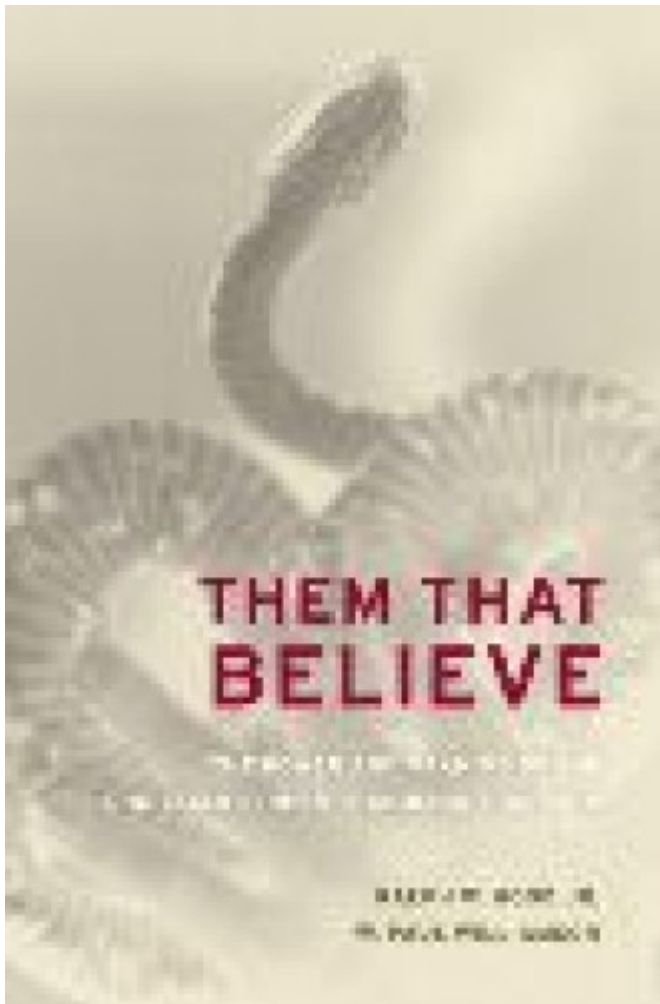


Them That Believe: The Power and Meaning of the Christian Serpent-Handling Tradition

reviewed by [Matthew Avery Sutton](#) in the [August 11, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Them That Believe: The Power and Meaning of the Christian Serpent-Handling Tradition

Ralph W. Hood Jr. and W. Paul Williamson

University of California Press

What does it mean to have faith? Is it knowing that God has provided a sacrifice to atone for our sins, or is it believing that the bread and wine represent the body and blood of Christ? Is it a sense of empowerment that comes from being filled with the Holy Spirit, or is it discovering the ability to speak in tongues? Or is faith believing that God wants you to handle deadly snakes and drink poison, and then doing it?

For a small group of Christians, located mostly in the Appalachian region, faith encompasses all of the above. Ralph W. Hood Jr. and W. Paul Williamson's *Them That Believe* explores the faith tradition of serpent-handling men and women. These Christians justify their style of worship on the basis of Mark 16:17-18, which reads, in the King James version, "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." The snake handlers see no ambiguity in these verses. Jesus has called his disciples, all of them, to handle snakes. According to Hood and Williamson, "What appears to the casual observer as a dangerous and bizarre activity is a simple act of obedience that holds great significance and meaning for believers." They can no more conceive of their faith "without this practice than Catholic believers could conceive of Catholicism without the Eucharist."

The faithful are quick to add that there is no guarantee in the scriptures that they will not be bitten. Indeed, Hood and Williamson list 89 documented cases of death from snake bites and nine fatalities from drinking poison. In addition, many snake handlers suffer nonfatal bites, some many times. Nevertheless, the snake-handling tradition continues. Believers understand serpent handling to be a literal confrontation with and an overcoming of death. The "handlers hold death and life in their hands. . . . If the serpent does not kill, death has been denied; if the serpent does kill, death has been overcome."

The snake-handling tradition grew out of American Pentecostalism, specifically Pentecostals' emphasis on supernatural signs as evidence of God's presence in their lives. The most famous early snake handler was George Went Hensley, who began handling rattlesnakes in the early 1910s. By 1914, Hensley had introduced various church leaders to the practice of snake handling, inspiring unknown numbers of Christians in the Appalachian region. But it did not take long for most Pentecostal

churches to reject the practice. The authors argue that this rejection was motivated primarily by Pentecostals' desire to build the movement and to blend into the mainstream, not by an honest or consistent examination of scripture. The few who kept the snake-handling faith alive in the face of modernity are the heroes of this book.

Contemporary snake-handling church services begin in fairly typical fashion. Congregants enter the church building, greeting each other with handshakes, hugs and chitchat. As the service starts, a minister welcomes the congregation and then encourages everyone to obey the Spirit of God. The leader then announces that serpents (usually rattlesnakes, copperheads or water moccasins) have been brought into the church. They are placed in handcrafted boxes near the pulpit. In some churches, a jar of poison (usually strychnine) is also placed near the front. The pastor reminds everyone of the obvious: "There is death in these boxes." Prayers are offered, followed by music and singing. Then, "what seems at first to be a cacophonous exhibition soon gives rise to a synchrony of living worship. . . . Suddenly, and without an nouncement, someone moves toward one of the special wooden boxes, unlatches the lid, and calmly extracts a venomous serpent. . . . Other serpents are taken out and passed among the obedient." The serpents are eventually returned to the boxes and worship concludes.

Hood and Williamson, both of whom are professors of psychology, based this book on extensive research, including 15 years of participant observation in snake-handling churches (although they did not handle snakes themselves). They are very sympathetic to their subjects, and the book actually becomes a defense of serpent handlers. As the authors acknowledge from the outset, they hope that their work will lead readers "to a greater appreciation of what is arguably America's most intriguing form of religious expression." They marshal the tools of history, anthropology and psychology to examine the tradition from every possible angle, looking at the religious rituals, the sexual symbolism of the snake, the meaning of the Pentecostal "anointing," and various efforts to outlaw the practice. This is an excellent introduction to what is certainly one of the most fascinating religious practices in the U.S.

Hood and Williamson almost persuaded me to rethink my skepticism toward the serpent-handling tradition. As I read, I found myself drawn into the lives of the snake handlers, inspired by the faith of the believers and even convinced that snake handling might be the ultimate act of faith—until I saw the photographs included in

the middle of the book. Moving from the authors' compelling defense of the tradition to pictures of men and women handling venomous snakes in worship brought me back to reality. No amount of academic theorizing can change the simple fact that these are people playing with deadly snakes in church. Even more disturbing was the photo of a child holding a rubber snake at the back of a church service. In just a few years, venomous rattlesnakes may well be slithering over his arms during worship, ready to strike. These images resurrected all of the negative reactions to the snake-handling tradition that I had when I began the book. If snake handling is a sign of true faith, I thought, God may not be worth our worship.

Yet in the back of my mind, I keep hearing Hood and Williamson's comparison of snake handling to the story of Abraham and Isaac. Is it really that hard to believe that a God who would ask a father to kill his son would also ask his disciples to handle poisonous snakes as an act of faith? I don't know. I guess I am just not one of them that believe.