



AN OVERVIEW OF INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY¹

INTRODUCTION:

Inductive Bible Study (or IBS for short) is a *method* for studying scripture. That means it is a process which has *sequential* steps and requires effort to move from our beginning point to the desired end. IBS is also holistic, meaning that it does get us all the way from the beginning (our first reading of a biblical text) to the full end (informed theology and ethics). This lecture will provide an overview of the process of IBS to complement your reading in. Many different teachers have described the steps in slightly different ways, but the substance is similar across the board. For discussions in this class, you should use the terminology found in this lecture.

Here are steps as I present them:

1. Pray
2. Observe
3. Ask
4. Interpret
5. Apply

Therefore, it has specific steps that we move through from beginning to end.

IBS is methodical, sequential, and holistic.

Notice that the middle step is intentional. Interpretation is the heart or center of the process (note the chiasm – remember this when we get to structural relationships). What we do before that gets us to interpretation and what we do after that flows from interpretation. This class will focus on getting us to that central moment. We will focus primarily on observing, asking, and interpreting with a short foray into application. However, we will not address evaluation or correlation in this brief six week course. This overview will help you to see where we are going and where you can go from here.

"answer/interpret." This

Let us examine each of these steps in turn.

1. PRAY

As we begin the process of IBS, we open with a humble admission that we need God's help. "If any of you lacks wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and without hesitation, and it will be given to you" (James 1:5). We pray as part of our affirmation that the Bible is God's word, and we need God's help to understand it.

¹ Document developed and copyright of Professor Bart Bruehler, Indiana Wesleyan University. We thank him for allowing us to use it in our church.

Students often wonder, "How or what do I pray?" You can use the following points as a guide, adapting them to your own prayer habits.

1. Quiet your mind and body before God – Be in quiet place, sitting comfortably. Take a few moments to allow your body to rest and your mind to calm down. Let the other thoughts that you have settle and clearly focus on God.
2. Ask God to cleanse your heart and open your mind – We recognize that we come before God with our frailties and failures. We must be cleansed of our sin (focused on our will and our heart) and freed from our ignorance or mistakenness (focused on our intellect in our mind) by God's grace in order to hear God's word.
3. Ask God to fill you with the Holy Spirit – The Spirit is the inspirer and interpreter of God's word. The Spirit both explains scripture to us and enables us to recall it (John 14:26).
4. While in this attitude of prayer, read a portion of the scripture you will be interpreting (especially if you are working on a whole book) out loud to God. Let the sound fill your ears and mind.
5. Ask God for the willingness, ability, and courage to obey what you find in the scripture – Apart from this our attempts to interpret are fruitless.
6. Close by thanking God for his revelation and help throughout the process.

**Open yourself
before God.
Become ready to
receive God's
word.**

2. OBSERVE

Next we must encounter the biblical text. We do this by reading it (or hearing it – try this, you might be surprised by what you find). However, we do not want to merely read and allow the scripture to go "in one eye and out the other" (to coin a phrase). We want to see everything that is there. This is the evidence that we will use to both ask and answer questions. I like to say, "You cannot interpret, what you do not see." That is why observation is critical. You cannot understand what the Bible says if you do not first recognize what it is saying.

**You cannot
interpret
what you
do not see!**

Thus, observation in IBS is not a passive or easy process. It involves the following tasks:

- Observation is the mental act of regarding/noticing/perceiving.
- It requires us to focus our attention on the biblical text for an extended period of time.
- We must be alert and attentive throughout, keeping our mind concentrated on the text.
- Some find it helpful to take notes at this stage. Others find it distracting (especially with longer passages or books). Do whatever is most helpful for you.

These characteristics of observation help to explain the task. Excellent observing is:

- Perceptive – it sees what is there.
- Impartial – it allows what is there to be seen without obscuring it or adding to it.

- Exact – it sees precisely what is there.
- Thorough – it sees everything that is there.
- Persistent – it works hard and keeps trying to see more.²

Many of us do not have well trained faculties of observation. Since observation is the foundation of good interpretation, we will spend a lot of time practicing good observation that aims at all of these characteristics.

Note: Your study of a biblical passage may start at any one of these points of observation. Many students set out to study a book, and so survey is the most appropriate. Others want to interpret a specific passage, so detailed observation is the best way to begin. In this class, we will begin with a detailed observation and then get the bigger picture with a book survey in a later workshop.

Observation has three levels:

1. Observing the book as a whole

We call this a "survey" in IBS. The book is both the most basic and the largest literary unit. Therefore, it provides a context for all that is in the book. Most of us do not encounter the biblical text this way on a regular basis (usually we get it in smaller chunks). However, IBS will give you tools to get the lay of the land (like a map) before exploring the parts. Workshops 2 & 3 will discuss book survey in more detail.

2. Observing major parts of the book

On this level we take major portions of the book and look at them as a complete unit in and of themselves. This typically occurs on three levels: Divisions (major parts of the book as a whole), Sections (major parts of divisions), and Segments (parts of sections). Because of the limitations of our 6 week course, we are using a brief book (Colossians) and we will be skipping the process of division/section/segment survey because it is similar to book survey in this case.

3. Detailed observation of short passages

These smallest units usually lead us to the questions that drive our interpretations. Interpretation is a challenging task, and for this class we will focus on interpreting small units. We can interpret larger units (e.g. Who is the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts?), but that is for more advanced study. Detailed observation takes us down to the nuts and bolts of a passage, and aims especially at thoroughness. We will begin with detailed observation in workshop 1 because it gets us into a portion of scripture right away and keeps our work focused as we begin.

Finally and most importantly, when we observe we must precisely describe *what* is there and *how* it works. Do not merely quote the biblical text. Unless you can describe it, you have not

² Have you ever seen the TV series *Monk* with Tony Shaloub? Monk is an excellent (though very neurotic) observer. Monk has two special gifts. First, he sees *everything*; no detail goes unnoticed by him. Second, he sees everything *together*. That is, he can put all of the pieces together in context to make a complete and coherent picture. Think of Monk when you observe, but also try to relax.

fully observed it. Your observations must be clear and precise. Also, you should not just say what is there, but what it is doing. You must *describe* what you see in a biblical passage.

3. ASK

Questions are the links that get one from observation to interpretation. Questions point out our ignorance (thus, we sometimes shy away from them), but at the same time they open up vistas of new insight.

Precise and probing questions lead to good interpretations. You should ask all three basic types of questions for each observation. However, some students make this a rote habit and fail to ask real, probing questions. This then deflates their interpretations. Good questions force us to sharpen our observations and lead us into interpretation. There are four basic types of questions

1. Definitional Questions.

Definitional questions ask "what?". They seek the denotation, meaning, or substance of the elements that you observe in the text. For example, in Luke 4:31-37, one might ask, "What is an 'impure spirit' (v. 33)?" in order to grasp what this thing is.

2. Modal Questions

Modal questions ask "how?". They seek to discover the manner or mechanisms at work in a process or relationship. For example, in Luke 4:31-37 one might ask, "How does Jesus command 'Come out of him!' cause the demon to leave the possessed man?" in order to probe the cause and effect here.

3. Rational Questions.

Rational questions ask "why?". They seek the reason or purpose for a thing or action. For example, in Luke 4:31-37, one might ask, "Why does the author have Jesus command the impure spirit to be quiet before ordering it to come out of him?" in order to understand the function of this action.

4. Implicational Questions.

Implicational questions ask about logical extensions of what is there, "what if?". These questions come in two forms. First, they can probe behind a thing/action for its presuppositions, or second, they can probe ahead of a thing/action to ask what naturally emerges from it. For example, in Luke 4:31-37, one might ask, "What are the implications about demonic knowledge based on the 'impure spirit's' correct identification of Jesus in v. 34?" or "What are the implications about demonic possession based on the actions of the possessed man in vv. 33-35?". These questions serve to open your mind to other possibilities in the text, but we won't often use them at this introductory level.

Two further developments on questions:

- You can also ask: Who (identification)? When (time)? Where (place)? These are all particular types of definitional questions.
- Questions can be directed at various elements in the text: things, people, terms, actions, structures, context, background, setting, etc.

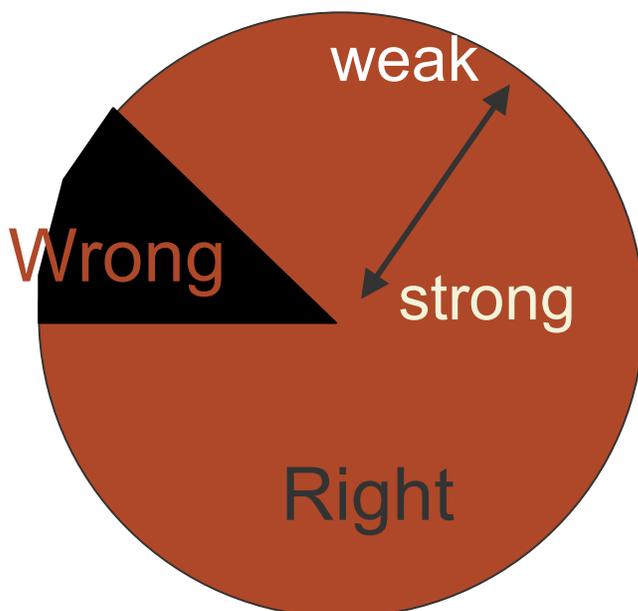
Final advice: Please try to focus your questions on specific elements in that you observe in the text rather than using questions to explore things that are not stated in the text about the author, the historical background, or the potential contemporary application of the text. Our aim is to interpret the scripture itself; therefore, it should be the focus of our questions.

4. INTERPRET

As stated above, interpretation stands at the center of the process. Prayer, observation, and questions get us to it. Evaluation, application, and correlation flow from it. Thus, interpretation is perhaps the most critical, and thus often the most challenging, task of IBS. In order to interpret a passage, we answer one of the questions raised in the preceding step.

A few preliminary points about interpretation

- Interpretation involves both explanation (stating clearly what is really there) and understanding (grasping the meaning of what is there).
- We seek to do "exegesis" to get the meaning out of scripture rather than "eisegesis" where we put our meaning into scripture. The two always interact with each other, and we aim to state the meaning of the text meaningfully in contemporary language and forms
- There are right and wrong answers. However, there are also lots and lots of different right answers. You will never ask and then answer the exact same question in the exact same way as someone else. God's word is infinitely creative and speaks to all of our (individual and corporate) circumstances in particular ways. Don't be afraid to choose a question and then go after it, just because you think you will answer it wrongly.
- While there are many right answers, they range from weak to strong. Weak answers are vague, superficial, and scattered. Strong answers are specific, probing, and focused. Of course, IBS looks for strong, right answers. See the following graph.



The Steps of Interpretation

1. Select a question.
 - a. You might come across a very interesting question in your observation process.
 - b. Or, you might want to wait until after you are done with all of your observing and asking. Get the whole picture in front of you and choose a question.
2. Answer your question
 - a. Brainstorm possible answers to your question. Be honest about your initial "gut feeling" for the answer.
 - b. Begin to look for evidence using the list of interpretive determinants as a guide (we will discuss these later). You will always begin with the immediate context of the passage you are interpreting. It holds at least 50% of your answer. If you don't see anything relevant there, then look again because you are missing something. Look at any commentaries or other secondary sources last after you have done all of your own work.
 - c. Organize your evidence, re-examine your question, and see if there is anything you have missed.
 - d. Draw inferences from your evidence
 - i. Be careful to explain how your inference flows from your evidence.
 - ii. Some evidence may have a variety of possible inferences (perhaps even some that are in tension with one another). Be sure to note all possible inferences.
 - iii. Characterize your inferences as "certain," "probable," or "possible."
 - iv. Pause throughout the process to summarize your inferences thus far.
 - e. Summarize the main possible answers that emerge and list the evidence that supports each.
 - f. Choose an answer that is supported by the closest evidence (from the immediate context), the most significant evidence (the weightiest, most certain, or most decisive), and the amount of evidence.
 - g. Synthesize your evidence and answer your question. This may come in many forms: a list, paraphrase with explanation, an outline, a prose paragraph, question-answer format, a sermon outline, etc.

Don't worry:

We will cover interpretation more thoroughly in a later workshop.

5. APPLY

In application, we move from the message of the passage in its ancient context to the impact on our modern context. Use the conclusions from your interpretation and evaluation and state the primary points that emerge, what situations they fit best, and how they fit into the larger biblical witness.

Begin application by brainstorming. Think about the options offered in *Bible Study that Works*

- Apply to ideas and actions
- Apply corporately and individually
- Apply negatively and positively
- Apply to a variety of contemporary contexts

Then choose a specific, contemporary situation with the following characteristics:

1. It is a real-life situation, not overly hypothetical
2. It is relevant to Christian faith and practice
3. You have experience in this type of situation
4. It is a good fit with the situations discovered in your evaluation

Now, practice your IBS skills on this situation.

1. Observe it and describe it thoroughly, especially note the dynamics of how the situation works and its contexts.
2. Ask questions about it, and try to get at the heart of the issue at hand.
3. Give some answers to your questions based on your experience, observation, insights of others, and any other research you might do.

Finally, apply your interpretation to this situation

1. Restate your interpretation.
2. Describe the main point of your interpretation of the passage, and follow it with a list of other specific supporting elements from your interpretation (decision 1 above). Select a few elements to focus on in your application and briefly describe how they functioned in the original context addressed by the biblical passage.
3. Relate the selected points of your interpretation to the contemporary situation, considering points of similarity and difference. Describe what would have an analogous function in our contemporary world.
4. Finally, creatively express your application adding explanatory comments where appropriate to show the connections between your interpretation and application.

You now have an overview of the IBS method. We will cover these steps in greater detail in later workshops. Feel free to ask questions about what you do not yet understand in preparation for your later work.

Application
applies the
skills of IBS
to the
contemporary
situation in
light of your
interpretation