

# Acts. The Revolution Continues....



## A Command or an Explanation?

Does the Bible teach that all believers should speak in tongues?  
Does it dictate that house churches are the ideal model for all churches?

Finding answers to interpretive questions like these requires that we understand the difference between prescriptive and descriptive texts between texts that are prescribing or commanding a certain action and those that are simply describing historical facts or events

As you read the Bible, you soon realize that it consists of more than one genre of literature. Genesis is considered to be a narrative. Leviticus is a book of laws. Proverbs is wisdom literature. Then you have the Epistles in the New Testament and Isaiah as a prophecy book. While the books of the Bible speak of Christ and the redemption plan put forth by God, how we interpret each book varies based on its genre. The way you approach the book of Genesis is different than the way you approach Psalms. When reading the Word it is important to ask this question: *Is what I am reading telling me how I should live, or is it explaining what is going on in the text?* This is the difference between prescriptive and descriptive texts.

### Prescriptive Texts

Prescriptive texts are those that prescribe to us how we ought to live. They are general commands from the Lord that deal with our call as believers, our conduct or how we are to treat others. Generally, prescriptive texts are easy to identify. Take, for instance, the command in [Colossians 3:9](#): "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices." The command given is prescriptive for how we ought to live. Paul exhorts us not to lie to one another. This is a straightforward call on our lives. Other texts in Scripture call us to love one another, confess sins to one another, live at peace with one another, seek the Lord above all else, and on and on we could go.

### Descriptive Texts

Descriptive texts are those that explain what is taking place. They are describing situations rather than telling us how we ought to live. The book of Acts contains numerous descriptive texts that are sometimes mistaken for prescriptive texts. Take, for instance, [Acts 1:12-28](#), where the disciples replace Judas. The process by which they choose Matthias is by casting lots. Luke is not prescribing for us how to choose our leadership in the church—he is simply describing to us what happened. Consider [Acts 9:36-43](#), where Peter raises Tabitha from the dead. Again, Luke is describing to us what took place. Although there are truths to apply from this passage, it is not explicitly commanding us to go to funerals and pray life back into the deceased.

## Prescriptive/Descriptive Balance

Sometimes we read a text as descriptive rather than prescriptive (or vice versa) to accommodate our own biases. If I find a command burdensome, I might be tempted to label it as descriptive. Conversely, if I want to justify a personal conviction, I might be tempted to read a descriptive text as a universal command.

If we aren't careful, we run the risk of devaluing a call or command from the Lord by reading it simply as an informative detail. Jesus' words for us to make disciples in [Matthew 28:19-20](#) are prescriptive. Matthew is not merely reporting what Jesus said to the disciples at that time, he is recording a prescription from the Lord for believers of all time to obey.

Likewise, we need to pay attention to descriptive texts and seek to pull from them the prescriptive truths they contain. In the book of Acts, we read that early believers had everything in common, sold all they had and distributed the proceeds to all. We wouldn't expect or require every member of our church today to literally sell all of his or her possessions, but we can prescribe from this text the call to live generously. We should take the truth behind the description as a command to give freely to others—for the glory of God. So, although not every descriptive narrative prescribes a specific course of action, there will always be a general truth to seek and apply from the text.

Perhaps you are confused as to whether or not a certain text is fundamentally prescriptive or descriptive. Here are a few things to consider:

1. Pray for wisdom. Ask the Lord to reveal to you the truth of His Word.
2. Remember that all Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit and is beneficial to us ([2 Tim. 3:16-17](#)).
3. Consider the context. Is the surrounding text as a whole trying to relate a history or give an instruction? Is it addressing a unique situation or expounding a general principle?
4. If the text appears to be prescriptive, are there any other texts in the Scriptures that back up the command, or is this the only place in Scripture where this idea is found? Let Scripture interpret Scripture.
5. If the text appears to be descriptive, what are the general prescriptive truths that can be drawn from it?

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Feb 3, 2014