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The Women and the Word: Serpent Handling, Devotional Writing, and the Women of the Church of God, 1914–1936

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Introduction

During a church service on a hot, humid summer's day in August 1915, Mary Mansfield approached a small, flat, rectangular wooden box lying in the grass. During that particular service, several members of the Church of God in Crab Tree, Tennessee had successfully taken up two copperheads, but after "the devil howled" the congregants deemed the third serpent, an "old rattlesnake," too dangerous to handle and placed it outside in a box.^[1] Mary, however, felt God's power and knelt down beside the box in the yard. Unlatching it, she reached in and took up the rattlesnake in her hands. It "sang" in her grasp, but did not bite, convincing observers of the power of God. The believers passed the serpent around, and at one point another female member of the congregation placed it on the ground. The animal coiled up as if it were about to strike, but then God gave "the power to reach down and take it up and it was as harmless as a bird."^[2] Energized by this experience and eager to share her testimony, Mary wrote to the *Church of God Evangel*, the official newsletter of the Church of God. Her report, titled "Crab Orchard, Tenn." can be found in the August 28, 1915 issue on the second

unadorned, cramped, text-laden page alongside other “reports from the field,” personal testimonies, and prayer requests from subscribers.

Mary was just one of thousands who in the early twentieth century joined the Church of God, a rapidly growing southern Pentecostal group based in Cleveland, Tennessee. Unique to this church was the belief that taking up venomous serpents was an authentic sign of Holy Spirit baptisms and a persuasive evangelical tool.^[3] Between 1914 and 1936 the church accepted and promoted serpent handling and used their popular weekly newsletter, the *Church of God Evangel*, to communicate this particular interpretation of emergent Pentecostal doctrine. By 1920—just five years after Mary submitted her testimony—the *Evangel* had almost 16,000 subscribers across the country and was a powerful voice within the larger milieu of Pentecostal publications in the South.^[4] Although the first General Overseer A. J. Tomlinson—whose indefatigable leadership had an outsized impact on the early Church of God—expressed strong support for the sign in numerous essays he wrote for the *Evangel*, the embrace of serpent handling did not come exclusively from church officials.^[5] Laymen and women eagerly joined church leaders in endorsing the sign as an authentic manifestation of the Holy Spirit, exclusive to the Church of God. Ordinary members, like Mary, expressed support for the practice by sharing reports of serpent handling in the *Evangel*. This article will examine how the women of the Church of God participated in the discourse surrounding serpent handling through close readings of women-authored serpent handling reports in the *Evangel*.

Women were not just avid readers of the newsletter. Their requests for prayers, testimonies of answered prayers and miracles witnessed, and reports from evangelistic services were published in the *Evangel* at double the rate of men.^[6] They also wrote forty percent of the attributable reports on serpent handling printed in the popular newsletter.^[7] By focusing on this popular newsletter and framing it as a remarkable and deeply-meaningful female religious network of communication, we can see how women became part of a larger conversation about proper modes of worship by refashioning their experiences with the controversial sign into commonly accepted devotional language in their letters. Close reading allows us to parse how and why the sign was adopted, understood, and spread by women. It enables us to uncover some of the subtle ways that women helped shape the religiosity of the early Church of God through their language in the *Evangel*. Despite their lack of access to institutional power, women disciplined the religious subjectivities of themselves and others in relation to serpent handling.

Through their unofficial engagement in conversations about proper and improper modes of worship through the *Evangel*, the women of the early Church of God helped to legitimize and normalize serpent handling in the early twentieth century. When the all-male church leadership began to distance itself from the practice in the late 1920s and '30s, women became its most strident defenders. The women's engagement with serpent handling can therefore also serve as a case study through which we can interrogate how individuals without full access to institutional power carve out space for themselves in the process of religious innovation, adaptation, and negotiation. Exploring the women in the early Church of God who embraced serpent handling recovers part of their history in an important southern denomination, deepens our understanding of the history of serpent handling, and challenges the "conceit of male dominance" in American religious innovation and history.^[8]

Although there is no evidence that any other major Pentecostal group ever fully endorsed and practiced the dangerous sign, the issue of the legitimacy of serpent handling during this time period was hardly a closed one, and women like Mary became part of a larger conversation about proper modes of worship in a major American religious movement. Consequently, this article sits at the intersection between the larger history of Pentecostalism in America and the history of Pentecostal serpent handling by recovering and reassessing the role of women in those histories.^[9] In "Take Away the Serpents from Us," Michael J. McVicar challenges the prevailing view that serpent handling was an isolated anomaly, and therefore relatively insignificant, in the larger history of Pentecostalism. Through analyzing Pentecostal periodicals, McVicar demonstrates that the process of acceptance and rejection of serpent handling actually profoundly influenced Pentecostal doctrine and practice. This process also impacted American culture more broadly by helping to define the boundaries of proper modes of religious practice in the early twentieth century.^[10] Even though the majority of Pentecostal converts during this formative period were women, and despite McVicar's important reassessment of the place of serpent handling in American religious history, scholarly studies on the role of women in this tradition are lacking.^[11] This omission may be attributed to the exclusion of women from preaching and other formal leadership roles in historical and modern serpent handling churches.^[12] Therefore, this article aims to fill the gap by examining women's letters on serpent handling and understanding their unique practices within the larger context of Pentecostal devotional culture as framed by R. Marie Griffith in her essay "Female Suffering and Religious Devotion in American

Pentecostalism.”^[13] Griffith examined the formation and regulation of religious subjectivity through the writings of early Pentecostal women. By closely analyzing letters written by women about serpent handling, we can gain insight into the role of women in this tradition and their embrace of the sign during a significant period in Pentecostal history.

Women and the *Church of God Evangel*

The first issue of *The Evening Light and Church of God Evangel* was published on March 1, 1910. Tomlinson, the first General Overseer and editor-in-chief, shortened the name in 1911, and by 1912 the *Church of God Evangel* had nearly as many subscribers as the church had members—2,135 and 2,294, respectively. The Church of God built a publishing house in 1913 to accommodate the rapidly growing newsletter, which by that point had transitioned from a bimonthly to a weekly publication. By 1920, the Church of God had over 14,500 members and 16,000 subscribers to the *Evangel*, a full-time editorial staff of fifteen, and was constantly expanding its publishing house and office complexes to keep up with demand.^[14]

The church employed its own members so that the “mechanical as well as editorial part of the Church literature would be done ‘by consecrated hands.’”^[15] Men and women worked furiously together to get issues out to eager subscribers. F. J. Lee, the State Overseer of Florida and later the second General Overseer, described the scene in 1919 in a rather sentimental article on the front page of the *Evangel*.^[16] “On opening the door,” Lee wrote, “we hear the hum and clatter of the machinery. At once we are confronted with... Mr. Hardy, the foreman of the shop, a man of intelligence and ability as a printer. Also at another desk sits Mr. Dodd, a man of several years experience. Raise your eyes again and you see several young ladies, some setting type, some running job presses, the large press or folder.”^[17] Women in Lee’s detailed account of the bustling publishing house did more than set type and run the presses, however. They were involved in nearly every aspect of producing the *Evangel*:

Here comes the editor’s daughter what does she do? Most anything that is to be done—some times [*sic*] the typewriter, then the addressing machine, the mailing, etc. She is capable of doing any of the office work. Now let us look into the transcribing room. Who is there? Sister Blanche Koon... It is she that looks over our letters and lovingly rewrites or corrects them if they need correction. Well, let us take another peep into Brother Tomlinson’s office before we go. This time I hear him dictating an article to his stenographer, Miss Maud Pangle... Well here comes Sister Tomlinson across the street. What does she

do? Every spare moment that she can get away from her household work she is helping with the paper.^[18]

The paper, at least from the 1910s through early 1930s, was a text-heavy newsletter. Cramped and largely devoid of pictures or illustrations, the format of the *Evangel* stressed utility rather than aesthetics or ease of use. The function-over-form mentality was characteristic of early Pentecostal periodicals as both publishers and subscribers “distinguished themselves as avid readers of religious books and papers” and sought to produce and consume as much about their growing movement as possible.^[19] These periodicals provided a vital medium for spreading religious news and ideas across the South and the country; they “constituted by far the most important technique for sustaining national and world [Pentecostal] consciousness.”^[20]

The typical content of the *Evangel* from 1910 through the early '30s consisted of a few long-form theological essays or sermons; a prayer or hymn; notices about upcoming events such as General Assemblies, camp meetings, and revivals; announcements from local churches; small advertisements for items such as bibles, bible cases, songbooks, or “Jesus Only” buttons; and most importantly, letters from subscribers, which the *Evangel* published to an increasing degree over the years. These reader-generated materials came from all over the country, but originated primarily in the Southeast.^[21] The submissions varied in length—ranging from a few sentences to several paragraphs—and fell into three general, often overlapping, categories: requests for prayers, personal testimonies, and reports from evangelists or participants in evangelistic meetings across the country. The *Evangel* printed hundreds of these letters a year. In 1921 alone, 2,355 submissions from subscribers were published in the weekly newsletter.^[22] Although it is unknown how many letters the staff at the *Evangel* rejected, it does appear that they tried to publish as many as they could. In one issue in late April 1933, the editor printed an earnest request for subscribers to “please condense [their letters] as much as possible,” because “we would like to publish all outstanding miracles of healing and remarkable answers to prayer, as well as some testimonies.”^[23]

Women were avid readers of the *Evangel*. In thousands of letters women professed their love and gratitude for the *Evangel*, its readers, and the Church of God. One such subscriber, Martha Hill, wrote, “I sure love reading the *Evangel* and I enjoy reading the testimonies of dear ones so much. I am glad I have lived to see the great power of God in its fullness and to be a member of the Church of God.”^[24] Others described their love for the *Evangel* in

metaphors: Maud Summeralls called reading the *Evangel* “food to my soul,” which helped “wake me up and to get my soul on fire.”^[25] Women also dominated the reader-generated submissions. In the 1910s through 1930s, there were twice as many letters by women published in the *Evangel* as by men. Between 1914 and 1936, women authored or co-signed a little over 10,200 total letters requesting prayers, delivering testimonies, and reporting on revivals, camp meetings, and services, with the vast majority of these letters authored by an individual woman. In contrast, only about 5,150 of the letters printed in the *Evangel* within this twenty-two-year period were authored by men.^[26] Women in particular dominated the prayer request and personal testimony genres. In one 1921 winter issue, for example, out of thirty total requests for prayers, twenty-five were identifiably written by a woman.^[27] In a 1925 issue, in a new, sporadically-appearing section titled “Healing Department,” every single published testimony of a miraculous healing was authored by a woman.^[28] Although the number of rejected submissions to *Evangel* is unknown, the number of letters sent in by women may have been even higher, especially given broad concern by male Pentecostal leaders that the movement appeared too feminized.^[29]

Although the exact demographics of the overall Pentecostal movement are difficult to pin down, historian Grant Wacker wrote, “we know with fair certainty that the majority of first-generation converts were female.”^[30] The *Census of Religious Bodies* reported in 1916 that women made up fifty-nine percent of the three Pentecostal groups that submitted data. Ten years later the same census reported that the percentage of total female members rose to sixty-four percent, with eleven different Pentecostal groups reporting.^[31] Local and national newspapers corroborate these trends, often noting the conspicuous, enthusiastic participation of women at Pentecostal revivals and meetings.^[32] This was certainly true for the Church of God. In 1886, when the church was founded, five of the eight charter members were women.^[33] In 1907, the second year that Church of God began holding and recording annual meetings, delegates to the Second General Assembly called “special attention... to the number of women in the churches exceeding that of men.”^[34]

Citing the fact that many women in the New Testament held prominent positions in the early church, the Church of God put their numerous female members to good use expanding and administering their growing community. Though only men could serve as bishops or ordained ministers, women were initially permitted to hold positions as deaconesses and

evangelists.^[35] At the 1909 General Assembly, however, the delegates officially rejected the formal ordination of women, and the title of deaconess became one that could only be bestowed upon wives of deacons, functionally abolishing the position as an independent ministerial role available to women.^[36] Female evangelists were not subject to the same marital requirements as deaconesses and retained relative latitude as vital workers expanding the Church of God. They consistently comprised twenty-five to thirty-five percent of the first generation of evangelists.^[37] The church “was willing to acknowledge that because there were female ministers in the New Testament, the church was to continue to recognize them... women could hold an evangelist license, which would officially distinguish those women who desired to preach.”^[38] Between 1909 and 1914, the evangelist’s license was the same for both men and women and granted holders the authority “to publish, preach and defend the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to baptize, to administer the Lord’s Supper and the washing of the Saints feet.”^[39] Historian David G. Roebuck noted, however, that on some of the women’s licenses “various authorities [were] crossed out,” indicating they were not permitted to perform them.^[40] By 1914 the Church of God developed separate licenses for men and women. While the men’s remained the same, the women’s only “granted the bearer the authority to ‘publish, preach, and defend the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and do all the work that may devolve on her as a prophetess or female minister of the Gospel,’” a marked reduction in enumerated authorities on the original licenses.^[41]

As the number of ministerial positions available to women contracted in the 1910s, Tomlinson and other male church leaders formalized the opinion that women should be excluded from church governance in essays in the *Evangel* and through the formation of various ecclesiastical committees only open to ordained, and therefore male, members of the church.^[42] “Let the women preach,” proclaimed Tomlinson exuberantly in 1914, “let them sing, shout and pray, but let them be the glory of the men in silence when it comes to government.”^[43] Thus, by the mid-1910s, women’s access to formal ministerial authority within the Church of God was reduced and official ecclesiastical leadership roles in the church were simply not available to them. If women wanted to serve within the church government, they were relegated to a supportive role, like that of clerk, Sunday School teacher, or superintendent. As Lisa Stephenson explains, such positions, though technically ones of leadership, were open to women because they were “not considered an office in the church.”^[44]

The published materials in the *Evangel* then reveal the existence of an extensive sanctified network of female religious life—largely separate from that of the exclusively male leadership—where women developed and maintained a rich devotional culture and set of practices revolving around reading and writing to the *Evangel*. The newsletter provided a weekly forum for ordinary women: anyone who could read, write, and afford postage could join to share their sorrows and worries, ask for prayers to alleviate physical or emotional afflictions, and testify to the power of God through recounting answered prayers, stories of salvation and healing, Holy Spirit baptisms, and other signs and miracles.^[45] The practices around prayer and testimony in the pages of the *Evangel* allowed for, as Griffith put it in her study of Pentecostal women’s devotional writing, “the formation of a Pentecostal community, composed predominantly of women, that transcended ordinary bounds of geography and social location and imparted comfort, benevolence, and recognition to the suffering hopeful across the land.”^[46]

Reading the *Evangel* was a devotional act that the women of the Church of God understood had to be completed with the utmost care. Letter-writers expected their submissions to be read carefully, deliberately, and prayerfully; Christian sisters wrote to the *Evangel* with the knowledge and understanding that prayer requests were not to be sympathetically skimmed, but seriously and earnestly read and prayed upon to help enact divine intervention into the lives of their fellow subscribers. Women wrote to the *Evangel* with testimonies crediting the prayers of their fellow sisters for the positive results. “I praise God for what He is to me,” testified Exie Hunt, “about one month after I requested the saints to pray, I received the baptism of the Holy Ghost. Bless His name.”^[47] Another woman, Mrs. C. B. West, wrote to the *Evangel* explicitly attributing the healing of her child to the prayers of readers and begged for their continued prayers. “Dear Evangel Readers,” she wrote, “I thank God for giving me faith in Him to believe and trust Him for His healing power. My little boy who the doctors claim had a tumor on the brain is getting better. Priase [*sic*] the Lord!...Saints, I don’t know how to thank you, for I believe it was your prayers that has helped my boy...Please continue to pray for us.”^[48] In this theology of prayer, which sought to “nudge God into fulfilling scriptural promises of happiness and healing,” individual women had the opportunity and power to effect real and lasting change in the lives of their sisters.^[49] Personal testimonies, like the ones excerpted above, were intimate, emotional narratives that toggled between accounts of suffering, sickness, and sorrow, and joyous tales of troubles alleviated by God’s grace and mercy, perhaps in large part due to their sisters’ prayers on their behalf.

Readers thus expected the letters in the *Evangel* to look and sound a certain way. Prayer requests had to be recognizable as prayer requests and testimonies had to be recognizable as testimonies; the women of the Church of God who wrote to the *Evangel* had to refashion their lived experiences to write in a way that maintained their community of the written word.

The relationship between communal religion and personal faith is an important reciprocal dynamic that gains even greater salience for the study of female religious subjects who often did not have full access to formal ecclesial authority and whose daily lives were constrained in a multitude of different ways because of their gender. Examining this dynamic, what Griffith calls the “refreshing [of] the subjective through common practice,” is one way to begin to understand the role that marginalized individuals play in the maintenance, authentication, and evolution of a religious tradition.^[50] Newsletters like the *Evangel* played a critical role in fostering the interplay between religious subjectivity, practice, and institutions. During the frenetic years of the early Pentecostal movement, as many doctrinal issues—especially surrounding which signs followed believers—remained unresolved, the practice of witnessing and testifying to various signs, miracles, and personal religious experiences in the pages of newsletters and magazines was a way that ordinary Pentecostals, and especially women, could participate in religious discourse through offering their support for and validation of one interpretation of scripture over another.^[51]

The Church of God, Pentecostalism, and Taking Up Serpents

During this time, Pentecostalism was rapidly expanding across the South as new churches opened or existing churches refashioned themselves as Pentecostal. This first generation of Pentecostals “yearned physically to enter the apostolic world, to breathe the air, feel its life, see its signs and wonders with their own eyes,” and carefully studied the Bible to construct “their own lives as transparent appropriations of the New Testament pattern.”^[52] Based upon an interpretation of Acts 2:1-4, Pentecostals believed that speaking in tongues always followed possessions by the Holy Spirit and initially served as the authenticating, supernatural sign of one’s baptism.^[53] What became known as “the four-fold gospel” of Pentecostal faith comprised Holy Ghost baptisms evidenced by tongues; a personal, heartfelt salvation through accepting Jesus Christ as one’s savior; a belief in divine healing of the physical body; and anticipation of the Lord’s imminent return.^[54] The Pentecostals’ emphasis on concrete, embodied signs such as glossolalia and faith healings created a legible typology of signs by which other Pentecostals could read,

interpret, and authenticate each other's Holy Spirit baptisms. Energized by the manifestations of the Spirit among their ranks, early Pentecostals, among whom the Church of God counted, yearned to "recover the supernatural power and miracles of the New Testament," and "expected that the 'former rain,' the signs and miracles described in Acts, would soon be fulfilled by the 'latter rain,' a final outpouring of the Holy Spirit's glory at the close of history."^[55] Consequently, first-generation Pentecostals vigilantly and eagerly awaited new, tangible supernatural gifts among their brothers and sisters. Turning to the Bible for more signs beyond glossolalia that may accompany the Holy Spirit, they found Mark 16:17-18, which reads:

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.^[56]

Mark 16:17-18 was quickly adopted as another passage that enumerated and authorized additional signs beyond those in Acts. Manifesting the greatest number of the signs in Mark—exorcisms, speaking in tongues, and faith healings—emerged as an essential symbol of one's membership among southern Pentecostal communities.

This emerging Pentecostal doctrine explicitly included women as potential recipients of the Holy Spirit. "And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God," quoted the Apostle Peter in Acts, "I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy."^[57] Women and men thus could equally be filled with the Spirit and blessed with supernatural gifts as the Kingdom of God began to break into the present age. Signs served as a way to signify the authenticity of one's spirit baptism experience, express their individual, spiritual empowerment, and advertise which church they belonged to, for the "manifestation of signs not only created distinctions between Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals, but also between competing Pentecostal groups."^[58] In this highly competitive, excited religious atmosphere, only one community accepted the third sign in Mark 16: The Church of God.

In 1914, during the Tenth Annual Assembly, the Church of God officially adopted serpent handling and claimed it as exclusive to its members, positioning it as a vital evangelical tool for the growing church. At this important assembly, 133 of the 538 attendees were women.^[59] Through this exclusivity, Tomlinson wasted no time in elevating the church above others in the area as it "surpass[ed] all others in miraculous signs and wonders."^[60]

The signs in Mark 16:18 thus coalesced into “a reservoir of spiritual and social power for the members of the rapidly growing Church of God.”^[61] Practicing all the signs enumerated in Mark 16 increased the number of legible supernatural signs—and spiritual power—potentially available to them, and helped distinguish Tomlinson’s followers from the growing number of Pentecostal groups. The acceptance of serpent handling as a legitimate sign that manifested exclusively to members of the Church of God coincided with a remarkable period of growth: in just five years, the denomination doubled in size from 6,159 in 1915 to 14,606 in 1920.^[62] By 1925, Church of God membership in the United States sat at nearly 25,000 across the country.^[63] This is not to say that there was a direct correlation between this explosion of membership and the church’s embrace of serpent handling. At worst, serpent handling had little effect on membership, and at best, it positively impacted the Church of God’s growth as it competed with dozens of other Pentecostal denominations for adherents by positioning itself as spiritually superior and distinctive through serpent handling.^[64]

Reporting on Serpent Handling

Out of the 106 subscriber-generated reports about serpent handling that appeared in the *Evangel*, eighty-eight were published during this period of remarkable expansion between 1914 and 1925. These reports were relatively frequent, with multiple reports occasionally appearing within a single issue of the *Evangel*. The large majority of the reports came from the Southeast, with the most instances of serpent handling occurring in the Appalachian regions of Tennessee and Alabama.^[65] Of the 106 total reports published between 1914 and 1936, forty were either written or co-signed by a woman.^[66] From 1928, when the male leadership of the Church of God began to downplay and criticize serpent handling, to 1936, when the final serpent handling report appeared in the *Evangel*, only four of the fourteen reports published were authored by a man. As serpent handling became increasingly marginalized within the church, letters about the practice came to be increasingly dominated by women. The final three reports were all written solely by women and the last report, authored by a female serpent handler herself, offered a powerful endorsement of the practice in defiance of male leadership.^[67] The final positive mention of serpent handling in the *Evangel* was in 1943 and was also written by a woman, Myrtle Whitehead, a prominent evangelist. In her essay titled “Signs,” Whitehead advocated for serpent handling by citing the Church of God’s standard justification for serpent handling—a literal interpretation of Mark 16, which included taking

up serpents as a legitimate sign of Holy Spirit baptisms—which by 1943 was no longer considered mainstream Church of God doctrine.^[68]

The women who submitted reports on serpent handling to the *Evangel* were committed members of the Church of God, and their interest in the sign that clearly outlasted that of the men. Of the twenty-eight reports signed by an individual woman, fifteen of the authors had at least one other letter published in the *Evangel*, and three of these women submitted more than one report of serpent handling.^[69] Most of the co-ed, co-signed reports were from traveling teams of husbands and wives or fathers and daughters evangelizing together, and many of the individually authored reports were also by female evangelists or women who served clerks for their local churches. Even those who wrote letters about serpent handling but did not hold formal roles within the Church of God were a part of a committed group of women members who could afford to subscribe to the publication as well as the cost of postage, and went out of their way to attend church services, meetings, and revivals. This dedicated group of women demonstrated and disseminated their acceptance of serpent handling by participating in a familiar venue: the sanctified network of woman-letter writers in the *Evangel*. Their embrace of serpent handling was not just reflected in the sheer number of their reports, but also through the language they used to describe instances of serpent handling as participants in the community of female religious meaning and power. By examining how women wrote about serpent handling in the *Evangel*, we can explore how they interacted with, understood, and integrated the controversial sign of serpent handling into their devotional writing practices and begin to get at the role women played in the solidification and propagation of the Church of God's most dangerous sign.

Aside from one letter praying for serpent handling, reader submissions to the *Evangel* favorably mentioning instances of the sign typically fell into the genre of evangelistic reports.^[70] These reports came from across the country and recounted events set within the context of evangelistic services during a revival, camp meeting, or church homecoming or reunion. Tent revivals and camp meetings in particular were large, joyous, highly-anticipated and multi-day outdoor events that brought together communities of Pentecostals. People traveled for miles to see old friends, meet church leaders and evangelists, go to picnics, attend “songfests,” and participate in multiple services a day that sometimes lasted into the early hours of the morning.^[71] Even if a report was not about a large event like a revival, instances of serpent handling in the *Evangel* occurred almost exclusively within the context of a worship service.

[72] Most serpent handling reports—whether written by a man or a woman—followed the same basic narrative structure and contained the same general elements: an emphasis on the labor or battle that the Church of God was “pressing”; expressions of triumph and victory over Satan when signs manifested and convinced people of God’s power; and feelings of personal joy, gratitude, and certitude in God.

The basic narrative structure of male- and female-authored serpent handling reports remained remarkably stable between 1914 and 1936. A letter by Bettie Teems from 1915, which also happens to be the first woman-authored serpent handling report in the *Evangel*, exemplifies the main characteristics and basic structure of serpent handling reports, but also highlights a few of the differences between male- and female-authored reports.

Dear Bro. Tomlinson,

Greetings in Jesus’s dear name. I am praising the Lord for salvation that keeps folks from sin.

I received the Holy Ghost three years ago for I spoke in other tongues as the Spirit gave utterance.

We had a meeting at my home not long ago and the power fell and O such shouting and dancing and handling fire. On Sunday afterwards serpents were handled. I want the saints to pray for me that I may stay humble at the feet of Jesus. Praise God.

Your sister in Christ,

Bettie Teems^[73]

First, like Teems’s, most—but not all—reports opened by praising God’s power. This was slightly more common in female- than in male-authored letters, but was still a standard part of serpent handling reports. Male witnesses to a meeting more frequently jumped right into an account of specific events with little or no introduction.

Next, the author would retell the events of the meeting or worship service with varying degrees of detail and emotion, including instances of taking up of serpents and other signs. Teems followed this structure almost exactly by detailing a meeting that occurred “at my home not long ago” where “the power fell and O such shouting and dancing and handling fire. On Sunday afterwards serpents were handled.”^[74] Finally, the author would close the report with a prayer request for themselves, their community of Pentecostals, or for continued manifestations of signs and evangelistic success as Teems did

when she requested “the saints to pray for me that I may stay humble at the feet of Jesus. Praise God.”^[75] Sometimes reports would also close with continued praise of God, as Teems’s did. If the report was about a meeting or revival, expressions of gratitude for the evangelists in charge might also be included. If the author was an evangelist, updates on where they would travel next, contact information, and requests for prayers or aid—whether for specific items or for monetary support—might be included toward the end of the report as well.^[76]

A short report by Will Fish published just a few months after Teems’s exemplifies the similarities as well as the key differences between male- and female-authored reports. In his report, which is quoted in full, Fish jumped straight into the action, writing, “We have just closed a meeting at Emory Gap. Two saved and sanctified and filled with the Holy Ghost and two reclaimed and one sanctified. The copper head snake was handled and the hot lamp chimney too. Pray for us. The meeting was concluded by Bro. Taylor.”^[77] Although Fish’s and Teems’s short reports were both about a meeting where serpent handling occurred and were similar in length and structure, Fish’s report jumped straight into the action with no salutation, contained less overt praise of God, no personal information or details about himself, and no “I” statements. Although Fish concluded his report with a prayer request, it was quite general and brief compared to Teems’s. This was representative of male-authored reports overall; men tended to include fewer personal details about their lives or their emotions in their reports of the sign. Men would also occasionally write in the third person or write for the entire group present as “we,” rather than themselves individually in the first-person. This was less common in woman-authored reports; women primarily wrote first-person accounts.

A key element that both Teems’s and Fish’s letters exemplify, however, is the frequent use of the passive voice in serpent handling reports, particularly when an author discussed how serpents came to be at service and who exactly handled them. More often than not, serpents “were brought in” by unnamed individuals, whose affiliation with the Church of God was unclear, but often seemed antagonistic. Other times, like in Teems’s and Fish’s reports, serpents simply appeared with little other information.^[78] The phrase “serpents were handled,” as seen in Teems’s letter, was quite common in both male- and female-authored reports, which unfortunately obscures the identities and number of saints who manifested the sign.^[79]

As noted, Fish's identity is almost completely absent from his short report; there is no use of the singular first person anywhere in his letter and he gave no background on his own previous religious, authorizing experiences, a common omission in male-authored reports. Women, however, frequently did. Before summarizing the meeting, Teems specifically mentioned when her Holy Spirit baptism occurred—implicitly drawing on the established reservoir of spiritual power—and which validating signs followed, a notable addition in such a short report.

Even if they did not include the exact signs that accompanied their spirit baptisms, women frequently alluded to their sanctification and membership to the church by including, and often opening their letter with, phrases like "I praise the Lord for saving, sanctifying and filling me with the blessed Holy Ghost," or thanking "our heavenly Father this morning that I have the assurance that I am one of His children."^[80] Women might have felt they needed to preface their reports with sources of their religious authority before reporting on the sign, where men did not. Invoking weakness was not a helpful rhetorical tool for women when reporting a sign. Weakness and the "traditional trope of female self-abnegation" were notably uncommon in woman-authored serpent handling reports, given what defining elements these are for Christian women's religious writing as a whole.^[81] Instead, woman reporters sought to project authority and certainty to give credibility to what they had witnessed through reiterating the sources of their personal religious authority. Aside from her request for saints to help her stay humble, there are no other references to weakness or self-abnegation in Teems's report; she recounted her own Holy Spirit baptism experience and the meeting she held at her house with confidence. In this genre of writing, the author's own strength and certitude served to emphasize God's power and helped validate the practice of serpent handling.

Reports of serpent handling by men and women were primarily joyous in tone because the authors were sharing the news of a special sign that manifested exclusively to members of the Church of God, confirmed God's power, and led to the conversion of unsaved souls. Although most Church of God members most likely never witnessed serpent handling themselves, reports in the *Evangel* of the successful manifestation of the special sign, and the conversions that often followed, helped to increase church members' collective certitude in their status "as some of the most sanctified and blessed people on earth," and were presented as causes for joy and celebration.^[82]

Despite this, women's letters about serpent handling sometimes possessed notes of sorrow and hints of suffering—a notable divergence from their male peers—because they integrated elements from another popular, female-dominated genre into their reports of serpent handling: personal testimonies. Women wrote letters that blended stories of serpent handling with personal testimonies because, unlike men, they were participating in and conforming to the expectations of letter writers set within the female community of *Evangel* readers.

Mrs. Alice Newell's report exemplifies the almost exclusively female practice of combining testimonies with serpent handling reports. Published in the fall of 1922, Newell's letter to "Brother Tomlinson, and All of God's Children Everywhere" possessed the main elements of a serpent handling report—praise and glorification of God's power, a summary of a meeting where serpent handling occurred, and a generally joyous, triumphant emotional tone—but the sign itself was deemphasized and decentered within her narrative in favor of other components of personal testimonies.^[83] Newell's report blended these two genres of woman-authored submissions to the *Evangel*, producing a highly emotional narrative of personal joy, sorrow, and serpent handling that was saturated with words of praise for God's glory and expressions of certainty in his power. Serpent handling appeared toward the end of her account as just another sign of God's power among many already known to her. Instead, and as in other personal testimonies, Newell skillfully wove an intimate narrative focused on her relationship with God, past and current trials, divine healing, and miracles.

Newell opened her report with an expression of gratitude for the Church of God: "Oh, how glad I am that I am a member of the great Church of God. I love her teachings and praise God for her rules and government. I can never thank God enough for what He has done for me."^[84] Newell then recounted her Holy Spirit baptism and detailed her relationship with God:

One year ago in August He wonderfully saved and sanctified me and filled me with the Holy Ghost which still abides. I am praising God for the joy and happiness that I have had since I took Jesus as my Savior.

He is my great healer and when I get sick and I am trusting Him for both soul and body. One reason that makes me know that I am right is the Bible evidence that we have that our loved ones will forsake us, but praise the dear Lord, we can give them up for Him. I feel the sweet peace flooding my soul.

Sometimes I feel like my trials are more that I can bear but I go to God in prayer and let Jesus fix it for me. It seems like the enemy has tried me in every way but I am holding to God's unchanging hand.^[85]

Like other testimonies and prayer requests written by women, Newell's report toggled between joy and sadness. Because her submission was a report of serpent handling, praise and joy were the dominant themes; but throughout her letter, Newell hinted at past problems with her health and familial relationships as well as current financial difficulties, for "the enemy had put my husband out of work several times."^[86] Newell remained optimistic, however, because "he [the enemy—perhaps Satan] can't discourage him."^[87] The assertion of continued trials, with accounts of female sickness and suffering alleviated by divine intervention, was a common element specific to women's testimonies. Newell's mentions of previous illness, familial estrangement, and financial difficulties fit well within the genre of personal testimonies. One of the essential elements of a woman-authored testimony, according to Griffith, was "ceaseless denials of the pain to which they simultaneously confessed."^[88] Newell's report offered examples of this narrative convention by expressing absolute certainty in God's goodness, love, and power, while at the same time hinting at past and present trials.

Newell's account of the meeting where serpent handling took place did not appear until the final full paragraph of her letter, where she wrote somewhat maternally that "the Word was confirmed here by Brother G.G. Williams handling a small serpent. The saints surely did dance and talk in tongues. I am praising the Lord for our little pastor."^[89] A report of serpent handling thus was folded into a rich, intimate, first-person account of joy, suffering, and religious power and meaning. In this last paragraph serpent handling was listed alongside another sign—speaking in tongues—and occurred during a worship service with their regular pastor. Newell's letter demonstrates how women displayed ownership over the sign by integrating it into one of their favored genres of devotional writing, and in turn representing serpent handling to their fellowship of women quite differently than their male peers. To Newell, serpent handling was just an occurrence during a meeting, a commonly held event, unimportant enough to mention in a single sentence at the end of her letter.

In reports authored by men, serpent handling far more frequently stood as the confident, sometimes dramatic, center of their almost exclusively triumphantly-toned letters; men often gave serpent handling more attention in comparison to other signs enumerated and frequently placed it at the heart

of their reports. C. T. Morgan's short letter serves as an excellent example of this. In the first paragraph of his two-paragraph submission, he wrote that during "the best meeting we ever had... the sick were healed and devils cast out. Five were saved, nine sanctified, and six received the Holy Ghost. Eighteen were added to the Church of God."^[90] Rather than listing serpent handling alongside these other signs, however, Martin made a new, separate paragraph—which further emphasized it—before recounting the instance of serpent handling with more specificity and emotionality than he did the other signs: "On the last night of the meeting there was a rattlesnake brought in and handled by a number of saints. Oh thank God! This makes me feel so good. The signs are truly following the Church of God."^[91] Some men went even further in centering the dangerous sign in their writing. In 1916, Pastor W.H. Rogers submitted a long letter detailing a single Thursday evening when,

... they brought a rattle snake pilot in a box and they put a chicken snake in with the pilot so the pilot would be good and mad and would be sure and bite whoever picked him up.

The power fell and such shouting and praising God you never heard and the saints began to say "bring him in." They were afraid to bring the snakes in at first but after a while they brought them in. Brother Cleve Vaughn broke the box open and the old serpent came out and bit him twice on the hand. His hand swelled just enough to know the poison was there... The devil said his arm was swollen twice its size but thank God, he came back to meeting Sunday with out [*sic*] a hurt. His hand was not even swollen.^[92]

Rogers concluded his report by quoting Mark 16—further tying the event to Scripture—and briefly detailing an additional manifestation of a sign when a woman received the Holy Ghost and was healed of madness. In an almost total inversion of Newell's letter, Roger's triumphant report centered around a rich, lengthy narrative of serpent handling and concluded with a shorter account of an instance of divine healing, whereas Newell's letter was a long, personal testimony of past trials, suffering, and healing with her short report of serpent handling left until the final paragraph.

By decentering the specific instance of serpent handling in her submission and combining it with a personal testimony, Newell demonstrated that she was an appropriate, reliable letter-writer to other women, versed in the rhetorical structures of the female community of the written word that expected deeply intimate and highly emotional narratives that toggled between accounts of suffering and reassurances of joy. Letters like Newell's

had the effect of normalizing and authenticating serpent handling to all readers of the *Evangel*, but in particular to women. Newell understood her testimony would be carefully read and taken to heart by multitudes of other women within their network of female religious devotion; perhaps some would also be influenced to integrate serpent handling into their own understandings of the signs that follow.^[93] By refashioning her experience with serpent handling to fit within—and therefore maintain—the existing narrative structures and expectations of prayer, testimony, and joyful reports of successful meetings and revivals, Newell confirmed her membership to the network of female religious power in the *Evangel*. She thus helped regulate what forms of worship were available to members of the Church of God, shaping—and disciplining—the religious identities of all.

This is not to say that women were any less concerned with statistical details or less interested in fully reporting on specific meetings and revivals than men. The women of the Church of God were deeply invested in evangelism and those who witnessed or participated in meetings where serpent handling took place strove to accurately report to the *Evangel* the number of people converted, the number baptized by the Holy Spirit or by water, and other important evangelistic statistics. Women's reports, however, still contained a higher degree of personal commentary and emotive language than men's, even when they were more focused on the events themselves. Ida McCoy's two lengthy serpent handling reports from 1916 exemplify woman-authored, highly specific narratives of events where serpent handling took place.^[94] In her September report, McCoy carefully recounted a meeting in Helicon, Alabama that lasted for fourteen days. During that meeting, McCoy reported that

Five were reclaimed, five converted, one sanctified, nine added to the church and twelve baptized in water. The baptismal service was very impressive. Four strong and handsome young men went in first hand in hand, next came four little girls from ten to fourteen years old and next came four ladies as they sang 'I Will Follow,' one other came at last. We had the Lord's supper and feet washing at the church this seemed the best of all. The church has been edified and the gospel seed sown in hearts that has [*sic*] never gotten the light before.

[95]

McCoy's joyous report continued for several more paragraphs, flowing into the next column with similar levels of detail and personal commentary. McCoy was clearly interested in accurately recounting a single event; she carefully detailed the exact numbers of individuals reclaimed, converted,

sanctified, and baptized—and how these achievements were accomplished—for readers of the *Evangel*. Optimistic personal opinions like McCoy’s comment that “the baptismal service was very impressive,” or evaluative statements like “this seemed the best of all,” were unusual in male-authored reports and spoke to the more emotional style of writing expected by and for women.^[96]

Relatedly, McCoy’s report also possessed three other elements that were more common in female-authored than in male-authored serpent handling reports. First, McCoy decentered serpent handling in her account of the large meeting in Helicon. Serpent handling did not appear until the second-to-last paragraph of her lengthy report and was again listed alongside the sign of divine healing as she triumphantly paraphrased scripture: “the signs are following. Some have prayed for the sick and they have been healed. Some have taken up serpents. Praise our God for the precious apostolic way. Hallelujah!”^[97] Serpent handling to McCoy was decidedly a part of the “apostolic way.” Within that quote, another common element of woman-authored serpent handling reports was present: copious praise of God’s power and glory. Finally, although McCoy’s report was mostly triumphant in tone, she expressed a type of bittersweet sorrow for the meeting’s end, which male writers generally did not. At the close of the meeting “the goodbyes were said,” she wrote, “and oh, how our hearts ached as they rolled away shouting and singing with victory in their souls.”^[98]

McCoy’s serpent handling report also contained a postscript that spoke to the sanctified network of female religiosity within the *Evangel*. After she concluded her letter, McCoy added a brief note addressed to another female reader of the *Evangel* which read, “P.S. If sister Franklin of Dora, Ala. wishes to correspond with me, my address is Arely Ala., R.1.”^[99] Through this postscript we can glimpse how the community of female Pentecostals may have extended to relationships outside of the *Evangel*, but still relied on the connections formed and maintained within the pages of the newsletter.

Female Serpent Handlers and Its Last Defenders

In 1923, one of serpent handling’s most strident champions, General Overseer and editor-in-chief of the *Evangel*, A. J. Tomlinson, was impeached for fiscal improprieties and discontent with his leadership style.^[100] The new General Overseer, F. J. Lee, began to downplay the importance of serpent handling but did not totally outlaw the practice.^[101] Aided by other church leaders, Lee and his successors helped usher in a new era of the Church of God, working in

earnest to bring their church into greater alignment with the teachings of mainstream Pentecostalism, which never accepted serpent handling as a wholly legitimate practice.

In 1928, S. J. Heath, an outspoken member of church leadership who served on the governing Council of Elders and the Executive Committee, published the first essay in the *Evangel* that took an anti-serpent handling stance.^[102] Since the earliest manifestations of the sign, other prominent members of the Church of God and male leaders had written about it with measured caution, but still felt compelled to acknowledge its legitimacy due to the primacy of Mark 16. The first report on serpent handling, published in the spring of 1914 by J. B. Ellis—a state overseer, elder, and future superintendent of education—exemplified this wary stance. Even as he dutifully described the practice to readers, Ellis expressed deep reservations. Writing that “All do not work miracles,” he urged believers to pursue signs that could benefit all, heavily implying that serpent handling did not;

I have seen some with swollen limbs. Others have taken up a great number of snakes and been bitten over a hundred times by all sorts of serpents and felt no harm. These, no doubt, have the gift of miracles, and could as easily command the lame to walk, the blind to see, and the deaf to hear if they would only use their gifts to profit withal. Let us get the gifts and use them as God directs and be sure we are in the more excellent way; for if we had all gift and not charity we would amount to nothing.^[103]

Fourteen years later, Heath, like Ellis, acknowledged that legitimate manifestations of serpent handling could occur, but his letter was fundamentally different in tone and emphasis and he took a far more unambiguous stance against the sign. While early leaders like Ellis framed the issue as one of misapplication—a legitimate spiritual gift used improperly or perhaps for selfish means—Heath condemned serpent handling as fanaticism.

In his thundering essay, Heath admonished members of the Church of God for deemphasizing the other signs in favor of serpent handling. “There is not very much stress upon casting out devils, speaking in tongues, and laying the hands on the sick for their recovery,” he wrote.^[104] Instead, “many have gone into rank fanaticism, and false teaching, bringing reproach upon the Church and disgust to intelligent people over the handling of serpents.”^[105] Rather than simply warning against misuse or misinterpretation, Heath presented serpent handling as a shameful practice that damaged the church’s reputation, endangered lives, and brought public embarrassment. Heath’s forceful critique thus marked a turning point: although he did not fully

disavow the sign—he could not fully ignore scripture—he no longer treated it as a spiritual strength but as a dangerous and socially damaging spectacle that caused more harm than good for the church.

Heath's forceful critique of serpent handling was an almost complete reversal of Tomlinson's initial endorsement. By 1928, serpent handling was no longer the special, exclusive sign that elevated the church above all others in the area. Heath articulated a growing belief among the male leadership that serpent handling was a dangerous, damaging, and frankly embarrassing practice that caused "much suffering to the victims, and many times has taken much prayer to save a life, then we are made a laughingstock to the world and reproach for the cause."^[106]

During the Twenty-Third General Assembly, just a few months after Heath's essay, leaders and delegates refused to "make handling a test for fellowship" but did not ban the practice outright.^[107] Although Tomlinson had never advocated that serpent handling should be a requirement for membership in the Church of God, his messy dismissal from the church, coupled with this official declaration just five years later, marked the beginning of the end of serpent handling within the Church of God. Although historians Charles W. Conn and Mickey Crews claimed that 1928 was also the year that the church formally prohibited the practice, McVicar, Ralph W. Hood, Jr., and W. Paul Williamson repudiate that claim, pointing out that the church never made an explicit statement against the practice or banned it. Instead, male leadership increasingly criticized it and downplayed its importance as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit.^[108]

Between 1928, when the *Evangel* published Heath's letter, and 1936, of the fourteen total reports of serpent handling, only four were written by a man. Of the remaining ten, one was co-signed by a husband and wife in 1929, and the rest were written by an individual woman.^[109] Over the broader twenty-two-year period when the *Evangel* published serpent handling reports, only five were by women recounting their own experiences taking up serpents, with the final firsthand account—published in 1936—also serving as the *Evangel's* last report on serpent handling by any author.^[110] Between the 106 different serpent handling reports in the *Evangel* and Tomlinson's first essay in 1914 about serpent handling, "Sensational Demonstrations," where he recounted several specific instances of serpent handling, there are forty-eight named individuals who took up serpents. Of those forty-eight, fourteen were women.^[111] If unnamed but identifiably female individuals are counted, the number of female serpent handlers rises to twenty.^[112] As mentioned in the

previous section, however, due to reporters' propensity for the passive voice, the actual number of female serpent handlers in the early Church of God is likely to have been larger.^[113] During the period when the Church of God endorsed serpent handling, women and men viewed serpent handlers of both genders as a normal part of their church; serpent handlers were ordinary brothers, sisters, and saints, not a separate group of special worshipers. Male and female serpent handlers almost exclusively manifested the sign when possessed by the Holy Spirit during evangelistic meetings or church services.
[114]

All of the woman-authored first-hand accounts of serpent handling largely mirrored female eyewitness reports in structure and purpose—praise for God, an account of the instance of serpent handling, and a request for prayers, with elements of personal testimony incorporated— but with two key differences. First, female serpent handlers centered the act of serpent handling itself in their letters far more than female eye-witnesses. Second, their accounts lacked the notes of sorrow or claims weakness often found in eyewitness reports, instead emphasizing personal empowerment and feelings of overwhelming joy. Women serpent handlers, however, more frequently incorporated the “traditional trope of female self-abnegation” in their writing.
[115] Unlike female witnesses, woman serpent handlers might have felt compelled to balance the awesome power they wielded when taking up dangerous serpents with gendered expectations of appropriate feminine behavior. Regardless, their accounts ultimately served not only to normalize and legitimize the controversial sign, but also to assert their own religious authority within the Church of God community.

As the practice declined, women proved its most enduring defenders. Because of power differentials between men and women in the Church of God, women relied more on Holy Spirit baptisms and accompanying signs for religious authority. Serpent handling represented an expansion of the number of signs available to them, which is perhaps why they remained committed to reporting on and endorsing the practice even as male leaders increasingly rejected it. A sense of urgency in women's accounts after 1928 is apparent when examining one of the first, first-hand accounts from a serpent handler alongside the last.

Returning to the report that opened this article, Mary Mansfield's letter contained all the core elements of a woman-authored, first-hand account of serpent handling—praise for God, feelings of power, and heightened joy without notes of sorrow—but possessed a heavy emphasis on divine

authority; Mansfield framed each encounter with a serpent not as moments of personal triumph, but as a demonstration of God's total power. Mansfield opened her report with a statement of praise for God's "full and free salvation. I want to praise Him for victory over sin."^[116] "We have been tried by two copperheads," she continued, "but glory to God He gave us the power to take them up."^[117] After her successful handling, "some were convinced while the old rattler sang in our hands."^[118] In her single-paragraph report, she stated that God "gave the power" three separate times. Although this power flowed freely through Mansfield to the others, Mansfield was careful always to attribute it to its proper source: God. Mansfield called the experience "wonderful" and worked to rhetorically authenticate serpent handling by directly and repeatedly connecting it to God's power, and, to a lesser extent, by noting an instance of successful evangelism sparked by the sign. In this letter, there was no question of whether or not serpent handling was a legitimate sign or not; taking up serpents was both an undeniable sign of God's power working through Mansfield and her fellow saints as well as a persuasive evangelical tool.

Mansfield refashioned her experience of serpent handling to fit within the traditional convention of female self-abnegation—but not that of weakness—through her writing. Through her denials of personal empowerment, she hinted at the strength of the power for which she became a conduit. Mansfield, an ordinary woman, not a female evangelist or a male member of the Church of God, took up the rattlesnake initially deemed too dangerous to handle by her community without injury, which led both to more Holy Spirit possessions and to more conversions—clear and undeniable victories for the Church of God. Mansfield's account, then, served not only to legitimize serpent handling as an authentic sign of Holy Spirit baptisms, but also to both subtly emphasize the accessibility of awesome power that was available to all members of the Church of God, male or female. However, by denying personal empowerment, she also positioned herself as an unexpected vessel that God was, remarkably, able to work through. Mansfield's report recounted her lived experience in a way that reinforced the limitations of female religious authority in the world she lived in; her access to spiritual power was firmly and exclusively rooted in the Holy Spirit that poured into her body and manifested in taking up serpents in such a way that both empowered and constrained her.

After the two reports in 1915, which included Mansfield's, there were only two other first-hand accounts by a woman serpent handler published in the

Evangel in 1918 and 1930, respectively, before Sarah York's letter.^[119] Published in 1936, York's submission served as both the last first-hand account of serpent handling and the final report of the practice in the *Evangel*. In her short but commanding letter, York wasted no time cutting to the heart of why she was writing. "Dear *Evangel* readers," she began, "as I have heard so much talk against taking up serpents I feel led by the Holy Ghost to write. Read Mark 16: 17, 18. There is no difference is [*sic*; in] taking up serpents and laying hands on the sick. God can use both to His glory."^[120] As with other first-hand accounts written by women, serpent handling was the central focus of her letter. Unlike the earlier writers, however, York's letter was prompted by serious concern about continuation the sign within her church.^[121] Similarly to Mansfield, and perhaps to temper her direct challenge to male leadership, York downplayed her own agency, instead stating she was "led by the Holy Ghost" to write.^[122] "About twelve years ago," York continued,

I was at church one night, at prayer meeting. They brought in a big rattlesnake. I began to pray and started to read and see what the Bible said about taking up serpents. The power came on me and I didn't fear. They laid it on the table and it coiled and stuck its head up, and when the power came on me I patted it on the head and it dropped its head. I put my hands under it and held it out and praised God with the snake in my hands. Then Brother J. H. Brooks' wife took it out of my hands and danced around until she dropped it. It crawled under a bench. I guess there were a hundred people there and some said they were convinced. Praise God, I am willing to do anything God wants me to. I am in His hands. Alleluia.^[123]

Like Mansfield nearly two decades before her, York and another female member of the Church of God successfully handled a serpent without harm, which converted nonbelievers. York's account also followed the same general structure and possessed the essential elements of a woman-authored report of serpent handling—including gratitude and praise for God, an emphasis on his power, and feelings of personal empowerment. Unlike Mansfield, however, York urgently felt she needed to directly defend and advocate for the practice as a legitimate sign, warning readers that

If we try to shirk when hard things come, we are liable to lose out. Be sure God is leading. There's nothing impossible with God. He delivered Daniel out of the lions' den, the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace... His power is not limited... Jesus said lay hands on the sick He also said take up serpents. Let's keep prayed up and listen to that sweet, small voice. Obedience is better than sacrifice.^[124]

York's personal experience of serpent handling empowered her to become an authoritative defender of serpent handling, and allowed her to go against the growing negative consensus about serpent handling among male leadership. At the same time, however, York downplayed her own power as an individual, Spirit-filled woman, and instead emphasized the highest authority, God, to both shield and bolster her critique, and to fit within the gendered expectations of behavior within the Church of God. She leveraged feminine piety to emphasize God's unlimited power and the importance of obedience to the Word of God to strengthen her defense of serpent handling. She framed this defense as virtuous and humble, rooting it in her moral authority as a woman who was concerned—fearful even—for the spiritual well-being of the church as a whole. This type of humble fear for those who did not accept all of the Bible modulated her religious authority, which was made undeniable through serpent handling, and invoked the worn trope of female self-abnegation. Her strong critique transformed into a loving, almost-maternal expression of concern for the church and its male leadership if Mark 16:17-18 were to be disregarded. York strove to protect and strengthen her community's relationship to God through the special sign that, at least at one point, was thought to elevate Church of God above all others.

This is not to say, however, that York's letter was weakly formulated. Rather, she mounted an overt resistance to doctrinal changes promoted by the male leaders of the Church of God. York used all the rhetorical tools developed over two-decades of women reporting on serpent handling to craft a well-articulated, biblically-based argument that taking up serpents must be considered a legitimate sign of Holy Spirit baptisms, or they would all be at risk of ignoring scripture and disobeying God. Although York's letter ultimately marked the last recorded instance of serpent handling in the Church of God, the practice went out with a final, resolute defense by a defiant Pentecostal sister.

As subscribers to the *Evangel* read York's defense of serpent handling in the pages of their beloved newsletter, they also read increasingly negative coverage of the practice in other printed sources. In the late 1920s through the 1930s, attention from the secular media intensified and "church leaders came to regard the once-perceived evangelistic benefits of the practice as liabilities."^[125] This attention only increased beginning in 1941, when Kentucky—followed by Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Alabama—passed legislation "banning the use of 'any kind of reptile in connection with any religious service.'"^[126] Serpent handlers subsequently came into conflict

with the law, and local and national newspapers turned their trials into media spectacles.^[127] Coupled with a series of highly-publicized deaths from snake bites in connection with religious services, by the close of the 1940s, serpent handling had turned into a sensational, criminalized, and profoundly other practice in the minds of the American public, and the Church of God wanted nothing to do with it.^[128]

Conclusion

In a way, Sarah York's letter at the end of the serpent handling movement in the Church of God exemplified much of what woman serpent handlers and female witnesses to serpent handling accomplished when they wrote to the *Evangel*. Through their reports about serpent handling, highly committed female members of the Church of God played an active role in the propagation, legitimization, and—most obviously in York case—defense of the sign, while navigating an uneven balance of power between themselves and their male peers.

Although the basic narrative structure of the women-authored serpent handling reports was flexible, women were still bound to include the standard elements of the genre in their writings: an emphasis on evangelism; exhortations of God's power when it manifested in the form of serpent handling and other signs that follow; and the individual reporter's feelings of joy, happiness, victory, and certitude. The women who "participated in the highly expressive practices of Pentecostal worship" such as the revivals and worship services where serpent handling typically took place were "compelled to reconstruct their life stories and refashion themselves according to the available vocabulary of experience."^[129] Reports had to sound more or less like reports, and their submission to the *Evangel* had to be prompted by an instance of serpent handling they had personally observed or taken part in.

The general rigidity of serpent handling reports served, as Griffith wrote, "to sustain the authority of Pentecostal theology, elicit correct attitudes and feelings, and produce disciplined religious selves."^[130] The three vital elements and narrative structure of a serpent handling report served two primary purposes, each related to Griffith's observation: to directly and repeatedly connect it with the Church of God's specific interpretation of scripture, God's power, and evangelistic usefulness; and to help elicit and sustain the proper emotions of joy and victory among *Evangel* readers when the sign manifested, which helped to discipline their religious selves. The

reports helped foster relationships among church members and with the divine; sustain religious devotion; and provide a blueprint to understand highly emotional, perhaps sometimes confusing, even frightening, religious events. Over the course of over twenty years, the women-authored reports in the *Evangel* played a key role in sustaining and legitimizing the sign of serpent handling. They regulated the forms of worship available to members of the Church of God, and disciplined the religious subjectivity of the denomination as a whole through incorporating the sign into their sacred female networks of religious meaning and power.

Even if most women did not witness serpent handling and even fewer handled serpents themselves, many still reported about the sign as a legitimate expression of worship, even after male leadership pushed to abandon it. Although the women of the Church of God had to fit their lived experiences into certain narrative structures and themes when writing to the *Evangel*, these structures and themes allowed them to become powerful proponents of the serpent handling movement; they simultaneously constrained and empowered them. As women embraced the church's teachings on the sign, they shaped a specifically female understanding of the signs available to members of the Church of God. Because of the power differential between men and women in the Church of God, women relied more on Holy Spirit baptisms and the accompanying signs to establish religious authority than their male peers did. Women supported serpent handling because they believed it was a legitimate manifestation of God's power, but they also embraced its expansion of the reservoir of spiritual, authority-granting gifts available to them. The committed group of female evangelists, clerks, and leaders who reported their experiences might have been particularly concerned with maintaining this expanded reservoir of religious power. Perhaps this is at least one reason why women became the final defenders of the practice in the 1930s.

This is not to say, of course, that women embraced serpent handling simply to attain religious authority. Rather, they found power and meaning in serpent handling and incorporated it into their religious subjectivities in order to live in a sanctified world. Mrs. J. H. Mull was one of those women, and her testimony serves as an excellent example of how they integrated the sign of serpent handling into their daily lives. In her letter to the *Evangel* in the summer of 1921, Mull described a desire "to get to the place where all the signs would follow me."^[131] One morning after Mull read the Bible, she went outside to a special place where she would go to pray. When she knelt in the

grass, she suddenly noticed that “there was a large rattlesnake lying close by.” She continued,

I got back a distance from it. My husband came and we prayed and shouted and talked in tongues, it seemed so gentle and did not try to bite. We let it crawl off. The next morning I went back to pray again. I read some in the Bible, and looked around to see if the snake was there as I didn't want to get close to it, but when I knelt to pray, the snake was coiled up close to me again. I am telling this for the glory of God. I suppose I had been sitting by the serpent for half an hour and it did not offer to bite me. I know that I am serving the same God that closed the lions' mouths. I know it would be wonderful to take up a serpent under the power of God. I had such victory for a week after that and so much of the power of the Lord. It seemed as if I would almost leave the earth at times.^[132]

Mull took a seemingly ordinary event—seeing a snake twice while praying outside—and derived from it profound sacred meaning and joy. Unlike other reports, which took place in overtly religious settings such as revivals, Mull's experience with the sign took place at her home in Arizona, between herself, her husband, and a serpent. Mull's account represents the extent to which women of the Church of God across the country had internalized the sign of serpent handling and integrated it into their religious selves. Mull took her personal encounter with a rattlesnake, initially a terrifying experience, and refashioned it into a positive one, steeped in religious meaning and spiritual empowerment. Serpent handling, and the narrative structures and thematic elements that surrounded it, helped women like Mull reinterpret their lived experiences to find deep religious meaning and to exist in a sacred world full of miracles.

Author's Note: Many people helped shape the ideas and research behind this article, but I am especially grateful to my advisors at the University of Colorado Boulder, Mark Pittenger and Deborah Whitehead. Mark was a true collaborator throughout the development of the master's thesis from which this article emerged, and he continued to offer crucial guidance as this piece evolved—at this point, he likely knows the material better than I do. Deborah's support and mentorship in the subfield of women and religion laid the groundwork for much of my thinking and growth as a scholar. I am also thankful to the anonymous reviewers, and Alison Collis Greene and Doug Thompson at the JSR for their thoughtful feedback and editorial work, to W. Paul Williamson for his encouragement and correspondence over the years, and to Myles Osborne for his friendship and unwavering support.

[1] Mary Mansfield, "Crab Orchard, Tenn.," *Church of God Evangel* 6, no. 35 (August 28, 1915): 2.

[2] Mansfield, "Crab Orchard, Tenn.," 2.

[3] For the latest edition of the official, but oftentimes apologetic, history of the Church of God, please see Charles W. Conn, *Like a Mighty Army: A History of the Church of God, 1886-1996* (Tribute ed.; Cleveland: Pathway Press, 2008). For a social history of the Church of God, please see Mickey Crews, *The Church of God: A Social History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990). For two histories of the Church of God that are part of larger volumes of work, please also see Deborah Vansau McCauley, "How an Independent Holiness Church became a Major Denomination," chap. 13 in *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 276–310; and Vinson Synan, "The Church of God (Cleveland, TN)," and "Cashwell in Cleveland, Tennessee," in *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 71-80, 123-124. For an excellent synthesis of the history of the Church of God with a particular focus on the serpent handling tradition, please see Ralph W. Hood, Jr. and W. Paul Williamson, *Them That Believe: The Power and Meaning of the Christian-Serpent Handling Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

[4] Michael J. McVicar, "Take Away the Serpents from Us: The Sign of Serpent Handling and the Development of Southern Pentecostalism," *Journal of Southern Religion* 15 (2013): Part I, n44, <https://jsreligion.org/issues/vol15/mcvicar.html>.

[5] A gifted preacher and indefatigable organizer, Tomlinson transformed the church into a Pentecostal powerhouse between 1903 and 1923. During this time, Tomlinson wrote eighteen essays for the *Church of God Evangel* in ardent support of serpent handling between 1914 and 1920. Please see A. J. Tomlinson, "Sensational Demonstrations," *Church of God Evangel* 5, no. 38 (September 19, 1914): 2-3; "The Assembly," *Church of God Evangel* 5, no. 45 (November 14, 1914): 1- 4; "Faith is Developing," *Church of God Evangel* 5, no. 46 (November 21, 1914): 1-3; "Extracts," *Church of God Evangel* 5, no. 48 (December 5, 1914): 1-3, 7; "Walk Softly Before God," *Church of God Evangel* 6, no. 2 (January 9, 1915): 1; "The New Year 1916," *Church of God Evangel* 7, no. 1 (January 1, 1916): 1; "Another Good Opportunity, Part 1," *Church of God Evangel* 7, no. 34 (August 19, 1916): 1; "Another Good Opportunity, Part 2,"

Church of God Evangel 7, no. 35 (August 26, 1916): 1; “Guilty or Not Guilty?” *Church of God Evangel* 7, no. 41 (October 4, 1916): 1; “Holy Ghost and Us,” *Church of God Evangel* 7, no. 50 (December 9 1916): 1; “Persistent Faith,” *Church of God Evangel* 7, no. 51 (December 16, 1916): 1; “Honest Souls,” *Church of God Evangel* 9, no. 10 (March 9, 1918): 1; “Enlargement and Deliverance,” *Church of God Evangel* 9, no. 12 (March 23, 1918): 1; “Signs Following Believers,” *Church of God Evangel* 9, no. 26 (June 29, 1918): 1; “The Holy Ghost and Wisdom,” *Church of God Evangel* 9, no. 31 (August 3, 1918): 1-2; “Do It Again and Again,” *Church of God Evangel* 10, no. 14 (April 4, 1919): 1; “Signs That Follow,” *Church of God Evangel* 11, no. 15 (April 10, 1920): 1; “Snake Bitten Child Report,” *Church of God Evangel* 11, no. 38 (September 18, 1920): 1.

[6] To arrive at this number, I reviewed every other available issue of the *Evangel* from 1914–1936. Of the 563 total issues examined within this twenty-two-year period (1914 to 1936), I identified 17,877 total reader-generated submissions, including prayer requests and personal testimonies as well as reports of domestic evangelistic services, revivals, camp meetings, homecomings, and regular church services (submissions about international missionary activity were excluded from this count and from this study). 2,516 of those submissions were either anonymous, or the gender of the author(s) was impossible to determine. Of the 15,361 letters where I was able to in good faith determine the gender of the author(s), 5,146 were authored by a man (33.5% of identifiable reports) and 10,215 were authored or co-authored by a woman (66.5% of identifiable reports). The vast majority of these letters were authored by a single, individual woman. I determined the gender of the author by considering names, sign-offs (e.g. “your brother/sister in Christ), contextual information within the letter (e.g. references to husbands/wives), and by cross-referencing the authors’ names within other letters and essays in the *Evangel* as well as other Church of God records like roll calls from General Assemblies, and tables of church leaders in Charles W. Conn’s *Like a Mighty Army: A History of the Church of God* (rev. ed.; Cleveland: Pathway Press, 1977). The reason why I refer to the older, 1977 edition of Conn’s work, rather than the more recent 2008 tribute edition is because it included more detailed tables about church leadership, particularly on the state level, which were removed from the newer edition.

[7] In relation to the number of serpent handling reports published in the *Evangel*, please see Jamie Sarafan, “The Women and the Word: Serpent Handling and the Women of the Church of God, 1914-1935,” (Master’s Thesis, University of Colorado Boulder, 2021) 149-151, Appendix I; 153-156, Appendix III. I have since found eleven additional reports of serpents

handling to the ones listed in the appendices, listed in chronological order: G. T. Brouayer, "Bonham Texas," *Church of God Evangel* 8, no. 18 (May 12, 1917): 4; W. A. Capshaw, "Sunburst, N.C.," *Church of God Evangel* 9, no. 31 (August 3, 1918): 2; Mrs. B. L. Shepherd, "Report," *Church of God Evangel* 9, no. 40 (October 5, 1918): 3; W. A. Capshaw, "Man Crushed in Coal Mines is Healed by Power of God," *Church of God Evangel* 15, no. 27 (July 19, 1924): 1; H. M. Nance, "Gaining Victory After Two Years of Battle," *Church of God Evangel* 18, no. 42 (October 15, 1927): 1; J. L. Glascock, "Louisiana State Camp Meeting," *Church of God Evangel* 18, no. 43 (October 22, 1927): 4; R. J. Aldridge, "The Lord Needs Brave Soldiers," *Church of God Evangel* 21, no. 24 (October 9, 1930): 2; J. A. Kims, "I Am Glad I Learned to Trust Him," *Church of God Evangel* 23, no. 8 (April 23, 1932): 1; E. B. Culpepper, "Snake Handled," *Church of God Evangel* 24, no. 4 (March 25, 1933): 1, 31; Rachel Barnes, "Best Revival Ever Held at Enigma, Ga.," *Church of God Evangel* 24, no. 33 (October 21, 1933): 13; and Sarah York, "God's Power is not Limited," *Church of God Evangel* 27, no. 8 (April 25, 1936): 13. Of the 106 total reports on serpent handling within the *Evangel*, two are anonymous, and the author's gender cannot be confidently determined in three. Of the remaining 101 reports where the author's gender is identifiable, sixty-one were written by a man, and forty were written or co-signed by a woman.

[8] Ann Braude, "Women's History Is U.S. Religious History," in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 91.

[9] Within the small subdiscipline of the history of Pentecostal serpent handling, there are five primary scholars aside from McVicar whose work deals with the history of the practice. Marsha Maguire laid the foundations for deeper understandings of serpent handling by placing it within the larger history of evangelical religion in America in her article, "Confirming the Word: Snake-Handling Sects in Southern Appalachia," *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 38, no. 3 (Summer 1981): 166-179. Thomas Burton's eclectic work, *Serpent-Handling Believers*, also connected the emergence of serpent handling with the larger histories of the Holiness, Pentecostal, and fundamentalist movements and uncovered the important role the Church of God and its newsletter played in the spread of the practice at the turn of the century. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993). David Kimbrough's monograph, *Taking Up Serpents: Snake Handlers of Eastern Kentucky*, reconstructed the rise and spread of serpent handling in Kentucky through one family, the Saylor. Like Maguire and Burton, he connected the

emergence of serpent handling with other Christian movements at the time, but emphasized fundamentalism in particular. Kimbrough's most important contribution was that he was the first scholar to argue for a historical and socioeconomic—rather than a wholly psychological—explanation for the emergence of serpent handling in the early twentieth century. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995). Finally, Hood, and Williamson's *Them That Believe* is the most comprehensive book on serpent handling to date. While this is not a historical monograph, the authors dedicated three chapters to the history of serpent handling and focused on the importance of the Church of God in the spread of the practice. They also connected the emergence of serpent handling with earlier movements like the First Great Awakening, linking serpent handling with a larger American tradition of spontaneous, highly emotional revivalism. Hood and Williamson offered the most detailed analysis to date of instances of serpent handling in the *Church of God Evangel*, carefully cataloging both essays about serpent handling by church leadership and reports of the practice by lay people, to try to discern the actual numbers of serpent handlers, how many church officials handled serpents, and the membership gains attributable to the practice. In addition to this monograph, these two prolific scholars published numerous articles together, separately, and with others on the subject. Please see in particular Ralph W. Hood, Jr. and David L. Kimbrough, "Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects: Theoretical Considerations," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34, no. 3 (September 1995): 311-322; Ralph W. Hood, Jr., "When the Spirit Maims and Kills: Social Psychological Considerations of the History of Serpent Handling Sects and the Narrative of Handlers," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 8, no. 2 (November 16, 2009): 71-96; Ralph W. Hood, Jr. and W. Paul Williamson, "A Case Study of the Intratextual Model of Fundamentalism: Serpent Handlers and Mark 16:17-18," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 58-69; and W. Paul Williamson and Ralph W. Hood, Jr., "Differential Maintenance and Growth of Religious Organizations Based upon High-Cost Behaviors: Serpent Handling within the Church of God," *Review of Religious Research* 46, no. 2 (December 2004): 150-168. Finally, for an excellent general overview of the scholarship on serpent handling—which has been largely completed by non-historians—organized by discipline, please see Jenna Gray-Hildenbrand, "The Appalachian 'Other': Academic Approaches to the Study of Serpent-handling Sects," *Religion Compass* 10, no. 3 (March 2016): 47-57.

[10] McVicar, "Take Away the Serpents from Us," Part I. Before McVicar's reconsideration of serpent handling in the history of American

Pentecostalism, most scholars ignored the practice. Works like Grant Wacker's *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* mentioned serpent handling once in the entire monograph within a conversation about biblical literalism. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 74. Even studies of Pentecostalism in the Southeast relegate serpent handling to the backcountry and portray it as a practice of small independent groups with little contact or connection with the larger Pentecostal movement. See Randall J. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 251–254. For an example of similar treatment of serpent handling in an otherwise comprehensive approach to Pentecostalism and the Church of God in Appalachia, see McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion*. For a far more in-depth analysis of the absence of serpent handling in the larger historiography of the early Holiness Pentecostal movement, please see McVicar, "Take Away the Serpents from Us," Introduction and Part I.

[11] There has been almost no academic work on the history of serpent handling and women. Scholars, as well as journalists, frequently position men as the presumed, dominant center of the tradition. One of the major exceptions to this is Fred Brown and Jeanne McDonald's collection of interviews with modern serpent handlers. Brown and McDonald's collection presented twenty-two unedited accounts from members of three prominent serpent handling families. Of the twenty-two interviews, over half were with women, and women still feature prominently as mothers, sisters, wives, and community leaders in the accounts by men. *The Serpent Handlers: Three Families and Their Faith*, (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair Publisher, 2000). For two additional oral histories where the prevailing presence and leadership of women within the serpent handling movement is pronounced, see Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents: Pastor Jimmy Morrow's Narrative History of his Appalachian Jesus' Name Tradition*, ed. Ralph W. Hood, Jr. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005); and Burton, *Serpent-Handling Believers*. In addition to highlighting the presence of women within his community, Morrow attributes the birth of the serpent handling movement to Nancy Younger Kleinieck, a "prophetess" from the Jesus's Name Tradition who handled serpents at a revival in coal country—rather than George Went Hensley, who is traditionally understood by scholars and most adherents as the originator of the Pentecostal serpent handling movement. Though a large portion of Burton's *Serpent-Handling Believers* focuses on Hensley and the male leaders of the early Church of God, women are prominent in his eclectic study of modern serpent handling churches. Of the three unedited oral histories (or

“Portraits,” as he calls them) included in *Serpent-Handling Believers*, one of them is with a prominent serpent handling preacher’s daughter. However, due largely to the methodological commitments of the scholars compiling these oral histories, there was nearly no analysis of the role of women in serpent handling, whether historical or modern, in these works. For an ethnography that highlights women as conspicuous members and participants in their serpent handling churches and communities, see Steven M. Kane, “Snake Handlers of Southern Appalachia” (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1979). Women’s attendance and participation in late 20th century serpent handling services is also notable in Kane’s “Holy Ghost People: The Snake-Handlers of Southern Appalachia,” *Appalachian Journal* 1, no. 4 (Spring, 1974): 255-262 and “Ritual Possession in a Southern Appalachian Religious Sect” *The Journal of American Folklore* 87, no. 346 (October-December, 1974): 293-302. Finally, for an example par excellence of the role of journalists in perpetuating the narrative of male dominance within serpent handling, please see Dennis Covington’s popular, but controversial, personal memoir *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1995). His book features many women as highly active members of serpent handling churches and leaders within their communities, but men remain in the center of the movement of his account.

[12] Howard R. Pollio and W. Paul Williamson’s “The Phenomenology of Religious Serpent Handling: A Rationale and Thematic Study of Extemporaneous Sermons” is an important article in its own right as it identifies and analyzes themes and tropes in modern serpent handling sermons. However, it is a single footnote about female serpent handlers in their article that must be briefly considered: in this footnote, Pollio and Williamson wrote that “within the serpent-handling sects we have researched, women are not allowed to preach in services, although they are permitted and sometimes encouraged to give brief testimonials - hence no women are represented in this study.” Williamson and Pollio’s explicit decision to exclude women due to the institutional structures of serpent handling churches perhaps speaks to the reason why proper, deeper analysis of their role has not been completed by scholars. Pollio and Williamson also noted, however, in the same footnote that since “extensive field research has noted that approximately 30%-35% of handlers are women, it also would seem necessary to include female participants in future studies.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no. 2 (June, 1999): 216n2. In relation to the religious history of women in the Church of God more specifically, see Lisa P.

Stephenson, "The Church of God," chap. 2.2 in *Dismantling the Dualisms for American Pentecostal Women in Ministry: A Feminist-Pneumatological Approach* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2012). Stephenson offers an excellent, concise overview of the history of women in ministry in the Church of God. This chapter, however, focuses primarily on female leaders, ministers, and evangelists within the church rather than ordinary women. Please also see David Grant Roebuck, "Limiting Liberty: The Church of God and Women Ministers, 1886-1996" (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1997); "Perfect Liberty to Preach the Gospel: Women Ministers in the Church of God," *Pnuema: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 17, no. 1 (Spring, 1995): 25-32; and "'I Have Done the Best I Could': Opportunities and Limitations for Women Ministers in the Church of God—A Pentecostal Denomination," *Theology Today* 68, no. 4 (January 2012): 393-403. Like Stephenson, Roebuck primarily focuses on women in ministry within the Church of God. In his social history of the Church of God, Crews also includes a short chapter on female leaders and evangelists. "Your Daughters Shall Prophecy," chap. 5 in *The Church of God*, 92-107.

[13] R. Marie Griffith, "Female Suffering and Religious Devotion in American Pentecostalism," in *Women and Twentieth-Century Protestantism*, eds. Margaret Lamberts Bendroth and Virginia Lieson Brereton (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 184-208. Please also see R. Marie Griffith *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Despite its focus on modern day evangelical women in the Aglow Fellowship, *God's Daughters* was still influential in my thinking and development of many themes and ideas present in this essay. In addition to Griffith, the work of Elaine Lawless helped me understand how Pentecostal women constructed religious narratives and identities. Although Lawless produced numerous works on this topic, please see in particular "Rescripting Their Lives and Narratives: Spiritual Life Stories of Pentecostal Woman Preachers," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7, no. 1 (Spring, 1991): 53-71; "Transforming the Master Narrative: How Women Shift the Religious Subject," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 24, no. 1 (2003): 61-75; and "'The Night I Got the Holy Ghost...': Holy Ghost Narratives and the Pentecostal Conversion Process," *Western Folklore* 47, no. 1 (January 1988): 1-19.

[14] McVicar, "Take Away the Serpents from Us," Part I, n44, n81; Conn, *Like a Mighty Army*, rev. ed., 430, table 41, "Church of God Membership."

[15] Conn, *Like a Mighty Army*, rev. ed., 147.

[16] Notably, his essay was accompanied by a sketch of the *Evangel's* offices and publishing house. This was before images and illustrations were common in the newsletter and speaks to the importance of the publishing house to subscribers and church leaders like Lee.

[17] F. J. Lee, "Reminisces of the Evangel Office and Workers," *Church of God Evangel* 10, no. 4 (January 25, 1919): 1.

[18] Lee, "Reminisces of the Evangel Office and Workers," 1.

[19] Randall J. Stephens, "'There Is Magic in Print': The Holiness-Pentecostal Press and the Origins of Southern Pentecostalism," Part I, *Journal of Southern Religion* 5 (2002), <http://jsr.fsu.edu/2002/Stephens.htm>.

[20] Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 264.

[21] Reports from individual foreign missionary workers—male and female—were common in the *Evangel* as well, but they are not a part of this study.

[22] The reason why I choose 1921 as an exemplary year is because 1921 marks the midpoint between the first report of serpent handling in 1914 and when the male leadership began downplaying and disavowing the practice in 1928.

[23] Editor, "Testimonies," *Church of God Evangel* 24, no. 9 (April 29, 1933): 2.

[24] Martha Hill, "Ivanhoe, Va.," *Church of God Evangel* 7, no. 35 (August 26, 1916): 2.

[25] Maud Summeralls, "Adrain, Fla.," *Church of God Evangel* 7, no. 30 (July 22, 1916): 4.

[26] See note 6.

[27] "Requests," *Church of God Evangel* 12, no. 3 (January 15, 1921):2.

[28] "Healing Department," *Church of God Evangel* 16, no. 25 (June 20, 1925): 3.

[29] Griffith, "Female Suffering and Religious Devotion," 189.

[30] Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 161.

[31] Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 161.

[32] Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 161.

[33] Crews, *The Church of God*, 17.

[34] "Thursday Morning, Jan. 10" in *2nd General Assembly January 9-13, 1907, Held at Union Grove, Tennessee* typescript, (The Consortium of Pentecostal Archives, Springfield), 1.

[35] The Church of God had three categories of ministers: bishops, or formally ordained ministers; deacons, who were unordained lay ministers who also helped run and administer churches; and evangelists, or propagators of the Gospel and church planters. Only ordained clergy could "preside over the Lord's Supper, water baptisms, marriages and other 'priestly' ministerial duties." Roebuck, "'I Have Done the Best I Could,'" 399. For a short discussion of the differences between ordination and licensure in relation to women ministers in the 1907 Second General Assembly please see Stephenson, *Dismantling the Dualisms*, 25.

[36] In 1908, deaconesses were instructed that they should be "as the women mentioned in Titus 2:3-5;" the Church of God expected female deaconesses to be mature, holy, and pure in their own behavior and to bear the burden of managing the behavior of other women—a task not assigned to male deacons with such gendered specificity. "Second Day. Jan. 10 – 1908: 1-1:30pm," in *3rd General Assembly Held at Cleveland Tennessee, January 8-12, 1908*, typescript, (The Consortium of Pentecostal Archives, Springfield), 3. The full verse cited by the delegates reads as follows: "The aged women likewise, that they be in behavior as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed." Titus 2:3-5 (KJV).

[37] To arrive at this percentage, I examined roll calls in General Assembly records. I only counted those whose names were identifiably female, excluding those where gender could not be confidently determined. "Ministers – Evangelists," in *Echoes from the Eighth General Assembly of the Churches of God, January 7-12, 1913* (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House), 93-94; "Ministers, Evangelists," in *Echoes from the Tenth General Assembly of the Churches of God Held at Cleveland, Tennessee, November 2-8, 1914* (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House), 40-42; "Statistical Report of Churches by State," in *Minutes of the Eleventh Annual Assembly of the Church of God Held at Cleveland, Tennessee, November 1-7, 1915* (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House), 23-32; "Statistical Report," in *Minutes of the Twelfth*

Annual Assembly of the Churches of God Held at Harriman, Tennessee, November 1-7, 1916 (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1916), 34-45; "Roll of Churches and Ministers," in *Minutes of the Thirteenth Annual Assembly of the Churches of God, Held at Harriman Tennessee, November 1-6, 1917* (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1917), 49-64; "Statistical Report," in *Minutes of the Fourteenth Annual Assembly of the Churches of God Held at Cleveland Tennessee, Oct. 29-Nov. 4, 1919* (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1919), 67-80; "Reports by State," in *Minutes of the Fifteenth Annual Assembly of the Churches of God Held at Cleveland Tennessee, Nov. 3-9, 1920* (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1920), 76-97. Unfortunately, there were no lists of ministers and evangelists included in the published General Assembly Minutes prior to 1913, and the 1918 General Assembly was cancelled due to the Spanish Influenza pandemic.

[38] Stephenson, *Dismantling the Dualisms*, 26.

[39] Roebuck, "I Have Done the Best I Could," 399.

[40] Roebuck, "I Have Done the Best I Could," 399-400.

[41] Roebuck, "I Have Done the Best I Could," 400. Licensed female evangelists could serve a "supply" pastor, a temporary lay pastor, if there was no ordained male minister available to lead a church they started. These cases were the exception, not the norm, but for just one example of a female pastor please see F. W. Gammon's letter, "Reports," *Church of God Evangel* 12, no. 28 (July 9, 1921): 4. Gammon reports on his and his wife's efforts turning a "mud hole... surrounded by a bad atmosphere" into a place with "ten or twelve churches." He requested for any Church of God pastor passing through to preach for them for "my wife is the pastor here," perhaps subtly implying the need and desire for preaching from an ordained male minister. For further information on women pastoring churches, see Stephenson, *Dismantling the Dualisms*, 31.

[42] In the 1916 General Assembly, the Church of God established a ruling body "similar to the president's cabinet of the United States." A. J. Tomlinson, "General Overseer's Annual Address" in *Minutes of the Twelfth Annual Assembly of the Churches of God Held at Harriman, Tennessee, November 1-7, 1916* (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1916), 12; "Committee on Questions" in *Minutes of the Twelfth Annual Assembly of the Churches of God Held at Harriman, Tennessee, November 1-7, 1916* (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1916), 26. The Council of Elders, which was the first of many ruling councils established, was created to help the General Overseer

consider various theological and administrative questions. Please also see Stephenson, *Dismantling the Dualisms*, 26-28. For a general summary of the evolution of the Church of God's governmental structure, see Crews, "Christian Democracy," chap. 2 in *The Church of God*.

[43] A. J. Tomlinson, "A New One Started: Women to Keep Silent in Churches," *Church of God Evangel* 5, no. 17 (April 25, 1914): 3.

[44] Stephenson, *Dismantling the Dualisms*, 28. For an excellent summary of the narrowing of ministerial and leadership roles available to women in the early Church of God see Stephenson, "The Church of God." For more information on the women and ministry within the Church of God, please also see Roebuck, "I Have Done the Best I Could," 393-403, and "Perfect Liberty to Preach the Gospel," 25-32. See also Crews, "Your Daughters Shall Prophecy."

In the first section of Chapter 2 (2-2.1) in *Dismantling the Dualisms*, Stephenson offers a good, concise overview of women in ministry in the larger early Pentecostal movement. For an excellent monograph about female evangelists from the late nineteenth- through early twentieth-centuries, please see Priscilla Pope-Levinson, *Building the Old Time Religion: Women Evangelists in the Progressive Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2014). In *Holy Boldness: Women Preachers' Autobiographies and the Sanctified Self*, Susie C. Stanley offers an analysis of the autobiographies of 34 holiness women preachers during a similar time period as Pope-Levinson's work. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002). For an important discussion of the issue of women's ministering authority in early Pentecostalism please see Charles H. Barfoot and Gerald T. Sheppard, "Prophetic vs. Priestly Religion: The Changing Role of Women Clergy in Classical Pentecostal Churches," *Review of Religious Research* 22, no. 1 (September 1980): 2-17. For a critique and reassessment of Barfoot and Sheppard's article, please see Stephenson, "Prophesying Women and Ruling Men," 410-426. For an excellent overview of the recent scholarly trends in the study of women in American Pentecostal ministry see Stephenson, "Looking Back, Going Forward: Contemporary Works on American Pentecostal Women in Ministry," chap. 3 in *Dismantling the Dualisms*. Finally, although Catherine A. Brekus's famous monograph *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* focuses on the role of women preachers and leaders in evangelical movements over a century before the period of focus in this essay, it is vital reading for anyone interested in understanding of this larger pattern of female leadership and influence

narrowing as evangelical movements mature. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[45] Although somewhat uncommon, the *Evangel* published numerous letters from non-subscribers and non-members of the Church of God to demonstrate the far reach of their movement to readers. One example by John F. Davis expresses admiration for members of the Church of God, stating that “no more consecrated band of workers ever lived,” and reported an instance of serpent handling where “two of the most devout members were bitten,” but were unharmed in a “beautiful little temple on a neighboring hill in the wild woods.” “Red Bay, Ala.,” *Church of God Evangel* 9, no. 37 (September 14, 1918): 2.

[46] Griffith, “Female Suffering and Religious Devotion,” 187.

[47] Exie Hunt, “Received the Holy Ghost,” *Church of God Evangel* 11, no. 5 (January 1, 1920): 4.

[48] Mrs. C. B. West, “Believes it was Prayer that Helped,” *Church of God Evangel* 27, no. 24 (August 15, 1936): 14. In addition to the prayers of the subscribers, women in particular believed that the paper itself was a highly potent tool for healing. For example, in 1928, Mrs. J. S. Strickland wrote “I want to testify of the many things the Lord has done for me. He has saved, sanctified and filled me with the Holy Ghost. My baby took sick and had a very high fever. I laid the *Evangel* on her head and prayed and in a little while she was all right and got well. Everybody who sees this pray that I may be stronger and stay humble at the foot of the cross.” “Healed By Laying On The *Evangel*,” *Church of God Evangel* 19, no. 28 (July 14, 1928): 4. For two additional examples of female-authored accounts of healing by the laying on of the *Evangel*, see Mrs. Wiley Arnold, “Workers Needed,” *Church of God Evangel* 14, no. 35 (September 1, 1923) 2, and Mrs. Susan Gibsen, “Healed by Laying on an *Evangel*,” *Church of God Evangel* 15, no. 6 (February 9, 1924): 2.

[49] Griffith, “Female Suffering and Religious Devotion,” 195.

[50] Griffith, “Female Suffering and Religious Devotion,” 185.

[51] The phrase “signs following,” or “signs that follow,” and other variations was used by Pentecostals to invoke the beginning of Mark 16:17-18 (“And these signs shall follow them that believe...” Mark 16:17 (KJV)). The phrase is shorthand to reference the five Markan signs and to talk about the people that

those signs follow: true believers, because signs only manifest or “follow” true believers.

[52] Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 72.

[53] Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 5. “And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance,” Acts 2:4 (KJV).

[54] Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 1-3.

[55] Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 3.

[56] Mark 16:17-18 (KJV).

[57] Acts 2:17 (KJV).

[58] McVicar, “Take Away the Serpents from Us,” Part I.

[59] “Names of Ministers and Those who Attended Assembly,” in *Echoes from the Tenth General Assembly of the Churches of God Held at Cleveland, Tennessee, November 2-8, 1914* (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1914), 36-46.

[60] A. J. Tomlinson, “General Overseer’s Annual Address,” in *Echoes from the Tenth General Assembly of the Churches of God Held at Cleveland, Tennessee, November 2-8, 1914* (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1914), 15.

[61] McVicar, “Take Away the Serpents from Us,” Part I.

[62] Conn, *Like a Mighty Army*, rev. ed., 430, table 41, “Church of God Membership.”

[63] Conn, *Like a Mighty Army*, rev. ed., 431, table 41, “Church of God Membership.”

[64] Williamson and Hood calculate 483 membership gains in direct association with reports of serpent handling in the *Evangel*. “Differential Maintenance,” 157.

[65] Williamson and Hood, “Differential Maintenance,” 158.

[66] Articles that just referred to the practice in general or were reviewing its theological basis are not included in this count. Please also see note 7.

[67] Sarah York, “God’s Power is Not Limited,” *Church of God Evangel* 27, no. 8 (April 25, 1936): 13.

[68] Myrtle Whitehead, "Signs," *Church of God Evangel* 34, no. 40 (December 11, 1943): 7, 14. Although there are other fascinating and important accounts of, and interviews with, female serpent handlers from the 1930s in local secular newspapers like the *Chattanooga Daily Times*, I believe that they are outside the scope of this study. First, most of those secular articles and interviews were not with female members of the Church of God, who are the primary subjects of study. Second, the bulk of these articles on the practice are from a slightly later time period than this essay focuses on. These reports and interviews are primarily from the 1930s and onward, in large part due to the increased interest in the serpent handling after several Appalachian states passed laws against the practice. The inevitable conflicts between police, the legal system, and serpent handlers made for sensational stories and increased media interest. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the reason for excluding these primary sources from this study is because, in a sense, this essay is less about female serpent handlers themselves, but rather about analyzing how women understood, accepted, and propagated the practice through their devotional writing practices to their church's own newsletter.

[69] This number is almost certainly higher. As noted in the previous section, there are thousands and thousands of letters that were published in the *Evangel*; this number came from my review of *Evangel* letters detailed in note 6 and from a cursory search for these authors' names in the digital Dixon Pentecostal Research Center archive within the Consortium of Pentecostal Archives. Ida McCoy, Mrs. B. L. Shepard, and Fannie Duncan all submitted two reports each of serpent handling to the *Evangel* in addition to many other letters to the newsletter.

[70] The single letter praying for serpent handling in the *Evangel* was written by a woman, M. B. Pimberton. In her letter, Pimberton identified herself as a longtime reader, even though she was not yet formally a member of the Church of God. She wrote that she and her husband were the lone Holiness people in their community, but that there were a few others about five miles away. Due to the distance, however, they would all meet only once or twice a year, which Pimberton claimed "is not enough for a weakling like myself." She prayed "that God will send some good spirit-filled powerful preacher here... I am satisfied if there could be some signs here, such as taking up serpents and the like, many would be convinced at once." "Chilton, Ky.," *Church of God Evangel* 7, no. 53 (December 30, 1916): 4.

Prominent members could also write essays like Whitehead's piece "Signs." After Tomlinson's impeachment in 1923, the *Evangel* published far more

essays by members and evangelists in addition to ones written by the editors and church leadership. Essays, however, did not usually mention specific instances of serpent handling or handlers, which are the primary focus of this study, and due to the genre of writing, were less personal and more directly focused on doctrinal issues.

[71] Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 135. McVicar noted that instances of serpent handling tended to be concentrated in the months of July, August, and September because outdoor revivals, camp meetings, and homecomings were usually held in the summer. McVicar, "Take Away the Serpents from Us," n68.

[72] Two notable exceptions to this in which serpent handling occurs in a private, non-religious setting are J. O. Mauldin, "Hartwell, Ga.," *Church of God Evangel* 10, no. 27 (July 5, 1919): 2, and R. D. Atnipp, "Poplar Bluff, Mo.," *Church of God Evangel* 6, no. 35 (August 28, 1915): 2. In Mauldin's report, it is ambiguous where he manifested the sign, and in Atnipp's report, a woman called Sister Mefford initially handled a serpent in a religious setting during a worship service, but then decided to bring the animal home with her.

[73] Bettie Teems, "Armuchee, Ga.," *Church of God Evangel* 6, no. 22 (May 29, 1915): 2.

[74] Teems, "Armuchee, Ga.," 2.

[75] Teems, "Armuchee, Ga.," 2.

[76] For an example of a request for material support, please see G. T. Brouayer, "Southside, Tenn.," *Church of God Evangel* 6, no. 43 (October 23, 1915): 3. Brouayer requested prayers and money for a new revival tent. A few weeks later, he submitted a report from Texas where he mildly chastised the saints for only sending him a fraction of the money needed for the tent. See "Report From Ladonia, Texas," *Church of God Evangel* 8, no. 24 (June 23, 1917): 4. Brouayer was a prominent member of the Church of God and served on the Council of Elders until 1923 when he was impeached alongside Tomlinson. Conn, *Like a Mighty Army*, rev. ed., 405, table 4, "General Executive Committee." Although it is unknown whether Brouayer ever handled serpents, based on reports he authored and reports about him, serpent handling featured prominently at his services and meetings. For accounts of serpent handling at meetings he either led or assisted with, please see Brouayer, "Southside, Tenn.," and "Bonham Texas," *Church of God Evangel* 8, no. 18 (May 12, 1917): 4; "Report from Ladonia, Texas," and "Report," *Church of God Evangel* 8, no. 33 (August 25, 1917): 4, 2; "Died in the Faith," *Church of*

God Evangel 12, no. 19 (May 7, 1921): 1; and Nannie B. Hagwood, "Southside Tenn.," *Church of God Evangel* 7, no. 24 (June 10, 1916): 2. His daughter was a known serpent handler who suffered a bite in 1915 at an evangelistic service, but was uninjured. For a firsthand account of the incident please see S. W. Patterson, "Report from Sobel, Tenn.," *Church of God Evangel* 6, no. 38 (September 18, 1915): 4.

[77] Will Fish, "Report," *Church of God Evangel* 6, no. 30 (July 24, 1915): 3.

[78] To name just two examples of many—both from a single issue of the *Evangel*—of this type of passive construction where it is unclear whether the believers produced their own animals, or whether outsiders brought them to camp meetings and revivals to challenge the saints' faith, see C. C. Martin, "Hayesville, N.C.," *Church of God Evangel* 8, no. 37 (September 22, 1917): 2; and C. T. Morgan, "Walhalla, S.C.," *Church of God Evangel* 8, no. 37 (September 22, 1917): 4.

[79] Teems, "Armuchee, Ga.," 2.

[80] Pearl Auten, "Gastonia, N.C.," *Church of God Evangel* 7, no. 34 (August 19, 1916): 3; Corine Rowe, "One of His Children," *Church of God Evangel* 14, no. 22 (August 11, 1923): 3.

[81] Janet Moore Lindman, "Beyond the Meetinghouse: Women and Protestant Spirituality in Early America," in *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past*, ed. Catherine A. Brekus (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 149.

[82] McVicar, "Take Away the Serpents from Us," Part I.

[83] Alice Newell, "Let Jesus Fix It for You," *Church of God Evangel* 13, no. 38 (September 23, 1922): 4.

[84] Newell, "Let Jesus Fix It for You," 4.

[85] Newell, "Let Jesus Fix It for You," 4.

[86] Newell, "Let Jesus Fix It for You," 4.

[87] Newell, "Let Jesus Fix It for You," 4.

[88] Griffith, "Female Suffering and Religious Devotion," 190, 195.

[89] Newell, "Let Jesus Fix It for You," 4.

[90] Martin, "Hayesville, N.C.," 2.

[91] Martin, "Hayesville, N.C.," 2.

[92] W. H. Rogers, "Walhalla, S.C.," *Church of God Evangel* 7, no. 44 (October 28, 1916): 3. For two other excellent examples of a male-authored report where a single instance of serpent handling formed the dramatic, narrative center of a letter, please see A. L. Crisp, "Reports from the Field," *Church of God Evangel* 14, no. 50 (December 8, 1923): 3; and especially J. L. Scott, "Ridgedale, Tenn.," *Church of God Evangel* 7, no. 35 (August 26, 1916): 2.

[93] For three more excellent examples of woman-authored reports with elements of personal testimonies, please also see Atnipp, "Poplar Bluff, Mo.," 2; Hagwood, "Southside Tenn.," 2; and Corine Rowe, "One of His Children," *Church of God Evangel* 14, no. 32 (August 11, 1923): 3. For three examples of the less common, male-authored reports that possess elements of a testimony, please see T. F. McGuire, "Summerville, Ga.," *Church of God Evangel* 6, no. 22 (May 29, 1915): 4; J. O. Mauldin, "Hartwell, GA.," 2; James A. Kims, "I Am Glad I Learned to Trust Him," *Church of God Evangel* 23, no. 8 (April 23, 1932): 1. McGuire only mentioned serpent handling briefly in passing, and instead focused primarily on the raging and howling devil and past issues with his health. In the second example, Mauldin focused the majority of his short report on his son's miraculous healing from lock-jaw without medical aid. His impressive feat of personally handling six serpents in five weeks was relegated to the second, and last, paragraph. In the final example of male-authored reports that possessed elements of testimony, James A. Kims's letter, which also happens to be the second to last male-authored serpent handling report published in the *Evangel*, opened by "prais[ing] the dear Lord this afternoon for full salvation. I am ever glad I learned to trust Him for my healing. He has been my healer for nearly seven years. He has healed me every time, blessed be my Lord," before diving into an account of a meeting where he handed a serpent and helped convince members of the Assembly of God to join the Church of God.

[94] Ida McCoy, "Arley, Ala.," *Church of God Evangel* 7, no. 24 (June 10, 1916): 4; "Arley, Ala.," *Church of God Evangel* 7, no. 38 (September 16, 1916): 4.

[95] McCoy, "Arley, Ala.," September 16, 4.

[96] For one excellent example of a highly detailed man's report that is almost completely devoid of any descriptive language, please see J. F. Dover, "Report," *Church of God Evangel* 10, no. 20 (May 17, 1919): 3. Despite his use of the first person, Dover's lengthy account of an extensive evangelistic trip lacks any emotional elements. He writes, for example, "On Nov. 28, 1918, I started

out on an evangelistic trip through Alabama. I went first to the church at Bankhead on Lookout Mt., and concluded a two weeks meeting that resulted in four getting the blessed Holy Ghost and two sanctified. I then went to Birmingham and spent two weeks in that Dist. I visited the Church at Ensley, preached one sermon, and one man fell in the altar and was wonderfully restored to the Holy Ghost. From there I went to Empire and started a meeting but old satan [*sic*], in some way, hindered, as there was only one man who was restored to the Holy Ghost." In the remainder of Dover's long report, he recounted four more towns he traveled to and meetings he either led or assisted with, one of which included an instance of serpent handling.

[97] McCoy, "Arley, Ala.," September 16, 4.

[98] McCoy, "Arley, Ala.," September 16, 4.

[99] McCoy, "Arley, Ala.," September 16, 4. Notices from representatives for local churches asking for the addresses or personal information about individuals to inquire after their "spiritual condition" were quite common in the *Evangel*. Requests for mailing addresses between members and subscribers were slightly less common, but still occurred regularly within the pages of the newsletter either as notices taken out by a member asking for the address of another member, or, as McCoy did, as a postscript in a letter. Anecdotally, these requests for correspondence between individual members were slightly more common between women than between men.

Ida McCoy was a prominent member of the Church of God. She was a licensed (not ordained) minister and evangelist, who started several Churches of God, frequently donated to church causes like the orphanage or the expansion of the publishing house, attended the Bible Training School, wrote several popular religious songs for the church, published religious booklets, and spearheaded the memorable presentation of a handmade "mission quilt" at a General Assembly dedicated to the churches and workers abroad. Rev. R. J. Johnson, "Rev. Mrs. Ida McCoy Passes to Her Reward," *Church of God Evangel* 43, no. 15 (June 7, 1952): 9. See also Ida McCoy, "Neglected Themes and Helpful Hints," *Church of God Evangel* 20, no. 4 (March 23, 1929): 4. McCoy was not only a prolific reporter of evangelistic efforts and meetings, she also was a noted interpreter of dreams and visions, which was perhaps why members sought her correspondence in particular. There are several instances where the *Evangel* published an account of a dream accompanied by McCoy's interpretation as well as a handful of essays penned by her. She also worked at the publishing house for a brief period in

1935. "McCoy," *Church of God Evangel* 26, no. 14 (June 1, 1935): 4. For examples of McCoy's dream interpretation, see Cordia Collier and Ida McCoy, "A Dream and Interpretation," *Church of God Evangel* 11, no. 37 (September 11, 1920): 2; and W. A. Baxley and Ida McCoy, "Copy of Letters – Interpretation," *Church of God Evangel* 12, no. 13 (March 26, 1921): 3. For McCoy's essays, see "A Sacrifice Acceptable," *Church of God Evangel* 11, no. 46 (November 20, 1920): 1.

[100] The last issue where Tomlinson is listed as editor and publisher was *Church of God Evangel* 13, no. 45 (November 18, 1922). In the following issue, J. S. Llewellyn was listed as editor, and Tomlinson published an essay titled "When the Harvest is Harvested," in which he outlined his transition to editor of the Church of God's long-form magazine, *The Faithful Standard*, which would separate from the publishing house to "relieve the house of some of its burdens." *Church of God Evangel* 13, no. 47 (December 9, 1922): 1. Tomlinson's abrupt departure from the *Evangel*, which he had founded and run for over a decade, hinted at some of the tensions within the Church of God leadership. Six months later, on June 26, 1923, Tomlinson was impeached and replaced as General Overseer by F. J. Lee, the Florida state overseer. "Concurred Action," in *Minutes of the Eighteenth Annual Assembly of the Churches of God Held at Cleveland, Tenn., November 1-7, 1923* (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1923) 28-30. For more details on Tomlinson's messy departure from the Church of God in 1923, please see Crews, *Church of God*, 23-31; Conn, "Onward to Sorrow," chap. 16, and "Through the Valley," chap. 17 in *Like a Mighty Army*, rev. ed.

[101] Crews, *The Church of God*, 91; McVicar, "Take Away the Serpents from Us," Part II.

[102] Conn, *Like a Mighty Army*, rev. ed., 405, table 4, "General Executive Committee," and 407, table 5, "The Executive Council."

[103] J. B. Ellis, "Oneonta, Ala.," *Church of God Evangel* 5, no. 36 (May 9, 1914): 8. M.S. Lemons in "A Misappropriation of His Power" wrote that although "weak men" cannot misappropriate God's power for "illegal purposes"—implying that he thought that serpent handling in specific circumstances was a legitimate miracle—also expressed concern that some had gotten "the cart before the horse." He wrote that people were trying to follow the signs by taking up serpents, instead of letting the signs manifest on their own—a "misappropriation" of divine power. *Church of God Evangel* 10, no. 18 (May 3, 1919): 3.

[104] S. J. Heath, "Signs Following Believers," *Church of God Evangel* 19, no. 30 (July 28, 1928): 3.

[105] Heath, "Signs Following Believers," 3.

[106] Heath, "Signs Following Believers," 3.

[107] "Report of Question Committee," *Minutes of the Twenty Third Annual Assembly of the Churches of God Held at the Church of God Auditorium Cleveland Tennessee, October 22-28, 1928* (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1928), 42.

[108] McVicar "Take Away the Serpents from Us," Part II; Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 72-73.

[109] In Sarafan, "The Women and the Word," Appendix III, please see specifically Bill Emmons and Wife, "Rattlesnake Handled Under God's Power," *Church of God Evangel* 20, no. 19 (July 6, 1929): 4.

[110] Florence Long, "Sale Creek, Tenn.," *Church of God Evangel* 6, no. 34 (August 21, 1915): 3; Mansfield, "Crab Orchard, Tenn.," 2; Mrs. B. L. Shepherd, "Report.," *Church of God Evangel* 9, no. 40 (October 5, 1918): 3; Mrs. Frank Dasher, "Serpents Handled," *Church of God Evangel* 21, no. 34 (October 18, 1930): 4; and Sarah York, "God's Power is Not Limited," *Church of God Evangel* 27, no. 8 (April 25, 1936): 13. See also Sarafan, "The Women and the Word," Appendix II, 152.

Although this number of female-authored firsthand accounts may seem low, there were not many first-hand accounts written by men either. There were only ten accounts in the *Evangel* written by serpent handling men; in order of publishing date please see G. R. Miller, "Report from Dividing Ridge, Tenn.," *Church of God Evangel* 6, no. 44 (October 30, 1915): 4; J. L. Scott, "Ridgedale, Tenn.," *Church of God Evangel* 7, no. 35 (August 26, 1916): 2; W. A. Capshaw, "Erastus, N.C.," *Church of God Evangel* 8, no. 31 (August 11, 1917): 2; Mauldin, "Hartwell, Ga.," 2; J. Nance, "Wonderful Power," *Church of God Evangel* 11, no. 44 (October 30, 1920): 3; L. G. Rouse, "Good Blessing in W. Virginia," *Church of God Evangel* 15, no. 33 (August 30, 1924), 3; L. G. Rouse, "Mouth of Gainsayers Stopped," *Church of God Evangel* 15, no. 47 (December 13, 1924), 4; J. A. Muncy, "The Lord Blessing Kentucky Saints," *Church of God Evangel* 16, no. 30 (July 25, 1925): 1; Kims, "I Am Glad I Learned to Trust Him," 1; E. B. Culpepper, "Snake Handled," *Church of God Evangel* 24, no. 4 (March 25, 1933): 1, 31.

York, "God's Power is Not Limited," 13.

[111] Williamson and Hood, "Differential Maintenance," 159; Sarafan, "The Women and the Word," Appendix III, 153-156; Shepherd, "Report.," 3; York, "God's Power is Not Limited," 13.

[112] Please see Sarafan, "The Women and the Word," Appendix II, 152.

[113] See Sarafan, "The Women and the Word," Appendix II, 152. There are several reports where women took up serpents that included their numbers, but not their names, detailed in Appendix II. Henry Kinsey's report, however, references an unknown, unnamed number of "sisters" who took up serpents and therefore was not included in this account of individual, but unnamed, female serpent handlers. "Report," *Church of God Evangel* 7, no. 32 (August 5, 1916): 3.

[114] For a discussion of how men wrote about female serpent handlers in their reports to the *Evangel*, see Sarafan, "The Women and the Word," 98-102. See note 72 for information on the two instances where serpent handling occurred outside of a service.

[115] Lindman, "Beyond the Meetinghouse," 149.

[116] Mansfield, "Crab Orchard, Tenn.," 2.

[117] Mansfield, "Crab Orchard, Tenn.," 2.

[118] Mansfield, "Crab Orchard, Tenn.," 2.

[119] Long, "Sale Creek, Tenn.," 3; Shepherd, "Report," 3; and Dasher, "Serpents Handled," 4.

[120] York, "God's Power is Not Limited," 13.

[121] The other letter overtly defending serpent handling by a female serpent handler was by Mrs. Frank Dasher. She reported the events of a revival led by brother G. G. Jones at her local church. The meeting lasted from August 18 through August 31 where on "the Sunday afternoon before the meeting closed, two serpents were taken to the church and were handled successfully for the glory of God. The writer was among those to handle one." Dasher, "Serpents Handled," 4. Dasher called the experience of taking up serpents "joy unspeakable" and took this deeply personal and powerful experience of taking up serpents into a vehicle to directly advocate and defend the sign if the Church of God were to continue to "grow in wisdom and knowledge of God." In comparison to York, however, Dasher's defense was rather subdued

—but not weak—which perhaps speaks to the fact that Dasher wrote only two years after the male leaders began to turn against the practice, not nearly a decade after as York did in 1936. The second to last serpent handling report published in the *Evangel* was by Gladys Robertson. Although she did not take up serpents herself, Robertson’s report is another excellent example of a fairly overt defense of serpent handling by an eye-witness at the end of the movement within the Church of God. See “Snake Handled at Odum, Ga.,” *Church of God Evangel* 26, no. 27 (August 31, 1935): 9, 15.

[122] York, “God’s Power is Not Limited,” 13.

[123] York, “God’s Power is Not Limited,” 13.

[124] York, “God’s Power is Not Limited,” 13.

[125] McVicar “Take Away the Serpents from Us,” Part III.

[126] McVicar “Take Away the Serpents from Us,” Part III, quoting Burton, *Serpent-Handling Believers*, 81; Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 214.

[127] For more on serpent handling and the legal system, please see Burton, “Serpent Handlers in Tennessee Courts,” chap. 5 in *Serpent-Handling Believers; The Serpent and the Spirit: Glenn Summerford’s Story* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004); Hood and Williamson, “Serpent Handling and the Law,” chap. 12 in *Them That Believe*, 208-225; David L. Kimbrough and Ralph W. Hood, Jr., “Carson Springs and the Persistence of Serpent Handling Despite the Law,” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1995): 45-65; W. Paul Williamson and Ralph W. Hood, Jr., “Religious Serpent Handling and Community Relations,” *Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community* 43, no. 3 (2015): 186-198.

[128] For an index of deaths by serpent bite please see Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 239-245, appendix I, “Deaths by Serpent Bite.” Hood and Williamson argued that deaths due to serpent handling were underreported prior to the 1930s. They posited that “the media began documenting deaths only after the tradition started gaining notoriety from maiming and deaths.” Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 245. The earliest documented death from a serpent bite included in Hood and Williamson’s index appears in the *Evangel* in 1922. Interestingly, in this report, the author, James N. Griffith, took great pains to emphasize that the man who died from a snake bite was “never a member of the Church of God,” and that “the devil is a liar and the father of lies so he just has to tell lies,” which indicates that even as early as 1922, the Church of God was well aware of the potential liability that deaths of their

members caused and sought to distance themselves from such incidents. "Report was False," *Church of God Evangel* 13, no. 36 (September 9, 1922): 2. For an excellent discussion of the secular media, serpent handling, and the pathologization of the serpent handlers themselves in the American consciousness, please see McVicar "Take Away the Serpents from Us," Part III.

[129] Griffith, "Female Suffering and Religious Devotion," 204.

[130] Griffith, "Female Suffering and Religious Devotion," 204.

[131] Mrs. J. H. Mull, "Signs that Follow Believers," *Church of God Evangel* 12, no. 33 (August 13, 1921): 4.

[132] Mull, "Signs that Follow Believers," 4.