

# Learning How to Read

Contra Costa Gospel Church  
Adult Sunday School

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Text Before Event 5

For our time today, we will work in small groups to employ the skills we have learned so far in this class. Specifically, the skill of the second main principle of Biblical interpretation will be practiced. What does that main principle tell us?

Don't \_\_\_\_\_ the event in \_\_\_\_\_. The event always has its place in the \_\_\_\_\_.

Our Class Example Today:

## 5) Speaking in tongues in the Book of Acts

When we think of the Early Church, the fledgling group of believers brought together by a shared belief in Jesus as the risen Son of God, oftentimes we associate this group with the regular practice of what we would call today, “the Charismatic gifts.” Speaking in tongues, miracles, words of prophecy, etc. These are the “signs and wonders” that are often associated with particular strands of Evangelical Christianity today (the aforementioned Charismatics, Assemblies of God, Pentecostals) and we often imagine these were regularly practiced by the primitive Christian church as well. Is that really the case? We will take a look specifically at the practice of speaking in tongues.

A quick search of the word “γλῶσσαι” (transliterated “glōssa,” meaning tongue) in the Book of Acts yields a very interesting results. It actually only occurs six times, in three contexts. Furthermore, four of the six times are all in the same story and thus should really be considered as one combined occurrence, meaning that in reality, tongues only pops up in the book three times. Let’s look at each of these.

### Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11)

The first time we see tongues is on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit comes upon the believers for the first time. Up until now they did not experience the Holy Spirit like this since Jesus was with them and the Holy Spirit was not sent yet. However, after Jesus’ ascension, the Holy Spirit was given to the people on this day. It is noted that those who received the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues were already believers of Jesus *before* they received the Holy Spirit.

### At Cornelius’ House (Acts 10:1-48)

In this second occurrence of γλῶσσαι in the Book of Acts, for the first time Gentile converts into faith in Jesus received the gift of the Holy Spirit in the presence of Peter and the other “circumcised believers” (i.e. Jewish believers; v. 45). This was to their astonishment since up until this point, the Christian church consisted predominantly of Jewish converts to Christianity. It is again noted that those who received the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues were already believers of Jesus *before* they received the Holy Spirit.

### Paul at Ephesus (Acts 19:1-12)

The final occurrence of γλῶσσαι in the Book of Acts involves a group of believers in Ephesus, in what is now Turkey. Paul came across some disciples of Jesus who were water baptized, but in “John’s baptism,” and not in the name of Jesus. They had yet to receive the Holy Spirit despite the fact that they were believers. Thus, Paul baptized them again in the name of Jesus and immediately the Holy Spirit came upon them and they spoke in tongues. It is again noted that those who received the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues were already believers of Jesus *before* they received the Holy Spirit.

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What do we make of these three occurrences? When we take these stories out of any kind of literary context and make no attempt to incorporate them into the larger narrative of the book, what conclusions do we arrive at as to the meaning of the stories?

The Assemblies of God, an American Pentecostal denomination, makes this kind of theological statement, largely from the events we have just read. Their statement reads: “All believers are entitled to and should ardently expect and earnestly seek the promise of the Father, the baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire, according to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ. *This was the normal experience of all in the early Christian Church* (emphasis mine). With it comes the enduement of power for life and service, the bestowment of the gifts and their uses in the work of the ministry. This experience is distinct from and subsequent to the experience of the new birth... The baptism of believers in the Holy Spirit is witnessed by the initial physical sign of speaking with other tongues as the Spirit of God gives them utterance” (<https://ag.org/Beliefs/Statement-of-Fundamental-Truths#7>).

In your groups, discuss the following questions:

- 1) Is the Assemblies of God denomination right in its conclusions based on the events that we read? Why or why not? And if you think it is wrong, how would you refute its interpretation based on the events in the Book of Acts?
  
- 2) Think back to our study of Acts when we examined the choosing of Matthias to replace Judas in the group of 12 Apostles. We discussed the larger narrative of the book, which is to show the progression of the gospel from “Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:9). With this geographic progression is the transition from ministry mainly to Jews to ministry mainly to Gentiles, and the shift of emphasis in the book from Peter (and the Apostles) to Paul. Do you think this has any bearing in helping us interpret the point of the stories of tongue-speaking?

Can you think of alternate reasons why Luke would tell us about these tongue-speaking experiences, based on this “bird’s eye view” understanding? Or should we understand them as the Assemblies of God denomination does?