

Leading Inductive Bible Studies

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Introduction

This training resource is provided for those who would like to lead small group Bible studies similar to the approach used at Cape Town 2010¹. The phases of individual study, group discussion of observations, and group discussion of application are the same. However, the group continues its discussion through asking and answering questions, rather than an exposition, to come to an understanding of the passage. Thus the group follows the steps of inductive study: Observation, Interpretation (Understanding), and Application with group discussion at every point. Bible study of this nature is a powerful communal learning experience.

¹ Cape Town 2010 provided an opportunity for rich discussion of the Scripture with brothers and sisters from around the globe. The format used was unusual – expository preaching surrounded by small group study and discussion.

What makes a Bible study “inductive”?

In this “Age of Information”, most of us are not used to reading something carefully and contemplating its meaning and implications. We have learned to skim and “get to the main point” as fast as possible. When we treat the Scriptures like an instant message, paying no attention to the way it is composed or the words that are being used, we miss the riches, beauty, and fullness of God’s communication. Inductive Bible study is one method to help us slow down and focus our full attention on the text. It is a discovery-oriented study of the Scripture that is highly participatory. It involves carefully paying attention to what the author said (**Observation**), understanding the author’s message to the original audience (**Interpretation/Understanding**), and being transformed by its truth (**Application**).

Inductive Bible Study takes the cross-cultural and literary nature of the Bible seriously. Behind every book of the Bible is a human author inspired by God, writing from a specific situation to an audience with a particular culture. We honor God’s Word by looking closely at content, structure, form (genre), and cultural/historical context. Listening to the Bible on its own terms requires us to continually ask “How would this have sounded to the original audience?” Without this posture, we are blind to the parts of the scripture which challenge our cultural assumptions.

In Bible study, a deductive approach is one which uses a theological or values lens and finds Biblical material to support it (e.g. a feminist, Marxist, dispensational, or Calvinist hermeneutic). Topical studies are also deductive. It is tempting to use the Bible to support what we already think. An inductive approach to Bible study helps us to humble ourselves under the authority of the Scriptures by pressing us to hear *all* of what a passage has to say and be changed by it.

An inductive study approaches a passage to see what the author intended to communicate to the original audience and uses every possible clue to construct an interpretation of the passage which takes historical, grammatical, and cultural context seriously. In other words, we don’t come to the Word with an agenda. E.g. John 4:1-42 can be studied to learn about evangelism (using the deductive premise that Jesus is a great evangelist and we can use his interaction with the woman at the well as a model). To study John 4:1-42 inductively will lead us to see much more (e.g. facing our sin, crossing social barriers, and Jesus’ offer of living water), though we will certainly also learn about evangelism.

The Power of the Word

God is eager to reveal himself. He uses creation to reveal his glory and power. He uses his Word to speak to us in even more specific and clear ways. Those that meditate on, believe, and obey the scripture experience tremendous benefit. The Word is one of God’s main tools in leading and blessing his people.

The most important thing you can do as a teacher is create space and time for people to get in front of the Bible and let it have its effect on them. It is valuable to grow in skill as a teacher and to develop methods of Bible study that are appropriate for our audience, but our confidence must never be in our skills or our methods. God’s word is powerful. We can teach the Bible and help others learn to study it with full confidence that it will have a powerful effect in the hearts and lives of those who open themselves up to it.

Preparation

Following these steps will enable you to be thoroughly prepared to lead a dynamic Bible Study:

1. Pray that your heart will be “good soil” for the Word
2. Read through the passage
3. Note the context of the passage
4. Observe thoroughly, looking for as many of these elements as possible:

<input type="checkbox"/> Repetition	<input type="checkbox"/> Introduction
<input type="checkbox"/> Comparison/contrast	<input type="checkbox"/> Summary
<input type="checkbox"/> Numbers	<input type="checkbox"/> Places
<input type="checkbox"/> People	<input type="checkbox"/> Time
<input type="checkbox"/> Nouns	<input type="checkbox"/> Conclusions
<input type="checkbox"/> Environment	<input type="checkbox"/> Climax
<input type="checkbox"/> Commands	<input type="checkbox"/> Metaphors
<input type="checkbox"/> General to particular	<input type="checkbox"/> Verb tenses
<input type="checkbox"/> Cause/effect	<input type="checkbox"/> Parallels
<input type="checkbox"/> Quotations	<input type="checkbox"/> Logical connectors: (e.g. therefore,
<input type="checkbox"/> Old Testament references or allusions	since, but, for, so that, however)
5. Brainstorm interpretative questions
6. Define words, phrases, and concepts which are repeated or which you do not understand by using the immediate context, dictionary, concordance, or Bible dictionary
7. Identify & research historical and cultural items
8. Mark units of thought in the text (indicated by a change in location, time, theme, thought, action, or characters); write a short title for each paragraph
9. Answer your questions with evidence in the passage
10. Ask yourself a larger question: “What did the author intend to communicate to his original readers?” Build a case for your answer. You are looking for an overall, integrative answer.
11. Write summary
12. Write 4-6 application questions covering different elements of the passage
13. Pray for the participants in the study to be responsive to God’s Word

Establishing expectations

An interactive, inductive Bible study might be quite different than what the participants expect. During the first several studies, reinforce the following ground rules. Sticking to these ground rules will greatly help the group dynamic and the quality of the Bible Study.

- The first goal of inductive study is to understand the author's intended meaning to original audience; therefore, stay in the text and work to understand it on its own terms. Don't cross-reference to other texts until you have figured out the meaning of this one.
- The second goal is to be transformed by the Scripture; therefore approach the passage with humility and eagerness to learn rather than show what you know.
- This is a communal study and the contribution of each member is valuable. God can use what each one says to help the rest. We can honor each other by listening well.
- Let the text speak for itself. Share what you see in the passage rather than what a commentary or pastor has said about it.
- Expect the text, rather than the leader, answer questions. The Bible study leader is present to facilitate the group discussion rather than give answers.
- Stay on the point under discussion.
- Wait to interpret or apply until observation phase is completed. These will be much stronger if the group has been thorough in observation.

Pacing

You are the facilitator of the groups' learning and are responsible for keeping the group on track. Steering a group through a passage in the time allotted is a leadership skill. Planning out how much time to spend in each phase of inductive study will enable the group time to go smoothly. Here are sample pacing plans for a 1 hour study and a 1.5 hour study.

Annotated outline of a 1 hour inductive Bible study

- **Introduction (2 minute, a little longer the first day)**
 - to inductive method
 - Share background and context information
 - Read the passage out loud
- **Individual Time (5 minutes)**

Provide the passage printed out with plenty of margins for writing notes.
- **Share observations/questions together (15 minutes)**

This time should be lively. Ask, "what do you see here, and what questions do you have?" Avoid asking leading questions such as "where were Jesus and the disciples going?" or "who did Jesus encounter on the road to Samaria?" Rather, ask open ended questions such as "what did you see?" and "what else did you notice?"

Note their questions but tell the group that we will hold off answering them yet.

Answer questions together (25 minutes)

- Walking through the passage from beginning to end, asking and answering questions.
- Use your own questions when necessary to cover the key sections of the text.
- Encourage the group to base their answers on evidence from the text itself and the context.
- These 20+ minutes of answering the questions together that the group generated are the heart of your study.
- Keep them in the text, and help them develop good questions and answer them from the passage, its context, and the Old Testament background. If you have helped the group observe well, the group itself becomes self-correcting when interpreting.

Summarize (3 minutes)

After walking through the passage and answering the questions as a group, a few main themes should emerge. Summarize those with a few sentences. Try to use the language of the text and the group as much as possible.

Process/Apply (10 minutes)

Help the group process and apply the passage. Have some possible application questions ready to go. Make sure you leave about 10 minutes for this. This is where Jesus will solidify what He has been speaking to the group about in the study. He will transform them by His Word as they make specific applications and then do them.

Outline of a 1.5 hour inductive Bible study

- Introduction (5 minutes)
 - to method
 - to passage
 - reading passage out loud
- Individual Time (10 minutes)
- Share observations/questions (20 minutes)
- Answer questions together (40 minutes)
- Summarize (3 minutes)
- Process/apply (12 minutes)

Teaching others to observe

Learning how to look closely at a passage is the most important skill to learn in inductive study. As Sherlock Holmes said, "Data, data, data. I cannot make bricks without clay."

All authors use strategies to communicate. Encourage the members of your Bible study to look closely for the following strategies when examining a passage of scripture. (A handout to give to the participants with this information summarized is in the Appendix.)

- Repetition
- Contrast
- Verb tenses
- Comparison
- Continuity
- Climax
- Characters
- Moods
- Environment
- Time in History
- Metaphor
- Genre (e.g. letter, narrative, poetry, proverb, contract, apocalyptic)
- Cause to Effect
- General to Particular
- Voice (e.g. first person, third person)
- Allusions
- Quotations

Articulating significant questions

"One cannot simply read the Bible, like other books. One must be prepared really to enquire of it. Only thus will it reveal itself. Only if we expect from it the ultimate answer, shall we receive it." Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1936)

God has created us to be curious and honors those who want to know more. Asking good questions leads us into discovering much more than we would at first pass. Posing and answering questions is a central component to inductive Bible Study. (See Appendix for an article on the biblical basis of asking and answering questions.)

A good question has these characteristics:

- Open-ended/has multiple answers
- Motivated by curiosity
- Gets us to dig back into the text
- Highlights relationships, feelings, and experiences
- Uses the language of the text
- Short and concise
- Startling or unexpected
- Considers the connection between various observations

Examples of some good questions:

- What do the various characters do? What motivates their actions?
- What is this image intended to express?
- How do these two different events compare with one another?
- How does this scene or passage connect to the scenes/passages before it?
- What does this phrase mean? How would the audience have heard it?

There are four types of questions in an inductive Bible study:

1. Questions that help the group to envision the scene.
2. Questions that capture the tension or point of intrigue in a text.
3. Questions that link the participants' lives to the text.
4. Questions that tie portions of the discussion together.

Usually, students ask #1 and #2 type questions, though not necessarily all the #1 and #2 questions needed to unlock the passage. Leaders should pay attention to what is missing in the group's questions. #3 type questions can be used to enliven the discussion. #4 type questions almost always come from the leader and are particularly necessary near the end of the discussion.

A leader prepares questions for two reasons. First, the process of thinking through strong questions will lead the leader into a deep interaction with the text. Second, often the group asks questions about parts of the text and not others, or their questions are very broad or very specific. Other parts of the text need to be filled out if the group is going to have the pieces they need to have a strong discussion about the questions that are on their hearts in a way that honors the author's intent.

During the sharing of observations and questions phase of the study, listen closely to the group's questions and add them to your list (sometimes this will involve re-wording the question to make the tension point in the question clearer). When leading the group discovery process, use a **combination** of your questions and the group's questions. The pre-written leader's questions are used to fill in the gaps of the students' questions to help the group grapple with the whole text. There is no need to cover every question you prepared beforehand or every question voiced by the group.

Facilitating discussion

It might be a new experience for participants to share their thoughts and questions during a Bible study. Attempt to create an atmosphere of openness and trust. Remember to keep the Scripture at the center and keep your comments to a minimum.

Factors to help facilitate a communal discussion:

- Affirm each person's contribution
- Be an active listener
- Ask follow up questions to participants' comments

- Encourage the group to respond to one another (e.g. ask, “Do others of you agree or disagree with that?”)
- Invite shy group members into the conversation
- Continually direct the group back to the text (ask “Where do you see that in the text?”)
- Remind the group of the ground rules

Summarizing

The purpose of summarizing at the end of a group discussion before moving into more focused discussion of application is to tie together and clarify the central elements of the passage and discussion. Through the summary, the leader is able to emphasize a particular point that he or she believes the Spirit is pressing. This is the spot in teaching where the leader gets to preach and persuade rather than just facilitate discussion. It should be given with passion and confidence. The summary is the launch pad for application.

During preparation, write a succinct, punchy statement that captures the tension or drama of the passage. The summary should highlight what is remarkable about God or life with God. A good summary captures the picture and feel of a passage. It is a short paragraph, not a slogan or a sentence of truth in a prepositional form. The truth of the passage is captured through the drama of the text and what that text reveals about Jesus or the life of faith.

You should have thought through the main points of a summary statement ahead of time, but be ready to change or nuance it according to the way the Spirit has led the group to experience the text together. Once the group has had its experience in the text together, nuance your summary to tie together the group’s experience, using their words and images. The summary must be a fair distillation of the group discussion or it will violate the premises of group.

This skill requires a deep dependence on the Holy Spirit before and during the study. You need to have prepared the study thoroughly so that you are comfortable with the text and come summarize the drama or movement of the text concisely. Then, while facilitating the group’s experience in the Word, be listening to the Spirit and the members of the group to discern the way that the Spirit is leading the group to experience the main teaching(s) of the passage. Your summary needs to tie together both the main teaching(s) of and the way that the group has experienced and defined the teaching(s).

Writing and selecting application questions

Response makes a Bible study transformative rather than merely comforting, cathartic, or informative. Without concrete and specific application, it is too easy to be “like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror... and at once forgets what he was like” (James 1:23-24). If we are not doers of the Word, the power of the Word does not impact and change us, and we deceive ourselves.

Characteristics of good application questions:

- Flow from the study
- Appropriate to the group
- Immediate
- Concrete

- Realistic but pressing
- Requires reliance on Jesus

Helping a study enter into transformative application is a leadership skill. You must start with where the group connected to the scripture intellectually or emotionally, and then move them from general to specific. For example, it is not enough to say that, "Jesus addresses our fears." Students of the Word must be helped to name the specific fears, in fact, fears that they presently experience, rather than fears they have experienced at some point in their life. In naming and articulating current issues, and then letting the truth of the scripture address those real issues, the Bible study becomes a direct encounter with the living God.

In preparation, brainstorm 4-8 application questions. Write questions that address different parts of the study. Paired questions work well. The first question is often broader and helps identify an area of life. The second question in the set brings a greater level of concreteness by asking for specific action or response.

During a Bible study, there is only time to discuss one or two of the application questions you have prepared. It is an exercise spiritual discernment to select which question(s) to discuss. Discernment comes from prayer, listening to your group, and listening to the Spirit.

- When you have completed your preparation, read through the passage and application questions one more time, asking the Spirit to highlight which question(s) he wants to work through.
- During the observation phase, notice if there are certain topics that multiple members of the group highlight. Consider which application question is most strongly tied to those observations.
- During the interpretation phase, notice the body language of members of your group and the energy of the discussion. Are there parts of the discussion that elicit stronger response? If so, which application question reflects that section of the passage?
- Towards the end of the exposition, ask for the Spirit's guidance and then decide which question(s) you will lead the group in discussing.

Appendix

English Resources

Books -

Charpentier, Etienne, *How to Read the Old Testament*. New York City: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1985

Fee, Gordon and Stuart, Douglas. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993.

Grahmann, Robert. *Transforming Bible Study*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003.

Keener, Craig. *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993

Kuhatschek, Jack. *Applying the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990.

New Bible Dictionary. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999

Walton, John, et al. *IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000

Videos -

Understanding the Word through Inductive Bible Study, Cape Town 2010 Pre-Congress DVD

Scripture on-line – (for printing manuscripts)

www.devotions.net/Bible

www.biblegateway.com

Trainers-

Bob Grahmann (IFES/USA) – Bgrahmann@go.mailsvc.com

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Experience God Through Great Bible Study — *An introduction to Inductive Study by Bob Grahmann*



Picture a scientist going about some great work. He or she is searching for the cure for some horrible disease, or making a marvelous new discovery. First, the scientist digs for facts, looking deeply, studying carefully, investigating every clue, relentlessly hunting for any and every fact that will make the discovery deeper, richer, and more accurate. Then, the scientist ponders what the facts mean, finally coming up with a theory. After much more testing, the scientist is ready to put the theory into practice, to apply it. This is a picture of “inductive” study. “Inductive” means going from the particular to the general, from the facts to the thesis or teaching.

The Bible Is Alive

“Inductive Bible study” starts with the facts of the Bible gleaned through careful observation of the text. After observing everything that can be seen in the text, inductive study then asks what the facts mean. This is “interpretation.” Then, after we understand the teaching or point of the passage, we apply the text to our lives.

So inductive study asks three questions:

1. What does the text say? **OBSERVATION**
2. What does it mean? **INTERPRETATION**
3. What does it mean to us? **APPLICATION**

Inductive study is not dry intellectualism. The Bible is alive. It is God’s Word, the way He communicates with us and reveals Himself to us. Good inductive Bible study is a way to engage the Scriptures deeply so that we meet God there. We put ourselves into the text, sense and feel the story or the teaching, and let God’s Word grip us. As we are gripped by His Word, we experience God Himself speaking to us individually and as a community through the Scriptures. This is the most exciting thing in the world—to meet God and hear from Him in His Word!

Inductive study is effective with many types of people, regardless of their faith or background. It works from the text outward so everyone is equal when coming to the text. It takes no special knowledge to study the Bible inductively. Also, because inductive study depends on observation—seeing what is actually in the text—the more people from different cultures who look at the text, the deeper the observations will be.

A Quick Primer

APPROACH THE PASSAGE

- Approach the text **EXPECTANTLY**, prayerfully, as a primary source, and be open to learn.
- Let the text **SPEAK FOR ITSELF**. Don’t depend on something you have read or heard about it. Come to the text as if you had never seen it before.
- STAY** in the passage. Don’t cross-reference to other texts until you have figured out the meaning of this one.
- Read the **CONTEXT**: what comes before and after your text?

- Study with a GROUP so that you get the insights of others and God can speak to you as a community and not only as an individual.

OBSERVE

- Get the FACTS; find out what the text actually says. Relive the passage.
- Make a LIST of facts that you notice. Note who, what, when, where and how. Note the atmosphere of the text. Do you see any words or ideas that are repeated, similar or contrasted?
- Put YOURSELF into the passage. If you were there, or were one of the main characters, or a recipient of an epistle, what would you be thinking and feeling? Relive the text in your mind or in your group.
- Make your own PARAGRAPHS if none are provided. What are the main thought units in the passage? Pretend you are “saving” the paragraph to your computer’s hard drive and give it a short title.
- Find CONNECTIONS between paragraphs. Look for words, phrases, or concepts that are repeated in a few paragraphs, or contrasted. Are there any causes that lead to effects?

INTERPRET

- Find the MEANING of the passage. Interpreting takes some thought, some sharing together.
- First ask: what IMPRESSES you from the passage? What is the main thing that “hits” you from it? If you were to leave the study at this point, what would you remember?
- Ask “WHY” questions here, like: “Why did the author put this story here and not elsewhere?” or “Why did Paul write about this subject and not others?”
- Look at each of the CONNECTIONS you found between paragraphs in the “observation” section. What is the meaning of each of these connections? What is the principle or teaching they are pointing to?
- Then put your meanings together into a sentence that encapsulates the MAIN MEANINGS, the main threads of the passage.

APPLY

- What is the MAIN THING the Lord is saying to you through this passage?
- Is there something to OBEY or an example to follow or avoid?
- Is there a TRUTH about the Lord you can rejoice in? Is there a promise for a situation you are in? What are the conditions to the promise? What does the Lord say He will do?
- What is the Lord saying to your GROUP, and not just to you individually?

As you study and obey the Bible regularly in this way, God will speak to you. You will meet Jesus. You will grow in mind and heart. You will see the majestic themes and great doctrines of Scripture, discovering the grand story of God at work in world history. You will be transformed by the power of the Spirit working through God’s Word.

The Biblical Basis of Asking Questions and Seeking Answers

When we think of relating to God and hearing the Gospel, we think of proclamation. God took the initiative to come to Adam and Eve, to Noah, to Abraham, and to Moses, to "proclaim His name" (Ex 34:6). He took the initiative to establish his Covenant of Grace (Gen. 12: 1-3, 15: 1-6); He proclaimed the 10 commandments (Ex. 20); He spoke to and through the prophets (i.e. Amos 5:21-23). In Jesus, He proclaimed the Gospel (Mark 1:14-15).

The preachers in Acts proclaimed the Gospel (i.e. Acts 2: 14-36; 8:4; 17:23). Paul proclaimed Jesus (Col. 1:28) and felt that his main calling was to proclaim the Gospel (I Cor. 1:17). He told Timothy to be persistent in proclaiming the message (II Tim 4:2).

The Gospel certainly did move ahead by being proclaimed, both in Bible times and now. Billy Graham has led millions to Jesus by the public proclamation of the Gospel.

Yet, throughout the Bible there is another approach to knowing God that is equally as valid and important, although it is much less obvious. This is the biblical mandate to know God and study His Word by asking questions and seeking answers.

Abraham received one of the greatest pictures of God's covenant of grace when he asked God the almost impertinent question "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" (Gen. 15:8). Moses' relationship with God went deeper at two crucial points in Exodus when he asked God deep and powerful questions like "what is your name?" (Ex. 3: 13), "show me your ways" and "show me your glory" (Ex. 33: 13, 18). The Psalmist, who lived close to God's heart, was full of questions (i.e. Psalm 74:1; 10:1). The whole prophetic book of Habakkuk is built around a dialog between God and the prophet Habakkuk as Habakkuk asks God a series of questions, then waits in faith and dread for God's reply (Hab. 1:3,13,2:1).

In the New Testament, Peter's great sermon in Acts two was launched by a question from the crowd (Acts 2: 12), Paul's whole letter to the Romans is built around a series of questions (i.e. Romans 3: 1-3; 5-9; 4:1; 6:1); Paul's letter of I Corinthians seems to be built around answers to a series of questions the church has asked him (i.e. I Cor. 5:1; 6:1; 7:1), and the first chapter of Hebrews begins and ends with questions and answers (i.e. Heb. 1: 5, 13).

But the one who seemed to love questions the most was Jesus. He commended His disciples and "those with them" for asking Him about the meaning of His parables, even saying that the questioners had found the secret of the Kingdom of God! (Mark 4:10,11). He got angry at the Pharisees when they stopped asking questions and were silent (Mark 3:5). He often answered a question with a question, to keep the question mode going (Mark 2:18-19; 24-25; John 1: 48-50). Jesus summarized His view of questions when He told His disciples specifically and clearly, to "ask, and you will receive, seek, and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you, for whoever asks receives..." (Matt. 7:7-8). Jesus could not have been clearer in sharing the priority of asking questions and seeking.

But the Bible not only puts a priority on asking questions, it calls us to seek for answers. I Chronicles says to "seek the Lord and His strength..."; I Chron 28:9 promises that if you seek Him He will be found by you; Psalms 27: 8 talks of the heart "seeking His face;" and Isaiah 34:16 says "seek and read from the book of the Lord.". This is put most powerfully by the author of Proverbs who instructs students to

"make your ear attentive to wisdom, incline your heart to understanding, cry out for insight, raise your voice for understanding, seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures." "THEN, he says, you will understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God." (Prov. 2: 2-5). Do you want to know God? Do you want to find the fear and knowledge of Him? Then SEEK Him, and seek His Word, diligently. Ask good questions, and seek hard for answers. That is the way to know God!

In the New Testament Paul says in a negative way in Romans what should be a positive call, to seek God (Romans 3:11). The early church counsel in Acts 15 wanted people to seek the Lord. Paul tells the Colossians to "seek the things that are above" (Col. 3:1).

And of course, Jesus not only told His followers to ask, but to SEEK, and they would find.

So, from the beginning of the Bible to the end, and especially in Jesus, there is the priority of asking and seeking as the way to come to know wisdom and truth. Even more importantly, asking and seeking are the ways to know God, and to know His Word.

No wonder good Bible study puts an emphasis on curiosity, on asking good questions and seeking deeply into the text for answers. It is the way to know God and experience Him in the text!

Bob Grahmann
Jan. 29, 2001