

“Ritual Liberation and Suppression” Unit at AAR/SBL 2025

Serpents, Social Norms, and Good-Ole Southern Communitas:

A Theoretical Approach to Appalachian Serpent Handling

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Hello, and thank you for coming.

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The man in this photograph is Chris Wolford's brother, Randy. He was bitten during a service in Jolo, West Virginia... He refused an ambulance... Hours later, he was dead.

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I was not there that night, but I have spent time with his brother, Chris, who still lifts serpents in worship.

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Each time he does, the images and videos I've seen return—bodies collapsing to the floor, faces contorted in agony, blood pooling on the church's wooden boards, the frantic prayers rising above it all. In these moments, after the bite, the line between faith and fatality narrows to a point where they finally meet. For Chris, that moment is sacred. For me, it is unbearable. Between us lies a theology I am still trying to understand.

In the hills and hollers of Appalachia, small Pentecostal congregations still gather to “take up serpents” as a sign of faith. The practice, rooted in early twentieth-century Holiness and Pentecostal traditions, draws on a literal reading of Mark 16:17–18—that believers “shall take up serpents” and “it shall not hurt them.” Services unfold in cramped wooden churches and tin-roofed tents: guitars droning, tambourines rattling, worshippers testifying until the Spirit moves.

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When it does, believers may take up venomous snakes, drink poison, or hold open flames, not as spectacle but as proof that divine power can still overcome mortal harm.

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For outsiders, these scenes often appear as relics of a distant Appalachian past. Yet among the handlers I have come to know, they are anything but archaic. They are living arguments about what it means to trust, to risk, and to live faithfully in a world obsessed with safety.

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Among Appalachian serpent handlers, the truest test of faith comes not when the serpent is lifted, but after it strikes. The moment after the bite—when believers truly surrender their lives to God rather than seek medical aid—marks the height of spiritual freedom.

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This paper argues that serpent handling fundamentally reimagines liberation as peril. It proposes a theology of risk in which true spiritual freedom is not achieved through protection, control, or the minimization of danger, but realized precisely through total, voluntary exposure to it.

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The refusal of medicine, then, is not passive fatalism but a live, conscious rejection of the nearly guaranteed safety that modernity offers.

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In embracing danger as divine, serpent handlers enact a radical inversion of modern values—placing risk, not safety, at the center of spiritual life. Far from an archaic remnant, serpent handling is a contemporary practice that locates divine presence precisely where modern life seeks to eliminate risk.

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Mortal peril serves as the highest form of the grammar of belonging. In one of my conversations with Chris, I asked if I—or anyone else—could ever understand what it feels like to handle a serpent.

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He told me some handlers say NASCAR drivers probably get the closest.

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Then he laughed and said, “That may be the closest, but there sure ain’t nothin’ really like it.” These words stay with me. “Nothin’ really like it.” An unbridgeable distance between knowing about the practice and feeling what it means to surrender your body to it.

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Among handlers, the truest test of faith begins not when the serpent is lifted, but when it strikes. The refusal of medicine is not simply a matter of ignorance—it is a conscious rejection of nearly guaranteed modern safety.

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Serpent handling is not about conquering fear but about a surrender so total that faith and fear become indistinguishable.

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In this bounded choice, freedom manifests through obedience, revealing how serpent handlers invert modern freedom: rejecting control and safety in favor of peril as the highest form of liberation.

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A handler being bitten is a complicated moment, for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the wording in Mark 16 explicitly states: “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.”

If any of you would like to check these verses for yourselves and happen not to have a Bible on you, there's only one option. As Billy Summerford, a prominent handler, once put it: “Always get you a King James Version.”

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Why the King James? Semantic and theological importance. The language is nostalgic, formal, and carries historical weight. Handlers, in every moment, must adhere to what they see as the original, uncompromised word of God.

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Yet even this is not without complication. During one of his sermons, Chris mentioned that he'd learned from a Bible scholar—the longer ending of Mark, the one that includes the serpent verses—was a later addition. This knowledge circulates in the community. It does not undo faith; it reframes it.

Chris actually wanted to thank, in his words, “y’all biblical scholars. Y’all are much smarter than me. I woulda never known it was a later addition, but that’s just another miracle. My God can add to that Scripture anytime he likes.” Congratulations, biblical scholars—textual criticism finally found a fan.

That moment captures what I mean by a theology of risk: even the revelation that the text itself has shifted becomes another site of divine power, not its diminishment. Faith does not resist modern knowledge—it absorbs it, then dares it to matter.

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“These signs shall follow them that believe... they shall take up serpents... it shall not hurt them.” The paradox presented—if a handler is bitten, it requires some explanation. The stakes are heightened if a handler was bitten and they die. The *why* of this varies, different depending on who gets bitten, who you ask, and when you ask.

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Answers vary, and these are interpretations I’ve heard from handlers themselves. Sometimes it’s said to be the handler’s fault—they may have unaddressed sin, hesitation, or doubt. Other times, the audience is implicated—someone present may have faltered in faith, or carried unconfessed sin. Occasionally, the responsibility might even be traced to an outsider like me: could my doubt or presence influence the outcome?

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The stakes here are absolute.

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Each bite is a site of intense mutual accountability, where lives are bound to the moral vigilance of the community. And yet, despite the myriad explanations, one answer consistently emerges: it was God's plan. The promise is never wrong, but the bite is never random.

Absolute determinism. Conclude from this what you want. From the outside, we may see this as a variety of things.

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For skeptics, it's theological gymnastics from fanatics retreating, designed to deflect. For those sympathetic, it's a return to "true, authentic religion."

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As an immediate observer, I have come to find that the moment of greatest freedom a handler can choose stems from an obligatory surrender.

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There is a choice that can be made no other way—a choice the handler makes, and continues to make, as the venom winds through the bloodstream.

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In that moment, the body's primal instinct to live contends with the soul's consent to die.

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The refusal of any secular intervention echoes the choice made by the “forefather” of serpent handling, George Hensley—but the stakes of that refusal have intensified over time. We can trace this evolution through three cases: Hensley himself, Randy Wolford, and Chris Wolford.

Across these lives, the theology of peril unfolds—from Hensley's defiant faith, to Randy's fatal encounter, and finally to Chris's ongoing, living negotiation of risk. Each instance illuminates how surrender to mortal danger remains central to the practice, even as its consequences shift with history and context.

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To understand how this theology of peril first took shape, we turn to George Hensley, the forefather of Appalachian serpent handling. His life reads like a catalog of the improbable: a former moonshiner, at times a fugitive, a self-taught preacher who was illiterate and relied on divine revelation.

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He was a trouble magnet, married multiple times, known for quoting scripture and cursing the government in the same breath. He would laugh in the face of death and preach with a conviction that makes you forget he never attended seminary.

Every element of his life seems designed to test limits—his own and others’—and to crystallize a faith defined through daring peril

Hensley’s snake-handling origin story has the weight of legend. While living as a member of a local Church of God, he struggled with doubts about the authenticity of his faith. He became fixated on the serpent

verses in Mark—but troubled by the implication, who wouldn't be?—and retreated to a mountain to pray.

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There, he encountered a rattlesnake. In that moment, he felt divinely empowered to lift it—and was not bitten. This encounter confirmed, for Hensley, that God called him to this practice. From that mountain, the template for Appalachian serpent handling began to take shape.

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I should note that Hensley's origin story is contested. His second wife claimed he borrowed the idea from someone else, and scholars corroborate that he likely encountered the practice at a revival service as a youth. He also claimed to have been bitten over 400 times, most without ill effect.

Whether every detail is true is beside the point.

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What matters is that his life crystallizes a theology of risk: the conviction that the greatest faith is proven through choosing to submit to mortal peril.

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Hensley's repeated bites culminated in a defining moment that would shape the template for future handlers. In 1955, during a series of services in Florida, he brought out a five-foot Eastern Diamondback rattlesnake. Handling it with practiced ease—wrapping it around his neck, brushing it against his face—he preached to the congregation. Toward the end, as he returned the snake to its can, it bit him on the wrist.

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In the hours that followed, Hensley enacted the template that future handlers would follow. He continued preaching even as vomiting, skin discoloration, and intense pain forced him to stop. Congregants—and even the local sheriff—urged him to seek medical aid. He refused, spending the night in agony, consciously choosing service through suffering, and died the next morning.

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His death was legally declared a suicide, which I find worth noting. It was a devotion complete—but not a “choice” to die, for that was never his to make. Here, liberation is not the absence of danger, but its embrace: a theology of risk defining faith by what it dares to expose itself to, rather than what it shields against.

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In those hours, Hensley embodied the bounded choice—the moment when the freedom to surrender eclipses all other options. His refusal was not only devotion but a declaration that faith cannot coexist with control.

Hensley’s case demonstrates that the theology of freedom through surrender to mortal peril is not a single decision, but one renewed with every moment of suffering after a bite. As symptoms worsen, the refusal of medical treatment grows increasingly irrational.

One handler described it as feeling “your life slipping away by the second.” Hensley could have sought care and perhaps preached the next day—but in his case, the choice was not his to make; it was God’s.

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The handler has the freedom to surrender to God—but cannot choose otherwise. Freedom exists only insofar as it manifests as obedience. This forms a grammar of belonging reserved for those who make that choice.

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It is one thing to be in the room; another to lift the serpent. Many have done the latter, but the truest signifier lies with those who, after the bite, surrender fully—entrusting their bodies to a divine, unknowable outcome.

They become like martyrs, though whether they live or die is almost beside the point.

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The bounded choice I describe is absolute, not gradual. To surrender is total—no halfway faith exists. Even tending the wound or reaching for

help can signify a loss of surrender. In this moral grammar, one act determines the whole. Each decision is final because it reveals the boundary where faith ends and fear begins.

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To see how this theology of peril persists, we turn to the Welford brothers—Randy, whose death is seared into both community memory and digital media, and Chris, who continues to lift serpents despite it.

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Both men, as teenagers, watched along as their father was bitten. He refused medical care and died shortly after.

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With that in mind, and the stories of their own bites, I hope to advance my claim that the theology of risk I'm proposing has evolved, and the stakes have become higher over time.

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I started this presentation by showing you this image of Randy being carried to a car.

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In 2012, Randy was handling a rattlesnake he had had for a few years, named “Old Yeller.” At some point in the service, he was bitten.

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Randy refused to call an ambulance, until right before his death when a family member convinced him to let them call for one, but it was too late. His refusal of care, like his father’s before him, was a conscious defiance of safety itself.

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Chris’s story complicates the theology further: survival becomes another test of divine agency, not a failure of faith. Chris, the pastor I have come to know best, has been bitten many times. The incident I will focus on is one he and I have discussed most, also documented by the Sun.

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In 2019, a rattlesnake bite spread venom rapidly, constricting his lungs. After about thirty minutes, he lost consciousness. Up until that point, he had refused medical treatment, fully enacting the bounded choice that defines his faith.

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Chris told me that while he was unconscious, members of the congregation took him to the hospital. He spent 13 days on life support, underwent ten surgeries, and his arm remains partly paralyzed. Yet his survival does not undo the theology of peril—it affirms it.

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Even when others intervened, his own submission—his bounded choice—remained intact. He is a living martyr: each bite renews the act of surrender, a death and rebirth enacted in this life or the next.

There are a few things I want to highlight about these two cases, that illustrate the *how* this ultimate freedom through submission to mortal peril is actually achieved—and how it has evolved from Hensley to the present.

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The natural starting place is the handling of serpents. For handlers around Hensley's time, stories of bites and deaths were passed around and occasionally documented in newspapers or obituaries.

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In the present age of media, numerous videos and images exist demonstrating the gruesome nature of a serpent bite. There is a graphic video of a pastor, Cody Coots, nearly dying from a bite. The videos are grotesque—blood flowing freely from his neck—and they have been seen by handlers like Chris.

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The death of his brother is also publicly documented, and Chris has seen all of the photos and articles that exist. This is not ignorance, but heightened awareness. It is explicit, fatal knowledge of what this choice means.

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The refusal of medical care, I argue, that Hensley did—is not the same refusal as the one Randy made, and Chris continues to make. On the slide, you can see a “snake-bite kit” from the 1940s. This was the rejection Hensley was making: rudimentary, often ineffective medical aid.

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Today, if these men rushed to the hospital after a bite, they would likely recover within minutes. With accessible ambulances, stocked antivenom, wound vacuums, and skilled doctors, the refusal of care is far more radical than ever.

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The bounded choice is no longer constrained by limited resources or dubious medical efficacy—it is made in direct, knowing defiance of technological capability. Their choice is maximally radicalized because their awareness of the alternative is total.

In both Woford cases, medical care was eventually involved—Chris even went to the hospital.

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Yet the theological logic remains intact: neither man made the choice themselves.

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Randy was persuaded on his deathbed to allow someone else to call, though it was too late. Chris was not taken until he lost consciousness and others acted for him. Even now, he credits God, saying that it was divine will that he survived long enough to make the decision himself.

For either man, to doubt God's plan in that moment would have been unthinkable dangerous—the stakes of trust are literal matters of life and death.

That conviction became painfully real for me the night of my first service.

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Look at them—they were so excited, unaware of the ethical ocean they were about to wade into.

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I was asked not to call an ambulance if someone was bitten. I agreed, telling myself I was respecting the community's autonomy, honoring their spiritual and legal boundaries. Even now, I wrestle with that choice.

What would I have done if someone were bitten and I did nothing? Is my silence an act of witnessing, or of letting death unfold untouched?

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That request places me in the same paradox I am advancing: freedom sustained through extreme surrender. To remain, I had to relinquish my instinct to intervene, submit my moral reflexes to their order.

Participation, even as an observer, demands more than intellectual sympathy—it demands complicity in potential tragedy. In the field, my role mirrors their faith: surrendering control, trusting a moral order not my own.

If you had been bitten on the hand when I began this talk, you would now be losing feeling in your arm. The venom would have reached your chest; breathing will become difficult. Over the next few minutes, some organs may begin to fail. This is the timescale of their faith—the measure between devotion and death.

The highest *good*, if you will, in this world is that decision you all would have made for the last few minutes. If you pick up a snake, you may, or may not be bitten.

If you have been bitten, there are very real chances you die, and a guarantee you will suffer. You do not know how long you will suffer, and you don't know if it will ever end.

Present in your mind is the knowledge that this could end as soon as you dialed 911, but you cannot.

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This is a community that has witnessed more death and suffering than I could ever put into words.

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It could end tomorrow. They could stop handling snakes, or at the very least stock up on antivenom. This, however, will not occur. But is it

because they cannot, because they will not? Or will not, because they cannot?

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It is a bounded choice, one that is elevated as the highest form of submission to God, but also one they could not have made any other way.

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This is the paradox of serpent handling. They are maximally free to choose their fate and salvation, only when they are minimally free to act against their prescribed obedience—the freedom is in the choice to be bound.

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In every generation—from Hensley's first act of peril to Chris Welford's continued defiance—this theology of risk reimagines what liberation means: freedom not from danger, but within it.

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In the end, it is not the lifted serpent that stays with me, but the trembling hands that refuse to let go—their freedom found not in safety, but in the slow, deliberate surrender to what may very well kill them.

And when death comes.

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They still sing the old mountain hymn: ‘Will the circle be unbroken, by and by, Lord, by and by? There’s a better home a-waiting, in the sky, Lord, in the sky.’ The song is not about certainty but continuity—the hope that what is broken in this life might hold together in the next.

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Perhaps the circle was never meant to be unbroken at all. The faithful repetition of bounded choices, carried through each surrender, remade each time faith meets the bite of the serpent. The strength of the circle lies not in its perfection, but in its return—the serpent lifted, the song sung, the risk renewed. Faith circles back to peril, and peril to faith, until the two are the same.

If you had been bitten when I began, you'd feel your life slipping away
by now. And still, they would be singing.

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Thank you