years had high status. The newer members who had not participated in the rituals held the lowest status. Those who demonstrated the spirit through glossolalia or dancing in the spirit had more status. Those who participated in the rituals of fire handling, drinking strychnine, and handling serpents had the highest status, in that order. Higher status was also dependent upon frequency of serpent-handling, type of serpent, and manner in which they were handled. The most highly committed would lie down on the floor with the serpents, place them in their shirts or on their heads, and place bare feet in the serpent box.

Status within the church was based on deeds and not economic status within the community. They denied the importance of possessions.

Mortification also involved socialization of new members to church doctrines. New members learned to call snakes "serpents" and not to fear them while under the anointing. Older members informally instructed the younger ones in serpent-handling techniques, teaching them not to squeeze the serpents, but to allow them to move through their hands.

The deindividualization was seen in adherence to an unwritten conservative dress code. If a member wore fine
clothes, he frequently would deliberately soil them during the service to prove his equality with the other members.

Transcendence

According to Kanter,

Transcendence requires first, the experience of great power and meaning residing in the community. Max Weber proposed that this experience is transmitted through a quality called charisma, a felt connection with a central and meaningful feature of existence which is generally connected with the presence of charismatic leaders.\(^8\)

The members had to view the ministers and the church as providing order and meaning to their lives within the organization. This power and awe was seen in the leaders of the churches. Those who were leaders appeared to handle the serpents, fire, and drink strychnine more frequently than the other members. In all areas they excelled. New converts would speak with awe about those who were able to handle the serpents with such "victory."

The power of ministers was reflected in their desire to have the healing power so that, if an amputee walked into the service, they could pray a new limb onto the person. This potential power was in the church, for they viewed themselves as the elect of God.

Involved in the transcendence was the baptism of new members. Baptism by immersion in a river or stream was fundamental to the serpent-handlers. They have broken the ice

\(^8\)Kanter, op. cit., p. 113.
on the river for this ritual. Church members gathered on the shore, while the minister read from the Bible, and expounded on his readings. Church members sang as the minister baptized with the following sentence, "In the commandments given to us by Jesus, I baptize this person in the name of "Jesus.'" The use of the name Jesus separated them from other churches in the area. The members of the church were rebaptized as they felt the need.

Another ritual was the handling of the fire. A pop bottle filled with kerosene was used most frequently; others have used propane torches; and a few used live coals from potbellied stoves. The fire was held under their hands, faces, arms, and some placed their bare feet in the flames. One family poured kerosene over their hands and ignited it.

The rare occurrence of burns was explained by "the spirit having left them." Many equated the sensation of fire over their hands with cool running water. In Foxfire, a member explained, "Faith will kill the power of fire. Fire's got power, you know. It will burn you."  

Another ritual of transcendence was serpent-handling. The norm was not to handle serpents unless one had received the "annointing." "Annointing" was the feeling that one "received from the Holy Ghost which let them know that they had the power to take up the serpents." The

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annointing manifested itself differently to different mem­bers: to some by numbness in hands and arms; to others it was a tickling sensation in their stomachs; for others it was manifested through glossolalia; and for still others, it was a calmness which replaced their fear of serpents.

At the beginning of the services, the ministers generally warned that serpent bites could kill. They were asked not to take up the serpents unless it was really of God, and they felt the power of the spirit. "Make sure it's God when you get them, brothers and sisters, there's death in these boxes."

On several occasions, one minister told the congre­gation that they must have the spirit and also instructed them on methods of handling serpents. He cautioned them to be alert and to do everything they could to prevent the ser­pents from biting. The serpents were handled in the front of the church and were not passed through the congregation; thus observers were not endangered.

Serpent-handlers ranged from age nine to eighty. Only once did the author observe a child handle a poisonous serpent. The minister stood close to him for protection, and he held it for fifteen seconds. In a Southern West Virginia city, some children handled nonpoisonous serpents in preparation for when they would handle them as adults. Most serpent-handling is done by adults and men handled them more frequently than women.
In some churches, the serpents were used to indicate the religious health of the group. A few members suggested that if the group were harmonious the copperheads would remain "balled up," but if dissension existed, then the copperheads would strike out and attempt to escape. Foxfire discussed the serpents as an indicator of the spiritual life of the church. "At other times, there were bad feelings in the room that ruined the effect of the blessing and caused the serpents to strike."¹¹

Summary

This chapter has applied commitment theory to various aspects of serpent-handling church services.

Kanter listed sacrifice and investment as the mechanisms of instrumental commitment. Serpent-handlers made sacrifices ranging from minor ones of dress to the ultimate sacrifice of life, in the practice of their deadly rituals. The chief investment of the serpent-handlers was time; they spent twelve to fifteen hours per week in church services, and traveled great distances. Physical participation in the services and financial tithing were other investments.

Renunciation and communion described the mechanism of affective commitment. Serpent-handlers perceived the outside world as evil and wicked, so members separated

¹¹Ibid., p. 38.
themselves from others by their dress, jargon, and absence of holidays.

The communion was the attachment of the self to the new friends within the church and the detachment from their "old sinner friends." The homogeneity of the Southern Appalachian background made the fellowship and group cohesion easier. The communion was completed when the new member practiced the signs of the church, such as serpent-handling, fire handling, or drinking of strychnine. The moral commitment was established through the mechanisms of mortification. The new self-image of the serpent-handler replaced that image of a sinner. Mutual criticism was part of the service where the minister, or a member, could tell another of their faults or their erroneous interpretations of the scripture.

These elements of the service were instrumental in the development of commitment within the church and the individual. This commitment would enable the follower to withstand the serpent bite or other suffering connected with their religion.
CHAPTER VI

FUNERALS

The ultimate commitment to the serpent-handling religion was the potential sacrifice of life. This chapter discusses this instrumental commitment as demonstrated by the serpent-handling ritual at funerals for those who died of serpent bites. During the ten years this author followed this sect, he was acquainted with three members who subsequently died from serpent bites. He attended two of the funerals following these deaths, and reviewed records of the third. He also obtained summaries of services of members who died from other causes and had the signs of the serpent handling, fire, glossolalia, and dancing in the spirit practiced at their funerals.

As the serpents were handled, members risked a deadly bite. The bites conveyed to the members a variety of meanings: (1) potential death inherent in taking up serpents; (2) unaltered state of the serpents—they were not milked nor defanged; (3) disobedience to the spirit—the anointing was gone and the handler should have replaced the serpents in the box; (4) dissension within the church; (5) proof of a member's faith; and (6) suffering endured for another member with less faith.
The author witnessed several bites and each was dealt with in the same manner. When a bite occurred, a group of church leaders, referred to as "saints," gathered around the victim and prayed for him. The striken individual said, "If I die from the bite it doesn't change the Word any. It's still true. (glossolalia) The Bible did not say that they wouldn't bite. (glossolalia) It said, 'They shall take up serpents.'" So, even in suffering a bite, there was affirmation of their commitment.

The person was taken to a nearby home and placed in bed with ice applied to the wound. The minister in charge asked if they wanted medical aid. The norm, however, was "to suffer it out with the help of the saints;" this group support was influential in the decision-making process. The saints continued to pray, often chanting, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus," for the victim. The victims experienced varying degrees of pain (See Appendix B) and stated that the saint's prayers made them better. Many members spent the entire night. Roles were defined by past experience of members; some ministered to the victim's physical needs, some provided and prepared food for the members who spent the night, while others notified family and other serpent-handling churches to request prayers.

Death was rationalized "as their time to go." They did not believe that it signified falling from grace. The ideal was to die in the "signs" or in the church.
Some suggested that this was fatalism. Fatalism has been used to describe the religion of Southern Appalachia. Gerrard, Weller, and others stressed fatalism as one of the main issues in religion. Jack Weller discussed fatalism, and stated that,

In the mountains, however, nature did not yield, instead, the hardness of the land overcame man. His confidence in himself was slowly but surely undermined. From this grew a fatalistic attitude, which allowed him to live without the guilty feeling that he himself was to blame for his lot and assured him that this way of life was fundamentally right, even when he was discouraged by it.... The fatalism of mountain people has a religious quality to it. "If that's the way God wants it, I recon' that's the way it'll be. We just have to take what the Lord sends us. He knows best."¹

If these people were consistently fatalistic, they would not have attempted to prevent the death of striken victims through prayer. Their actions differed from the middle class norm of going to a doctor or a hospital. They did, however, value the power of prayer and did not merely submit to fate. A more appropriate concept was "situational realism." Dr. O. Norman Simpkins used this term to suggest that when individuals had done everything possible to change events and viewed their efforts as no longer effective, then they accepted situations.² In the illustration of the serpent bite, if the prayers of the "saints" failed and the


²Interview with Dr. O. Norman Simpkins, Professor, Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia, 10 October 1976.
individual died, members accepted this as God's will.

Following death, the body was brought to the church for an evening service, preceding the funeral. A typical service with singing, dancing in the spirit, preaching, prayers, and serpent-handling was attended by family and church members from many states.

The family sat close to the casket. A Bible, opened to the 16th chapter of Mark, with the scripture about serpent-handling circled in red, resting on the chest of the deceased, illustrated the final commitment. The minister encouraged everyone to be free and obey the Lord as the victim would not have wanted them to be sad. "Don't worry about him because he's in the hands of the Lord. We don't want no weeping spirit because God's already been here."

They began singing slowly, but the tempo rose until people were dancing in the aisles and speaking in tongues. They had eulogies for the deceased and described him as in heaven, no longer suffering. The services lasted from seven until eleven p.m. and some members spent the night with the body. It was suggested at one funeral, "that if everyone had been of one mind, they could have raised the person from the dead."

The funeral was similar to a regular service, but more emotional. The ultimate commitment to this religion was vividly demonstrated as survivors continued to handle the deadly serpents; frequently the same serpent(s) which
had fatally striken their loved ones. At one funeral, the son-in-law of the deceased was bitten four times.

A nineteen year old widow handled serpents and spoke in tongues in front of her husband's casket. She had lost both father and husband to serpent bites within two months time. She bravely demonstrated her faith to the congregation, as she handled huge rattlers. Her commitment was increased by her personal loss. Widows were frequently influential in encouraging new members to handle serpents for the first time.

During these emotional services, the congregation mourned their loss, but also realized the demands of a commitment which might kill them next. In speaking of her own possible death a widow stated that

It was one of the most wonderful meetings I've been to in my life. This was the night that I drank strychnine and handled the serpents at the same time. It was the first time. I think Jesus for letting me do it. . . . This is my request, that when I go, that I don't go with a funeral, that I go back to my church and that I, when with my saints, with my brothers and sisters, that they have a church service and my one request from God is that there will be more power come down from God that night or perhaps two nights, I hope I could go two nights. I hope more power comes down in the church and I hope saints are blessed and I want shouting, singing, and dancing, and handling of the serpents, and the strychnine drank. I want God to shower more power a double portion, upon everybody. More power than he has ever put in the church.  

The widow had just come from her husband's funeral and these were her reflections. Most members desired to have this

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3Kenneth P. Ambrose, "Field Notes."
type of service when they died.

As death became known to the public, rumors and misconceptions about their beliefs spread. When asked to open the casket at the grave, a fearful funeral director asked, "Are you going to put anything in it down here?" The serpent-handler denied the rumor that serpents were placed in the casket by saying that,

Children, I just don't believe being that cruel to any living thing. . . . Children, just think what that would be like to have to gradually die. As far as I know the people who handle serpents don't have that kind of heart. 4

After a fatal serpent bite, persecution of the church generally increases from the press, community, and fellow workers. The serpent-handling practice and dedication increased. Persecution was seen to be very important in the commitment building process. In the face of pain, suffering, and death, commitment to the serpent-handling church increases.

**Summary**

The commitment of the serpent-handlers was demonstrated in the funerals which were held for members. The victims of serpent-bites with group support "suffered the bites out." Their instrumental commitment was demonstrated when members sacrificed their lives; or the life of a relative. The families of victims continued to practice the

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4Ibid.
serpent-handling ritual despite their loss; some did so at the funerals. This sacrifice increased the investment of the family into the church; going beyond the investment of time, money, and social relationships.

The funerals reflected the mechanisms of commitment through the rituals of dancing in the spirit, drinking strychnine, handling fire and serpents, and instilled in the followers an appreciation of the seriousness of their religion and the cost of membership.

The bites had different meanings to the members: to some it meant suffering a bite for another member who was weak in the spirit; or a demonstration to nonbelievers that the serpents had not been milked nor tampered with in any way; to a few it meant a loss of faith; but to all it meant potential death.

When a bite occurred, the division of labor was determined according to past experience. All prayed for the victim, some administered to physical needs, while others prepared food for individuals who spent the night.

Fatalism was not evident in the time period after the bite, nor at the funeral. Members worked within their value framework of prayer for the survival and health of the victim. Only after they had done all they could within their sphere, would they say, "It was God's will;" some authors view this as fatalism.

When a death did result from a bite, the press,
larger community, and fellow workers were quick to persecute church members. This had the effect of drawing members closer together and increasing their commitment.
CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY OF THE DATA FROM
THE INTERVIEWS

After five years of participant observation of the serpent-handlers in the rural Appalachian area, this author spent another five years in the study of the Mid-Western urban serpent-handling church. This chapter will discuss the findings made during this time and the data obtained in interviews with the members.

The interview was developed to obtain information about the members' commitment to the religion and to the individual church. These interviews were arranged in the homes of the members; five were conducted before or after church because of the distance involved. There were no refusals from the members; seven did not wish to be taped so notes were taken for their interviews. There were no problems connected with the interviews, members willingly answered all of the questions. (For interview guide, see Appendix A). Background information was obtained and then the interviewer investigated the instrumental commitment—the sacrifices they made in the church and the investment in time, money, property, and personal suffering. The second major area was to investigate the affective commitment
in terms of the renunciation of their friends, family, and previous lifestyle. The communion developed into the attachment of the self to the group; their participation in the group. The third major area was the moral commitment; the mortification process within the church and then the transcendence.

Members were previously known to the author through his association with this church. A trust relationship had been established and great candor was evident in the responses to these questions. The author sought to examine the commitment which enabled this group to withstand persecution by outsiders and to willingly die from their religion.

There were sixteen males and twenty-three females in the study, ranging from age fifteen to seventy-four. The majority of men (ten) worked in factories in the city, two were physically disabled, one was a cab driver, one a student, one a self-employed contractor, and one was retired. The majority of women were housewives (twelve), seven worked in plants, two were clerical workers, one a licensed practical nurse, and one a student.

The education levels varied, with thirteen high school graduates, while fourteen had an eighth grade education or less. While some lacked the formal education, this was not an indication of their intelligence, but rather the circumstances of their social class and geographical location which made school attendance difficult.
When interviewed about the sacrifices which were required for church membership, all members mentioned dress as one of the sacrifices. One woman continued to wear slacks because of her job and justified the practice because they did not look "like men's pants." All but two of the men stated that they had to give up drinking or smoking. It was interesting to note that smoking was not gradually reduced, but the men threw away their cigarettes and never returned to them. All of the members stated that when they joined the church there was a loss of old friends who did not believe in their new religion. Half of the members suggested that once they had ceased to indulge in these practices, they no longer considered them sacrifices. They stated that "God took the desire for them away." So these sacrifices were made, but once in the church, they did not consider them important. One man was not able to give up his cigarettes and continued in "his sin," but expressed the hope that he would be able to give them up soon.

Investment was made by tithing. Only one male stated that he did not tithe, he felt that the Old Testament had been fulfilled in the New. He did not feel that he was under the "old law." It was found that this person actually gave more than a tenth of his income. One woman stated that her husband would not allow her to tithe. Those who worked in the plants generally had their United Fund contribution automatically deducted from their wages so their actual
gifts to charity was generally above ten per cent. All stated that they consistently contributed to the freewill offering in excess of tithing. Three men had signed the church mortgage, so in effect they invested their own homes for the success of the church. All stated that they had given food, clothing, as well as in the community.

The members invested their time in the church during the services, but also devoted time to their devotions and prayers. Two of the members stated that they spent about an hour a day in prayer. One widow would pray "Half of the night because I can't sleep." Time and energy was spent in visiting the sick and praying for them. Quarterly conventions, lasting an entire week-end were attended by half of the congregation.

As members sacrificed old friends, they invested in new ones in the church. All of the members related how their new friends in the church took the place of the old ones; also the roles of some older members were that of parents to the new converts.

Affective commitment was established by the renunciation of families and old friends. In two instances, this renunciation meant the separation of the nuclear family. Fifteen suggested that there was conflict with their family over their involvement in the serpent-handling church. They maintained contact with them, but a "gulf" existed
which separated them.

While there was no ecological separation, the norms of the larger community were so different that the members were seen as separate. The jargon and special terms used by the group separated them. They learned to call the sanke a serpent, other people within the group as brothers and sisters; they also learned that shouting, dancing, and glossolalia were acceptable in the church. They emphasized the importance of the "lord Willing" added to their statements. It meant the event would only occur if the Lord intended it to occur. Serpent-handlers reinterpreted the world as evil. One family refused to celebrate the holidays of the Christian year as well as national holidays. They told their children that there was no Santa Claus and refused to decorate for the Christmas season. The church was more important than the nation. They created their own special days in the various churches, such as homecomings and special revivals.

The affective commitment was also achieved through the communion mechanism. The group had a homogeneous Appalachian background with the emphasis upon individualism. Ten were originally from the same hometown and knew each other before moving to the Midwestern city.

Communion was created during the regular group services which were held three times a week. Because of their work, twelve stated that they were unable to attend the
Tuesday evening service. This regular contact and worship established the communion commitment. The members shared in the service, either through the singing, praying, preaching, or testifying.

Only five females and six males had parents or siblings who were active in the church before they were converted. The families of the others were active in some other church, such as the Baptist, Church of God, and holiness churches. Only four of them stated that their parents did not attend some church while they were growing up.

Twenty-one of the members stated that they felt the serpent-handlers were crazy before they themselves became part of the group. One woman took her daughter to the church "to see those crazy snake people." During one meeting the power of the Lord overcame her and she ran to the front of the church where she "became one of those crazy people." All expressed the fear of the serpents in the "flesh," but when the spirit came upon them, the fear was gone.

Members experienced common persecution. The older members who had suffered most, supported the younger ones and prepared them for what they would experience.

Twenty-one females and sixteen males said they would continue to practice the religion, even if the state or federal government were to make it illegal. One woman stated that she would not disobey the law and felt that they should
to those states where it was legal. They regarded their commitment to their religion more important than any suffering they would endure from the state. The Midwestern church of serpent-handlers sent money for bail to a minister in Tennessee who was jailed for practicing serpent-handling.

Moral commitment came with mortification of the individual. In the interviews, no members indicated that they had confessed their sins before the congregation, but the author observed that they did discuss their past sins in their testimonies and preaching. One woman stated that, "I could drink with the best of them in the bars, but that's before I knew Jesus." Smoking, drinking, and cursing seemed to be the sins most mentioned by the men.

Mutual criticism did not occur frequently, but if a member was not following the norms of the church, the minister or a member of the congregation could get up and correct them. At one meeting, two women had identical dresses; the minister cautioned them about letting the world get them into their fashions, and suggested that they not dress alike again.

All of the members stated that they did not criticize those "backsliders," but that they would pray for them and try to help them. One man said, "I've been a backslider myself, and the members helped me to come back." The main concern was to help and pray for them.

New members were not segregated from the other
members were not segregated from the other members, however, great caution was exercised while they worked in the signs.

Transcendence mechanism were varied for the serpent-handlers. The respondents stated that the new religion was the one true way; the fulfillment of the Word of God. They implied in the interviews that they were a selected people to whom power was given via the anointing.

This power was exemplified by the ability to handle the serpents, poison, and fire. Only two female members had not handled the serpents; they were the most recent converts to the church.

Two women and two men had sustained bites. One man was washing the serpents in his home before a service. He was bitten by a copperhead. He stated that, "the fear came upon him" and he went to the hospital. The same man had been bitten several times during church services, but the support of the congregation helped him to refuse medical aid.

In the interviews, nineteen females and fifteen males said they would not seek medical help if bitten while under the anointing. Two of the females said they would; three members were undecided. Those who answered in the affirmative stated that it was their desire not to seek the aid. In the bites which the author has observed, it was the group support which helped the person to make his decision. One man was about to go to the hospital when the group started to "press" which gave him the support he
needed to change his mind. The importance of the group can be seen in the photographs, which immediately follow this section, of a man who was bitten by a serpent during the service. The group was present to pray and encourage the individual during his suffering. All respondents believed that there was death in all serpents, therefore, the decision not to avail themselves of medical help was difficult to make. This commitment had been established for them, however, and the majority were willing to undergo the contracted sacrifice.

When this author questioned the serpent-handling members about moving their membership from the serpent-handling church to another church which did not believe, nor practice the signs, all stated that they would not do so; nor would any of them move their membership to a church which believed, but did not practice, the signs. All but three of these members stated that they would not move their membership from one serpent-handling church to another. Most stated that God would have to tell them to move their membership.

The norm for members was to be so committed to their religion that they would sacrifice their life for their beliefs. They were so committed that they did not seek medical help when bitten by poisonous serpents. The group was very important in this commitment building process, as was illustrated by the interviews and the photographs.
The series of photographs will illustrate the importance of the group when a serpent bites a member. The group will offer support and help the victim in their decision-making.
The serpent was in the process of biting

Seconds after this picture was taken, the serpent bit him on the finger of his left hand. The congregation's attention was not centered on him before the bite.
Group’s attention immediately directed toward the victim

The serpent has bitten the man, who immediately receives the group’s attention. The woman in the picture has taken the serpent, but her main concern was for the victim. The men were coming to his aid.
The members supported the victim both physically (note arm around the victim) and also with their prayers.

The trances of the people on the left are just as important as any of the other activity, because this indicates the presence of the spirit in the group.
Figure 5

A group of the "saints" formed around the victim

The emphasis on prayers and trances as a means of aiding the victim was evident. The men closest to the victim have received serpent bites before and are leaders in the church.
Figure 6

A minister assesses the seriousness of the bite

The assessment of the seriousness of the bite was made by a minister who had been bitten 65 times by the serpents. The entire congregation was praying for the victim and the small group of leaders provided spiritual and emotional support at this time.
After the assessment was made, prayers were again offered for the victim.
A group of about twelve saints surrounded the victim. The hand was held by one of the men. Those closest to the victim were leaders in the church who had previously sustained bites and survived. Those closest are men, while the women are on the periphery.
Surrounded by saints, victim was seated on the right side of the church

The victim was seated on the right side of the church while the group of saints continued to surround him. The rest of the congregation remains standing in support of him.
Victim removed outside for fresh air

The victim was removed to the outside of the church for fresh air. All victims were asked if they desired medical attention. The majority stated, "I'll suffer it out with the help of the saints."
If the victim desired, at this point, the saints would take him to a home of a member close to the church where they would pray for him. Ice would be applied to the wound, but no other treatment would be given.
Summary

The interviews with the serpent-handling members in the Midwestern city tended to support Kanter's theory of commitment. Through the mechanisms of sacrifice of time, money, and self, the individual attached themselves to the church. As they invested more of themselves to the church the more committed they became. The affective commitment was made through the renunciation of their old life-style and friends to the attachment of the new friends within the church. While the majority did not make a formal confession before joining the church, the majority of the testimonies would have some references to their past "sins."

The various element of commitment which Kanter discussed could be seen very readily in the church services as well as in the interviews with the members. The photographs illustrated the importance of the group when a decision was made about seeking medical attention or not following a serpent bite. If there were the support of the group, the majority would not seek aid, but if they did not receive support, then the person would probably go to the hospital.
CHAPTER VIII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Throughout history, people have been so committed to a way of life, a religion, a political cause, or an ideal that they have been willing to sacrifice their lives for their beliefs. This was exemplified by members of an Appalachian religious sect who practiced serpent-handling. This study described the services in a Midwestern serpent-handling church and the commitment of its members to a religion posing potential death in the rituals of serpent-handling and drinking strychnine. The majority were migrants from Southern Appalachia.

The study utilized participant observation; records; diaries; interviews with members, non-members, police, and other sociologists; unobtrusive measures; photographs; movies; and taped recordings.

In examining the commitment of this group, this study utilized the definition of commitment given by Kanter in Commitment and Community. Commitment is,

A means of the attachment of the self to the requirements of social relations that are seen as self-expressive. Commitment links self-interest to social requirements. When a person is committed, what he wants to do (through internal feeling) is the same as what he has to do (according to external demands) and thus he gives to the group what it needs to maintain itself at
the same time he gets what he needs to nourish his own sense of self.¹

Kanter also discussed three types of commitment: instrumental, affective, and moral. The instrumental commitment involved mechanisms of sacrifice and investment. Affective commitment involved renunciation and communion. Moral commitment utilized the mechanism of mortification and transcendence.

These three commitment building mechanisms were utilized in the serpent-handling church services. The instrumental commitment involved sacrifice of cigarettes, alcohol, movies, certain dress styles, and a way of life. The investment was seen in the tithing of their money as well as the investment of their time. The affective commitment was demonstrated in the renunciation of their family and friends; the communion mechanism was the homogeneity of the group, their regularized group contact, their rituals, and their persecution experiences. The moral commitment used the mechanism of mortification in their confessions, mutual criticisms, their sanctions for deviant behavior, and through the spiritual differentiations within the church. The transcendence was seen in the awe of the ritual, the power and authority of the leaders within the group, the conversion experiences, and the tests of faith.

The ultimate commitment to the serpent-handling

religion was the potential sacrifice of life. The author has described the instrumental commitment as vividly demonstrated by the serpent-handling ritual at funerals for those who died from serpent bites. This was exemplified by a nineteen year old widow who handled serpents in front of the casket of her husband who had suffered a fatal serpent bite.

In-depth interviews, conducted with thirty-nine members of serpent-handling respondents, described a commitment which had been developed by the mechanisms discussed by Kanter. In addition, they emphasized the importance of group support in not seeking medical aid following a serpent bite. Therefore, the mechanisms of sacrifice, investment, renunciation, communion, mortification, and transcendence were seen to be effective in building commitment within the serpent-handling church.

The study has added validity to Kanter's theory of commitment. Kanter began her study with the 19th century communes and this study applied her model to a contemporary religious group. This demonstrated the applicability of her theory to other groups and provides more information about group behavior. The commitment model is relevant to sociological discussion in the theory of groups whether they are represent business, military, political, family, or economic systems. This enables the sociologist to predict the success of various groups by the commitment mechanisms
which they would use. This can be helpful in the study of such groups as the SLA, for example.

The major contribution was the emphasis on the theory of commitment which can be utilized with other groups. The group which socializes their members in this manner will build stronger commitment to the group and thereby insure the survival of it.

The study also demonstrated the importance of the group in the decision-making process. Through the photographs it was demonstrated that the group would provide the support of a victim and help him/her decide the course of action. When the group was not there, as was the case with the minister washing the serpents in the basement of his home and was bitten, the individual immediately turned to the medical profession for help. This supports what others have discovered about the impact of the group on an individual's actions, such as the Milgram studies.

Some of the limitations of the study were: that it was based on only one serpent-handling church in the urban area. Basically, the people were from one geographic area. Other regions which have serpent-handling churches may have responded differently to these questions of the meaning of the serpent bite, medical attention after a bite, and others. The study did not differentiate between the first, second, and third generations of serpent-handlers and how they responded to the questions.
Some of the areas which need to be researched next are listed below:

1. A comparison of urban and rural churches' conception of commitment, to determine what—if any—differences exist, is recommended.

2. There should be research in those states where the practice is legal, compared with states where it is illegal to determine if there are any differences in the commitment to a practice which is illegal.

3. A study to determine the function of the Appalachian culture within the urban setting, and the value of this part of the culture in the adaptation to an urban setting. Does serpent-handling provide a function which enables members to adapt better to the urban environment?

4. An investigation should be conducted among members who drop out of the church regarding their reasons for doing so.

5. The next area of research, which this author would suggest, would be to interview widows of the ministers who have been bitten and subsequently died from the serpent bite. Are they as strong in the faith as they had been in the past? What effect has this had upon their lives? Do they continue to practice serpent-handling?

These are some of the areas which should be studied, as well as some of the limitations of this study. The mechanisms of commitment and Kanter's theory were supported by
this study. It has importance in the field of sociology of religion, small groups, the socialization in various groups and institutions. The study also demonstrated the importance of the group in the decision-making process for the individual.
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APPENDIXES
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview #
Name:
Address:
Sex:
Age:
Education:
Occupation:
Place of birth:

Instrumental Commitment Sacrifice

Could you describe some of the sacrifices, if any, that you made to become a member of the serpent-handling church?

Do you think that a member should be willing to sacrifice their life or the life of a member of their family through a serpent bite or the poison for the gospel?

Have you ever been bitten by a serpent? If so, could you describe the circumstances surrounding the bite and your thoughts at the time? Did you receive any medical treatment for the bite?

Have you known any of the members who have died from the serpents or the strychnine? Could you explain why you think these people died in the signs?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Investment</td>
<td>What are some of the investments you have made in the church such as time, money, or property?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective Renunciation Commitment</td>
<td>Could you describe any detachment you made with your former friends or family because of your new religion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Could you describe the friendships you have made with the members of the serpent-handling church?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communion</td>
<td>Would you explain your conversion to the serpent-handling religion? What was your attitude toward people in the church before and after you joined the church?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Could you describe the circumstances and your feelings when you handled your first serpent?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Were any members of your family active in the serpent-handling religion before you joined?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How many services do you attend a week? How far do you travel?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do you participate in the service? Which signs have you participated in?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have you received any persecution because of your religion? How do your neighbors and fellow workers treat you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you think that a person should practice this religion if the state or federal government were to make it illegal? If so, why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Mortification Commitment</td>
<td>Did you confess your sins before the congregation when you became a member of the church?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Could you describe the process by which you became a member of the church?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX A—Continued

What is your attitude toward those who deviate from the teachings of the church? (backslide)

Transcendence If you were at a service where a member was under the annointing of the Spirit and they were bitten by a serpent, would you seek any medical aid for them? For yourself?

Would you be willing to take your membership out of the serpent-handling church to join one which did not believe nor practice the signs?

Would you be willing to take your membership out of one serpent-handling church and join another church which believed, but did not practice, the signs?

Would you be willing to take your membership out of one serpent-handling church and join another serpent-handling church in the same area?
APPENDIX B

TYPES OF SERPENTS USED IN THE CHURCH SERVICES
AND SYMPTOMS OF THE SNAKE BITES
## APPENDIX B

### TYPES OF SERPENTS USED IN THE CHURCH SERVICES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Snake</th>
<th>Average Length of Adult (inches)</th>
<th>Approximate Yield Dry Venom (mg)</th>
<th>Interperitoneal LD50 (mg/kg)</th>
<th>Intravenous LD50 (mg/kg)</th>
<th>Amount of Venom Needed to Kill a Man 180 lbs. (mg)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Rattlesnake (Crotalus)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Diamondback</td>
<td>33-65</td>
<td>370-720</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>137.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Adamanteus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western diamondback</td>
<td>30-65</td>
<td>175-325</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>343.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Atrox</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timber</td>
<td>32-54</td>
<td>95-150</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>215.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Horridus horridus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Moccasins (Agkistrodon)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cottonmouth</td>
<td>30-50</td>
<td>90-148</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>327.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Piscivorus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copperhead</td>
<td>24-36</td>
<td>40-72</td>
<td>10.50</td>
<td>10.92</td>
<td>893.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Contortrix</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C. Asian Cobras (Naja)</strong></td>
<td>45-65</td>
<td>170-325</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>32.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## SYMPTOMS OF THE SNAKE BITES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptoms and Signs</th>
<th>North American Rattlesnakes (Crotalus)</th>
<th>North American Moccasins (Agkistrodon)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Swelling and edema</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pain</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discoloration of skin</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vesicles</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecchymosis</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superficial thrombosis</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necrosis</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sloughing of tissue</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weakness</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thirst</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nausea or vomiting or both</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diarrhea</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak pulse and changes in rate</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypotension or shock</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sphering or destruction of red blood cells</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased bleeding time</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased clotting time</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemorrhage 2</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anemia</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood Platelet changes 3</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glycosuria</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proteinuria</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tingling or numbness 4</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fasciculations</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muscular weakness or paralysis</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ptosis</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blurring of vision</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respiratory distress</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swelling regional lymph nodes</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abnormal ECG</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coma</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. In the more severe cases the intensity of the symptoms may be markedly increased. In addition, there may be severe respiratory distress, cyanosis, muscle spasm, and secondary shock leading to death.

2. Bleeding may be from the gastrointestinal, urinary, or respiratory tracts, from the gums, or it may be subcutaneous.
Legend: continued

3. Platelets may be increased in mild poisonings and markedly decreased in severe cases.

4. Often confined to the tongue and mouth, but may well involve the scalp and distal parts of the toes and fingers as well as the injured part.

5. (+ to +++ = Grading of severity of symptom, sign, or finding.

(-) = of lesser significance or absent.

APPENDIX C

STRYCHNINE
APPENDIX C

STRYCHNINE

The type of poison used by the serpent-handling members in their church service was strychnine. Members recounted stories where lye, battery acid, Drano, and other poisons were used in the services, but the author witnessed only strychnine.

The Mixing of the Poison

The mixing of the poison was usually done in the minister's home, or at the church if there was a source of water. In mixing strychnine the ritual was to get some of the powder strychnine on the tip of a knife. This was placed in a quart jar of water; stirred until most particles of the strychnine were dissolved. Ministers would place their fingertip into the mixture to taste it. Their normal reaction was to emphasize how strong the mixture was and they really would have to have the "annointing of the Lord to go into the jar during the service." They never drank any poison before the service, but usually waited until they were in church. On one occasion the author did taste the powder on the tip of his tongue, which was most bitter.

There was uncertainty about the strength of the
mixture. They never knew if it was strong enough. One one occasion, this author saw a minister mix a solution which another minister stated was too strong, whereupon, he disposed of it.

**Use of the Poison During the Service**

The poison was kept in the minister's home, or locked in the pulpit drawer. Great concern for the children's safety was exhibited by the members; they weren't permitted to get near it. Before the service the poison was brought out and placed on top of the pulpit. Anyone led by the Holy Ghost could drink it.

The strychnine was used at any time during the service. Ministers stopped preaching and took a drink; at other times the members would be singing and a person would open the jar and drink from it. When the jar was opened it was offered to others. There was no loss of face if a person refused it; the Spirit did not move for them. The author never saw anyone visibly affected by the poison. The amount of poison consumed varied with each person; some only took a sip while others consumed about a fourth to a half of a quart jar.

Members who did not drink the poison often explained their refusal by quoting the Bible, which stated "and 'IF' they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them." They interpreted it, not as a command, but "if" they accidently
drank poison, it would not harm them.

The number involved in this ritual was about four or six out of a congregation of fifty. In the author's M.A. Thesis, only twenty-three per cent of the adults and ten per cent of the youth had used strychnine.

The social status increased for those who drank the strychnine. It demonstrated the power of God to conquer poison for the individual. Again this act separated the members from the world and affirmed their state as more powerful than the world's. While this ritual was practiced by a small percentage of members, it is viewed as a vital part of their church service.

Some Characteristics of Strychnine

The author had both the powder and liquid strychnine analyzed by Dr. L. Malspeis, at Ohio State University, College of Pharmacy, who verified that the powder substance was strychnine, but the liquid sample was too diluted for his method of verification.

Strychnine is different from other stimulants in that it affects the central nervous system. "...Strychnine is an ascending stimulant; where caffeine acts first on the higher centers, strychnine acts first on the lower centers."\(^1\)

APPENDIX C—Continued

In *Drill's Pharmacology in Medicine*, it was stated that:

... strychnine does not initiate the convulsions, but converts normal reflex activity into convulsive movements. Thus strychnine causes a remarkable augmentation of the level and spatial distribution of reflex excitability of the spinal chord, so that simple sensory stimuli become sufficient to cause maximal tonic seizures. This phenomenon has been referred to as a general reduction in synaptic resistance which causes synchronous discharge of large numbers of neuron, presumably as a result of release of direct inhibition.\(^2\)

The nerves are receiving the stimuli and are not able to relax, therefore producing the tonic seizures.

Death from poison is usually asphyxiation. Those who have witnessed the deaths said that the victim was under a great amount of pain.

Death from strychnine occurring during, or at the end of the tonic seizures, is believed to be the result of asphyxia. The extreme muscle tone prevents pulmonary ventilation. If the muscular convulsions are prevented by a neuromuscular blocking agent and artificial respiration is maintained, exhaustion of the respiratory center does not occur. This finding suggests that death is asphyxial and is the result of the mechanical interference with breathing.\(^3\)

Absorption of the poison into the body is relatively quick. After some members have taken the poison, they have talked about getting "down in the joints." Their legs and arms begin to stiffen on them. It has been demonstrated

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\(^3\)Ibid., pp. 523-524.
that after oral administration, strychnine will be absorbed rapidly; "convulsions usually begin 15-45 minutes after oral doses."^4

While the absorption of the poison is rapid, it is also discharged quickly. "In man, strychnine can be removed from the urine. The bulk of the drug recovered appears within the first 12 hours, but small amounts continue to be found during the next two days."^5 Some of the members have related about the services where they have consumed large amounts of strychnine and have passed blood with their urine after the services. From the research in the area, there appeared to be no build-up of tolerance to the poison. In monkeys and rats, Hazelton and Fortunate "...could find no evidence of accumulation of tolerance following long periods of daily parenteral administration of the one-half convulsive dose."^6

The amount of poison needed to kill a person depended upon their size, general health, and other factors. Lucas stated that "the oral fatal dose is about 30mg.; .2 gm. is certain death."^7 In Drill's Pharmacology it was stated that:

...poisoning with strychnine has been reported in human beings with doses as small as 15 mg.... The

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^4Ibid., p. 524.  
^5Ibid., p. 524.  
^6Ibid., p. 524.  
The symptoms began within thirty minutes after the poison had been taken. There was usually tension in the muscles of the face and neck.

At this stage, a state of hyper-reflexia is present and slight stimulus may precipitate a maximal tonic seizure... during the tonic seizure, the patient is usually in opisthotonos with marked arching of the back, flexed arms, and tightly clenched fists. The contraction of the muscles of the jaw and face cause sardonicus. The spasm lasts for a minute or two, during which increasing cyanosis develops.9

During this time the patient was fully conscious and aware of what was happening. The feeling of impending suffocation and convulsive movements cause the person to cry out. The convulsions may occur after tactile or auditory stimulation. "Death may occur during the apex of the tonic state or during the depressed postictal stage. It usually occurs after two to five convulsions."10

8Ibid., p. 524.
9Ibid., p. 524.
10Ibid., p. 524.
TO: Dr. Russell R. Dynes  
Professor of Sociology  
114 B Hagerty  
1775 College Road

FROM: L. Malspeis  
College of Pharmacy

SUBJECT: Samples Provided for Qualitative Identification of Alkaloid

The solid sample which was delivered to my office during the week of November 11, 1973 contains strychnine as determined by optical crystallography of the chloroplatinate salt.

The aqueous samples either did not contain strychnine or were too dilute for the qualitative analytical method used. We elected not to concentrate the aqueous solution.

These samples may be picked up by your student at any time.

LM:drp
APPENDIX D

NOTES FROM THE DIARY OF

A SERPENT-HANDLER
Sept. 3, 1972  Bitten by copperhead on left hand at T., West Virginia.


July 10, 1973  Tuesday washed 3 rattlers in wash tub for the first time.

July 30, 1973  Appeared on live broadcast, Morning Exchange Channel 5. Good results--my picture w/rattlers first page local paper. God really blessed.


Aug. 24, 1973  A former minister called. Bad Spirit. Called serpents devils. Said he would never have them in his church. Told me not to come to his church.

Sept. 12, 1973  Bro and myself drove to West Virginia to see Dr. J.'s serpent bite. Preached to 13 people in lobby (of hospital).


Sept. 29, 1973  Minister from Tennessee and I handled serpents in my back yard along with another Brother. Drove to C., Ohio for homecoming service. My Dad got serpent bit on right thumb. Suffered it OK.

Sept. 30, 1973  Service C., Ohio. I preached wonderfully, Dad also preached very fine. Two baptised
in name. Also had church service night at B., Ohio. Four new people handled serpents.


These last two entries were made by his wife.

April 2, 1974  My husband got serpent bit at K. about 8 or 8:30. (Me, Mom, Dad) drove down there. I stayed all night. He was really bad all night.

April 3, 1974  My husband died at 3:00 at K., West Virginia. About 9:00 he kissed me and then said that he was going to make it. All the saints kissed him.

These comments were made by his wife. "He was 33 when he died; the same as Jesus. There were 66 bunches of flowers which are the same number as the books of the Bible." He was baptized 1967 by his father.
The church was on the outskirts of the town, next to the railroad tracks, where the low-income housing was located. The church and the houses still had outhouses. The houses and church needed repairs and painting. The church was originally a small house, but now the walls were removed to make one large room. There were various religious pictures on the walls, a skink in one corner, an old electric water cooler, a piano, and benches.

12:30 Members of the church gathered on the outside to exchange greetings. They would hug and kiss each other (Kiss of Charity). There were people there from West Virginia and many communities in Ohio.

12:40 J. started singing, "My mind, my mind, my mind's done gone; (repeated several times), Holy Ghost done got my mind and gone." During the singing 5 people were dancing in the spirit and praising Jesus. The majority of the congregation was singing with J.

12:50 Brother S. at this point warned the people about the serpents and said to make sure that it was God before they came up and got into the serpent-box.

He stated that he was looking for a great time in Jesus and again warned the people not to press too close in on the serpents.

At this time he was in the spirit and got the serpents out of the boxes. There were three rattlers and four copperheads in the other. Eight members handled the serpents during this session which lasted for about 30 minutes. During this time, three of the members handled the fire and two drank the strychnine.
Brother K. began preaching on the subject that they had a right to make a show of the handling of the serpents. He asked for Psalms 50 to justify it. He preached on the hard times and the suffering of the chosen, and that if you got into this that you would suffer. He brought out the fact that he brought up his son in the faith and that his son died for the Word of God.

He said later that everything that's done against God's people does them (serpent-handlers) good; that the people will benefit from their trials. You must worship God in Spirit and in truth. If a person is never in the spirit and they went to church seven nights a week and were never in it, they would be lost. With this statement he began to run in the Spirit. He ran around the front of the church followed by two other members.

He talked about the Lord's day where he does have a special day and they should honor it. He said that some people say they can't see this serpent handling, but if they got in the spirit they would see it. He went on to say that there is no sickness, pain of death, trouble, etc., that can follow you into the spirit.

He changed his topic to the Hell-fire where Jesus blew on the lake and set it on fire himself. He talked about the twice dead. At this point he said that he could tell that some people were upset and didn't like what he was saying, but he said that he didn't come up to tickle someone's ear.

He then covered the subject of Jesus and the disciples going on the mountain and the disciples wanted to build three tabernacles. When the cloud was lifted there was "JSEUS ONLY" which was reiterated over and over again while the congregation encouraged him with "Amens."

He then returned to the snake handlers and said that some of them don't want to suffer the persecution. Brother K. then said that the fire seemed like cool breeze over his hands.

ON VOTING    Brother K. never voted in his life. "I was
APPENDIX E—Continued

raised up to be two things: a democrat and a Free Will Baptist. When I grew up and finished up, I was neither one of them. My relatives say, 'You should vote,' 'Noooooo. Nooooooo!!! I've got my birthright. Have you got yours?" (This brought shouts of agreement from the congregation.) He related the story of the man who came to the church to obtain his vote for the next election. He said, "You're going to vote for me ain't you?" He said, "No sir, God will put into office who he wants. God is running the world and I will just pray, but not vote." He said that he would never put a sticker on a car because that would make another man mad. He was riding in his car with speakers on the top of the car announcing a service at the church when he turned the corner and a man shouted, "Who are you electing?" K. shouted back, "JEEEEEESUS!" He continued with the story of the politician; how he gave him the scripture; why he was not going to vote for him. The man reached into his pocket and gave him $10.00 and went to the restaurant next door. In 15 minutes he came back and gave him $10.00 more and then said that he was a good man and that someday he might have Brother K. baptise him. K. went on to say that if you take care of the spiritual things that the material things will be added.

Brother K. then admonished the people to obey their pastors who are in charge of them.

He preached on the fact that Jesus would not tell his disciples to do anything that he himself had not done. He went over the Word of God protecting the three in the furnace, but the others were burned because they did not have the Word of God.

He became very serious and said that sometimes you have to drink a cup of loneliness. There was a strong reaction of agreement to this statement. (They were aware of his son's death and the separation of his wife.) Many of the congregation started to speak in tongues.

2:30 Brother B. said that he was going to preach on what K. said and merely restated some of his sermon.
Brother S. began to sing and have an altar call for those who were lost. They sang, "Had it not been for a place called Mt. Calvary." Later he called his son to come to the front of the church and sing the song about the man at the bar. During this song, Brother S. went to the back of the church to talk with a man and encouraged him to come to the altar. One of the men came and prayed. He did receive the Holy Ghost.

Sister M. came to the front of the church and took one of the rattlers from the box. Her husband placed it around her neck; three other men repeated the same act with their wives.

During this period four men drank the strychnine and one lady handled the snake for the first time. They drank some more of the strychnine and this time two ladies drank some. The song which they were singing was, "You've gotta move."

Brother S. said how many enjoyed the service. Then he got in the spirit and called a woman to the front of the church and said that the Lord told him to tell her to make her decision and stand by it. Then he fell to the floor and was speaking in tongues and was down there for 2 minutes. After this he stood up and repeated what he said before. His son started to dance in the spirit with a tambourine for about 5 minutes.

Brother N. testified what his conversion had meant for him and his family. About 5 minutes.

Sister L. talked about being scared of snakes and she felt she should go over to the box last night, but her husband handled them first. Today she had been up since 4:15 A.M. and felt that God was going to do something today, but she did not believe that it was going to be the serpents. She said that when she walked over to pick up the snake that there was no fear in her heart. After this there were many Amens and some speaking in tongues.

Sister M. was the other lady who handled them and drank the strychnine. She testified that
APPENDIX E—Continued

she was glad she handled them and would not be satisfied until she had one put around her neck and shouted all over the house.

One of the men who received the Holy Ghost stated that he hoped that God would take his life before he ever backslid.

Six other people testified and asked for prayers for the sick and other problems.

4:15 Brother S. said that he had been bitten 5 times since 1938. Brother K. stated that he had been bitten 6 times since 1948, and they had handled about a box car load of them.

4:20 They dismissed with prayer where everyone prayed at the same time. The various members gathered up their instruments and they had some fellowship (talking with one another about the service, family, work, and other topics). The group made the two hour trip home.
APPENDIX F

FUNDAMENTALS AND GOVERNMENT OF A
SERPENT-HANDLING CHURCH
APPENDIX F

FUNDAMENTALS AND GOVERNMENT OF A
SERPENT-HANDLING CHURCH

Fundamentals and Governments: The Full Gospel Jesus Church
The Second Assembly Year
1970

"If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed."

II John 1:10

FOREWORD

With true sincerity we pray that God will grant the reader the knowledge and grace to see and to accept the truth in JESUS. Jesus said, "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and they are they which testify of me."

St. John 5:39

GENERAL BISHOP
EXECUTIVE BISHOP BOARD
STATE BISHOPS

THE BIBLE

The Holy Bible (King James Version) is the written word of God, written by holy men of God as they were moved upon by the Holy Ghost. We are to rightly divide it and believe it, both Old and New Testaments. We believe it to be the plan of salvation and no other.

II Peter 1:21 ..... Ephesians 2:20.

ONE TRUE GOD

There is only one true God, the Creator of all things
in the heavens, and in the earth, and under the earth. He is manifested to mankind as the Father (CREATOR), Son (SAV­IOR), and Holy Ghost (INDWELLING SPIRIT). The Father which is the divine spirit being incarnated in the flesh body of JESUS, the Christ, called the Son of God. Genesis 1:1...
St. John 1:1, 14.

THE SALVATION PLAN

The salvation plan of God is the spirit, water, and blood.

Spirit—The baptism of the Holy Ghost is very essential, the Bible says, for by one spirit, are we all baptised into one body (ONE TRUE CHURCH) the BRIDE OF CHIRST, the BODY OF JESUS. It is evidenced by speaking in other tongues as the spirit of God gives utterance. It was outpoured on the day of Pente­cost. The Word says without the spirit of Christ you are none of His. I Corinthians 12:13.... Acts 2:4.

Water—Water baptism is an essential part of the salvation plan of God. Without proper water baptism one cannot enter into the kingdom of God. It is a commandment. Jesus said, "Go teach all nations baptising them in the NAME of the FATHER (JESUS), and in the NAME of the HOLY GHOST (JESUS)." Matthew 28:19.

Blood—It takes the shed blood of Jesus to remit sin. Without the shedding of Blood there is no remission. If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another and the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleans­eth us from all sin. I John 1:7.

WORK OF THE SPIRIT IN THE CHURCH LIFE

The Holy Ghost, and it only, can do the supernatural, spiritual work of God. Jesus said, "It is not me that doeth the works, but my Father that dwelleth in me (which is the SPIRIT) and (which is the HOLY GHOST); He doeth the works. The Spirit is to operate the gifts, signs, miracles, and wonders, and also prophesy and minister the word of God. St. John 14:10.

WORK OF MEN AND WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

They must separate themselves from the world and present themselves holy and acceptable unto God. They must set themselves aside for the work of the ministry, or for the office they desire because today there is a natural and spir­itual body, just as it was when Jesus was here. Jesus did
APPENDIX F—Continued

the work as a man and as God. Romans 12:1.

GIFTS, SIGNS, MIRACLES, AND WONDERS

Gifts—According to the Bible, there are spiritual gifts to be given to anyone who desires them and becomes qualified. They are to be operated in or out of the church. I Corinthians 12:4, 11.

Signs—Jesus did many signs while here in the flesh that are not written in the Bible, but he said, "There are written that you might believe." There are five signs, recorded in St. Mark's Gospel, that Jesus said would follow the believers. These five signs are to be practiced in the church, or out of the church, wherever the Lord anoints. St. Mark 16:16, 18.

Miracles and Wonders—When Jesus was here in the flesh body, his work was made up of miracles and wonders. In establishing the church, Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church." When he ascended, he left the church here to the Apostles and people that are faithful. Jesus said, "These works shall you do and greater works shall you do, and they are to edify the church." St. John 14:12.

THE ADOPTION

The Adoption is a deeper depth in the Holy Ghost. The Bible says they that receive Jesus to them gave He power to become the Sons of God.

To wit the redemption (ACCEPTANCE) of our bodies. This is witnessed by the Spirit (NOT FLESH) crying ABBA, FATHER. St. John 1:12 ..... Romans 8:15 ..... Romans 8:23 ..... Galatians 5:25, 26.

DIVINE HEALING

Healing is for the physical ills of the body and is wrought by the power of God through the prayer of faith by the laying on of hands and also through the gifts of healing. By the Lord's stripes we are healed. It is the privilege of every member of the church. Isaiah 53:5 ..... James 5:14, 15.

LORD'S SUPPER AND FEET WASHING

We believe that these two ordinances of God are both to be taken spiritually. St. John 6:46, 56 ..... I Corinthians 11:28, 30 ..... St. John 13:4, 10 ..... St. John 15:3
HELL AND ETERNITY

One who physically dies in their sins is hopelessly and eternally lost. According to the word of God, there is a literal, burning Hell for those who die in their sins. After the resurrection and judgment, they shall go to the lake of fire which burns forever and forever. The fire is not quenched, and the worm (BODY) dieth not. Isaiah 66:24 ...... Revelation 20:10, 15 ...... Revelation 21:8.

DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF THE SAINTS

The Bible says that the Lord has pleasure in the death of his Saints. Paul said in his writings, "It is better for me to depart and be where Christ is." He knew his spirit was going to separate from the body. His body was going back to dust and his spirit back to God who gave it, to rest in paradise until the return of Jesus back to earth and the first resurrection, at which time the Saint's bodies shall come forth from the graves. The Saint's bodies shall be glorified, and they shall be like Him. Psalms 116:15 ...... Revelation 20:4, 6 ...... I Thessalonians 4:13, 18.

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

The scripture has set forth that no one put away wife or husband save for the cause of fornication. This church disapproves of members getting divorce except for this cause. In no case but fornication or death can they marry again. Divorced and remarried persons are not to hold any official offices in the church. Ministers should perform ceremonies only to innocent parties. Matthew 19:9.

HOLINESS

Apparel--The members should dress according to the Bible teachings. Apostle Paul wrote, "In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel." The scripture also says to dress as becometh Saints. Members should not wear clothing of the opposite sex; neither shall they dress ungodly. I Timothy 2:9 ...... Deuteronomy 22:5.

Tobacco--Tobacco is considered to be a lust of the flesh. The word teaches to cleanse ourselves from all lust and filth of the flesh, perfecting Holiness in the fear of the Lord. It has also been proven to be harmful to the physical body.
APPENDIX F—Continued

The body is a temple of the Lord, and he that defileth the temple, him shall God destroy. James 1:21 .... I Corinthians 3:17 .... Hebrews 12:14.

Jewelry—The Bible teaches against the wearing of jewelry for ornaments, decoration, or pride. It teaches not to adorn ourselves with braided hair, Gold, pearls, or costly array. The ornament that God wants His people to wear is the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit which, in the sight of God, is of great price. I Peter 3:3, 4.

Bobbing of Hair—The female members of the church shall not cut their hair. A woman's long hair is her glory. Mercy is to be shown to the new members coming into the church that have bobbed hair. I Corinthians 11:5, 16.

THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

The gifts and callings of God are without repentance, and the Holy Ghost divideth upon each as He will. In the last days our sons and daughters shall prophesy. When called of God and anointed by the spirit, the women may freely serve as prophetesses, missionaries, and evangelists, or in any other way that the church might be edified; but, to keep the admonition of Apostle Paul, they shall not rule over the man. Romans 11:29 .... Acts 10:34 .... I Corinthians 11:3.

NAME OF THE CHURCH

Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church." He built the church upon himself, and His name is JESUS so the true church name has to be JESUS. If the church is baptised in water in the name JESUS, and baptised into the spirit (whose name is JESUS), then the church name is JESUS. Jesus said, "Ye shall be hated of all men for the name's sake." What is name's sake? It is being called after someone else. Jesus said, "My people that are called by my name." The name JESUS is above every name. It alone is excellent. Why have another? Matthew 16:18 .... Matthew 10:22 Psalms 148:13.

FINANCIAL SYSTEM

Since the church doesn't believe in any other means of supporting the church, all members should pay tithes and offerings as God prospers them. Paul, in his writing to the church, said, "Upon the first day of the week, let every one of you lay by him in store as God has prospered him." In
APPENDIX F—Continued

Malachi the Lord said, "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house." All members and officers should pay into the local church where they are members or laboring.

The church treasurer shall keep a record of all finances, coming into and going out of the treasury. Each local church should pay tithes from the tithes they receive to the general treasury so that the church might have means to print, and that it might have proper literature to spread the Gospel, and gain other churches into the fold. The general treasurer shall keep a record of all finances coming into and going out of the general treasury. Malachi 3: 8, 10 ..... I Corinthians 16:1, 2 ..... Proverbs 3:9.

SECRETARY

Local--The secretary of each local church shall keep a record of all business meetings. They are to take notes of all business transactions and keep a record of all members taken into the church. They shall keep a record of all members transferred, and also a record of all ministers. They shall act upon, and carry on, all correspondence that may be required by their office. They must be ready for all conventions and assemblies to do the work that might be required.

General--He shall keep a record of all general meetings of the church and Bishop Board. He shall maintain a record of all ministers and of minister licenses. He shall issue and sign licenses when approved by the Bishop Board. He shall also assist in the arranging and the notification of all State and General Assemblies.

INSTALLATION OF OFFICERS

This church is against holding elections. We do not put anyone in office by vote. Local church pastors shall be selected by the General and State Bishops, then approved and appointed by them. State Bishops shall be appointed by the General Bishop, when approved by the Bishop Board. To put one in by vote has never been practiced in the Acts of the Apostles, this side of Pentecost, or in any of the Bible churches. Paul told Titus, "That for this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I have appointed thee." They also went from city to city setting the churches in order and leaving at every church a degree (OR DOCUMENT) to govern the church.
APPENDIX F—Continued

MEMBERSHIP

To be a member of this church in good standing with full fellowship and voice and favor, each member shall abide by the governments of the church. Apostle Paul wrote to the church to let us all walk by the same rule. Let us be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the judgment, that there be no divisions among you. Each member must have his name recorded on the church membership book.
I Corinthians 1:10.

GRIEVANCES

An accusation against a minister or member shall not be considered until it has been carried out the Bible way. State Bishops and church and Deacon Boards shall handle each local church membership. The General Bishop and Bishop Board will decide cases involving ministers.

MINISTER LICENSE

Positively no license shall be issued to anyone unless they have filed an application, and the application has been reviewed and approved by the Bishop Board. Minister Fellowship Cards shall not be renewed unless ministers holding cards make a report or contact the State or General Bishops or the Bishop Board.

NOTES

After reading the general views and teaching of the Bible by this church, and you feel that we are on the truth, and you want to be in fellowship with the church, contact one of the State Bishops whose name and address is listed in this book or one of the churches located nearest you. If you are a minister and desire license with the church, contact State Bishops, General Bishops, or Bishop Board at the addresses given in this book. This church is open to all new revelations when proven to be true by the Spirit and word of God.
APPENDIX G

APPLICATION OF VISUAL SOCIOLOGY IN
A SERPENT-HANDLING CHURCH
APPENDIX G

APPLICATION OF VISUAL SOCIOLOGY IN
A SERPENT-HANDLING CHURCH

A portion of the data for this study was collected with the use of photography. The story of a serpent-handling church is depicted in the following photographs, Figures 12 through 50.
Figure 12

The urban churches were in the downtown area
Figure 13

Storefront church in urban Ohio
Most of the serpent-handlers will have bumper messages on their cars. Most stated that "Jesus is God."
Figure 15

This photograph communicates various aspects of commitment. The long dress and hair are evident as well as the absence of jewelry on most of the women. Note the modesty cloth on the legs of the woman on the right. This cloth will be used to drape across the legs of women who were "struck down by the spirit" and fall to the floor, so that they will not be indecent.
This was the beginning of a "press." The majority of members gathered in front of the altar to begin singing, dancing in the spirit, and speaking in tongues. Only men were behind the altar and a woman if she were playing an instrument or an older sister. The woman with the short dress was a visitor that night.
The prayer cloths were brought to the service where oil was placed upon them. The members would lay their hands on the cloth in the same way they would pray for a person. The cloth had the same power as if the individual had been in the service and prayers given directly to them.
Figure 18

Members placing their hands on prayer cloths and praying for them
Figure 19

Healing occurred by the laying on of hands and the prayers offered. All members pray at the same time. The majority of sick will state that they felt the power of God and were better after these sessions.
In the back of the church the children will imitate their parents by dancing. During the preaching, however, they are expected to remain in their seats and listen to the message.
This boy had fasted for seven days in preparation for this event. He was 10 years old and merely held the serpent for about five seconds. This was the exception rather than the rule. Most people started their serpent-handling later in their teens.
Footwashing was performed by both men and women. This demonstrated the humbleness and commitment on their part. The minister of the church washing the feet of a member in this photograph. Some of the women will dry the feet with their hair.
These three men traveled three hundred miles to be on a TV talkshow in order to testify to others about their faith. They sacrificed time and their wages for two days to be on the program.
This woman held her hand directly above the flame for fifty-five seconds and her hand was not burned. She went into a trance which prevented this burn. Another woman poured kerosene on her arms and hands while another person held a flame under her arms.
Figure 25

This man held the flame near his face and was not burned
Fire is usually placed on the arms, face, and a few will place their feet in the fire.
This photograph illustrates that not everyone received the same message from God. The man in the chair had been bitten by a serpent on the foot the week before. The other man was handling the fire and felt God told him to place it on the bite. The victim did not receive the same message and stated it burned, as he jumped away from the flame.
Washing of the serpents usually occurred before the service. Some will merely hose the serpents in the boxes, while others will wash them in the following manner in a pan of liquid soap, then a rinse pan, and finally they will dry the serpent.
At times they will place the serpents on the Bible and continue to preach while the serpents remained coiled.
In the next three photographs you will note the woman who handled the serpent for the first time. Note the group around her when she received it. Note the very passive expression on the face of the woman in the first photograph while the minister gives her the serpent. Figure 31 shows more control of the serpent but still an expression of concern on her face. The final photograph, figure 32, demonstrates a calmness which she experiences. There was no fear of the serpent at this time.
Figure 31

Note the expressions on the faces of the others who surround the serpent-handler. The woman in the rear was going into a trance which signified that the spirit was in the midst of the meeting. The man on the right was waving his hand over the serpent and toward the woman which again was to place the spirit on her, and protect her while she handled the serpent.
Figure 32

Note the calmness on the faces of all of the members. There was no fear on the part of any of the participants.
In this photograph, note the light reflected in the lens of the camera which appeared like a halo over the minister. When he saw the photographs, he interpreted this as a sign of the Holy Spirit on him rather than the function of the camera.
While there are a few Blacks in the serpent-handling religion they are found in West Virginia and North Carolina. This group, through their sermons are concerned about the plight of those who have been discriminated against in our society.
The serpents are carried in wooden boxes such as those above. Some will have verses of scripture, others will have Jesus, and some poison serpents written on the boxes. All of the boxes will have locks on them.
The following photographs will demonstrate some of the serpent-handlers handling the serpents. Status was gained by the number of serpents picked up, the placing of their face of feet in the middle of them, which they did not define as an increasing of status, but rather as a sign of "victory" over the serpents.
A minister in one of the churches handling serpents to demonstrate his faith to a group of people who have not experienced serpent-handling before.
Some members will place their feet in the middle of the serpents
This minister placed his hand in the middle of the serpents on several occasions during the study.
The members achieved status by handling a large number of serpents.
This minister permitted a rattler to crawl over his face.
This minister continued to preach while holding seven rattlers
Some serpent-handlers permitted the serpents to crawl on their body while handling others in their hands.
While the quality of the photograph was poor, one can observe the size of the rattler. This serpent bit and killed this minister just minutes after the photograph was taken. This illustrates the commitment of a member who was willing to sacrifice his life for the religion.
The following photographs illustrate some of the bites which the members have sustained. Some were minor where there was some local swelling, but in others there was the loss of part of their finger and damage to other parts of their body.

Figure 45
In this photograph the man had been bitten about a month earlier. Because of the infection the end of his finger rotted off at the first joint. Several members have experienced the loss of part of their fingers due to serpent bites.
This member had been bitten on the foot, came to the church and continued to play the guitar and handle the serpents as this photograph illustrated.
The minister was bitten by a large Eastern Diamondback and died the next day. At the funerals, the Bible is opened to the 16th Chapter of Mark and was outlined around the scripture of the serpent-handling.
Figure 49

The family expressing their final farewell to father, husband, and son
Through this photograph, one notes the commitment on the part of the members who are willing to continue the practice in front of the casket of their minister who had died from a serpent bite. The widow continued the practice which killed her husband. This was the ultimate act of commitment.