

Enhancements to Inductive Bible Study

InterVarsity/USA Bible Study Task Force
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An inductive Bible study simply means a study that starts with the Biblical text, approaching it with humility and with as few preconceptions as possible, and working out from the words of the text to interpretations, meanings, and applications. This is the opposite of starting with a pre-conceived idea or meaning and working that back into the text. There are a variety of methods and styles of doing inductive Bible study. No method is sacred. All are man-made. Methods need to be updated with the times. Our sense is that the basic methods of inductive Bible study that we use in InterVarsity do not need to be reinvented, but do need to be rethought. They need to be *enhanced*. Thus we present our *Enhancements*, which we would like to commend to all staff who teach Bible study, no matter what method they are using.

The InterVarsity/USA Bible Study Task Force studied the current situation in InterVarsity. We looked at the history of Bible Study within InterVarsity, at Postmodernism, at a theology of the Word, at contemplative theology and practice, at our own experiences, and at the considerable time we spent together in the Scriptures. We developed this set of principles we are calling *Enhancements* to inductive Bible study. These enhancements are not presented to be trendy. We feel that they are timeless, deriving from the Word itself. They flow out of our passion for the Scriptures and our desire to see the Bible studied and taught with power and relevancy within InterVarsity. They are intended to be used far beyond the comings and goings of specific student generations. We hope that they will become the heart and soul of the way that we teach and do Bible study in InterVarsity:

1. The passion of the teacher for Jesus and His Word is the key.

* The crucial element in any Bible study or Bible study training is the passion of the teacher. A teacher can be trained well and teach a Bible study or Bible study method that is technically correct. But for there to be real power in the Bible study the teacher must have a passion for the Word of God, a passion for the Jesus whose living Word this is, and a passion to see students come to love the Word. A teacher needs spiritual power as well as technical acuity.

2. We seek both the truth of the passage and to experience Jesus in His Word.

* An important purpose of inductive Bible study is to discover the truth of a passage and apply that truth to life. But an equal purpose must be to experience Jesus in His Word. One without the other is out of balance. Seeking both doctrinal truth and an experience of the presence and power of Jesus in His Word are the expectations with which students and teachers should enter the study. Actually, these are not separate since a truth in the Bible is encapsulated in a Person, Jesus Himself (John 14:6). So experiencing Jesus in His Word is a discovering truth.

3. We are dealing with a living Word, not a dead letter. God's Word, as God Himself, often offers surprises, and challenges our traditional cultural assumptions.

* The Word of God is alive, not a dead letter from which laws are derived. God is a God of surprises. When believers approach Bible study they are encountering a living word, not analyzing a dead fish.

God's Word is sometimes built around surprising paradoxes. An important part of

inductive study is noticing unexpected twists in the text and deeply pondering their meaning.

Similarly, believers who study the Bible inductively need to be open to the fact that the living Word challenges long-held cultural assumptions. The Pharisees of Jesus' time were locked into an interpretation of the Old Testament which led them to a certain view of the kind of person the Messiah would be. This caused them to be blinded to the Messiah when He stood right in front of them. It took students of the Bible nineteen centuries to hear what God=s Word really said about God=s abhorrence of slavery. Students of God's living Word need to be open to the fact that the Word challenges our cultural assumptions in surprising ways.

4. Are-living≡, or entering the text emotionally, is an important method of observation.

* The basic method of observation of a text taught today within evangelicalism is to observe the Afacts≡ by finding the who, what, when, where, and how in a passage; and by finding Alaws of composition≡ in a passage such as repetition, contrast, and similarity. But there is another valid observational method that needs a stronger emphasis: the observational method of Are-living≡ the story of the text, entering the story emotionally as well as analytically, and identifying with the characters.

5. There must be a balance between the intellectual/analytical and the experiential/contemplative in Bible study.

* Church history reveals that the Bible is most powerfully studied when there is a balance of the analytical and the experiential, as in the approach of Jesus and Paul, the approach of the Reformers, and in the Wesleyan revivals. There are abuses on the experiential side today, but as a whole contemporary inductive Bible study tends to lean too much toward the analytical, Ascientific≡ side of Bible study. A strong experiential component must be added as a balance without losing the solid observation and analysis that has characterized inductive Bible study.

6. Forming good questions about the text is a key to interpretation.

* The heart of good inductive Bible study should be the forming of good questions about the text, questions which will probe the depths of the text and uncover layers of meaning which may not appear on the surface.

7. Studying in community is vital.

* Although it is important for individuals to know how to study the Scriptures and be independent students of Scripture, Bible study is best done in community. The more diverse the community of believers studying the Bible, the richer the study will be because they will see more in the text. Studying in community is also a hedge against false or bizarre individualistic interpretations. Community also helps challenge false worldviews or personal assumptions.

8. Teachers need to also be learners, and see the learners as teachers.

* Contemporary educational theory stresses empowering learners rather than just feeding them information from up front. In studying the Scriptures in community, it is important that teachers see themselves as Ateacher/learners≡ and see the students as Alearner/teachers.≡ This is in line with Jesus' view of teachers in Matt. 23:8,10-12. Inductive Bible study needs to be taught as a dialog, respecting the learners, learning from them, and empowering the learners to be able to search the Scriptures on their own.

9. The experience of the reader needs to be woven into the study as it goes along.

* The experience of the reader, which the reader brings to the text, is important to acknowledge early on in the study and weave into the study. In good inductive Bible study, the Story in the text engages and transforms the story of the reader. This cannot happen unless the reader's experience is woven into the discovery of the Story in the text.

10. The narrative nature of Scripture needs to be emphasized.

* Not only are there straightforward narratives in the Bible, such as the Gospels, Acts, and the Old Testament historical books, but the whole sweep of Biblical history is a narrative; it is the Story of God's redemptive history. Even Bible books that are thought to be didactic, such as the epistles to the Romans or Ephesians, contain strong narrative elements. The narrative nature of Scripture must be taken into account as we approach Bible study.

11. Inductive Bible study helps us find main points, but they need to be held with humility and openness to further light.

* In stark contrast to the conclusions of Postmodernism that there is no intrinsic meaning in a text and that the intent of the author is irrelevant, John 1 and other passages show that there is meaning in the Word and that the intent of an author of a text is important to discover. Passages have main truths that run through them, and the tools of inductive study are the best way to come near to the main point of a passage.

However, those who study the Bible inductively need to hold these main points with a certain humility. All people are blinded by their own culture, by their personal experiences, and by the limits of their personal experiences as they approach a text, and no one can approach a text completely objectively and see all that is there. All main truths are subjective in some sense and need to be open to correction. This should inspire students of the Bible to even deeper study, asking more questions of the text so that more layers of truth are uncovered. This is also an important reason to study in community as well as individually.

12. Bible study is an art, and needs to engage our creative and sensing side.

* The study of a text is an art rather than a science. Creative ways need to be developed to engage more of the senses in the study of the Bible, and to take into account different learning styles. Aesthetics and the arts such as drama, video, and other media should be creatively employed, especially in teaching the method of inductive Bible study.

13. Inductive Bible study is about discovery

* The strength of inductive Bible study is that it helps students discover the meaning of the text for themselves and not depend on teachers and preachers. Meanings arise from the text rather than being forced onto the text. Yet there is a tendency on the part of teachers to become more and more deductive the more experienced they get. There is a temptation to tell the students what the passage means, or manipulatively lead them to discover the teacher's conclusions, or to spend too much time applying the study in the way that the teacher was moved by the passage. Teachers need to constantly remind themselves that InterVarsity specializes in *inductive* Bible study, letting the Bible speak for itself. The teacher is a facilitator of discovery, teachers and students form a hermeneutical community around the text, and the conclusions of the group are sometimes

different from those the teacher had discovered on his or her own.

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