

# Guest Post – Discovery and the Inductive Approach

by davidwatson on November 9, 2010 (modified by D Milne for Australia)

Another Guest Post from David Broodryk. I spent the last three weeks with David in South Africa. We discussed many of the topics covered in this post. David is working hard to develop Disciple-making approaches for a post modern culture.

## **Discovery and the Inductive Approach**

There are two main approaches to Bible study. One is inductive. The other is deductive. Discovery groups work with an inductive approach. They fail when using a deductive approach. The struggle we have in particularly Christian-background cultures is that often seminaries and churches teach a deductive approach to scripture. When this Christian baggage is carried into our Discovery groups, it causes serious problems.

### **The Deductive approach**

A deductive approach begins with generalizations, conclusions or doctrines and moves for support of these by using scripture. In other words, it begins with a prior belief and then attempts to make scripture support this predetermined belief. Deduction is subjective and often prejudicial. It is narrow by nature and is concerned with testing or proving hypotheses. It is likely to produce Christians who dictate to the Scriptures, rather than disciples who listen to the Scriptures. Many non-Christians also have this problem in that they assume the Bible is saying things that it is not. This happens when they do not read it closely but carry into the text previous assumptions.

When we talk about placing the Word of God in the hands of ordinary people, many church leaders express a fear that heresy will develop (A fascinating return to pre-reformation thinking!). This fear arises from their deductive training – *but the concern may be well intentioned*. A deductive Bible study or sermon begins from a point that the teacher is trying to make, and then uses a number of scripture verses and examples to support that conclusion. Many Western churches are built on this deductive approach to scripture. [Note: not all Western teaching follows this caricature. The author's mode of explanation (contrasting bad deductive with inductive) helps us understand key advantages of the inductive approach. Don't let this introduction prevent you from reading the article. – DM ] So are most cults. A cult begins when a powerful leader begins with a premise and then brews a concoction from scattered pieces of scripture to construct support for his premise. Cults are formed when God's people become too lazy to form their understanding of truth on Scripture itself, but rely on a strong teacher or denomination to interpret scripture for them. Cults use the deductive approach in order to keep people ignorant of the scriptures and dependent on the leaders of the cult. This "top down" approach is the root cause of most heresies. The result of the church adopting this approach to scripture is that most churches are "heresy management centres." They are continually trying to counter heretical deductive reasoning with truth arrived at by using the same deductive approach. The result is all kinds of arguments about often petty issues that ignore the simplicity of plain obedience to scripture. The best defence against heresy in small groups is not a deductive process, but rather an inductive approach to scripture.

This is not to say that there is no place for the deductive approach. Not all deductive study is dogmatic or heretical (making scripture say something it actually does not say). At its

most basic level, deductive Bible study is simply instruction in Biblical doctrine. As long as doctrine is formed by correctly handling scripture, it is of some benefit. Of course, in deductive Bible study the student places a lot of trust in his teacher to guide him through the doctrines. This creates a problem in our “insight-based” culture. Too often, leaders under pressure to reveal their “latest insight” fall into weaving a web of interpretations that appear to support their desired view. They deceive themselves and their audience by impressing their own thinking into the Bible rather than allowing the Bible to impress it’s thinking on them. They are less concerned with what the scriptures say than they are about protecting their own personal insight. The result, regardless of the teacher’s intent, is that the listeners are misled (2 Peter 3:16). It is therefore vital that we teach believers to be like the Bereans, who tested what they heard against the scriptures (Acts 17:11-12). This is the strongest defence against heresy. Scripture teaches this practice, continually warning us to guard against fables, babblings and contradictions that are falsely called knowledge (1 Timothy 1:3-4; 6:3-5; 6:20-21; 2 Timothy 2:17-18; 4:3-4). The only way to truly test what Scripture says is to use an inductive approach.

### **The Inductive Approach**

A better approach in a small group is an inductive approach to scripture (what we call a Discovery Group). An inductive approach is (*as much as possible* –DM) objective and impartial. It demands that we first examine the particulars of the Scriptures and then make conclusions based on those particulars. It begins with the plain text of scripture, and encourages participants to read the passages and draw conclusions directly from what the text itself says. Inductive reasoning, by its very nature, is more open-ended and exploratory. It uses questions asked by a facilitator in order to elicit thought and learning. It is a highly effective learning method, especially in a self-correcting group process. Facilitators of an inductive study group are trained to ask questions, not provide answers. People are trained to study the scriptures. They are taught to ask questions which help them understand what is going on, what is being said, and how that relates to the rest of the passage. Inductive Bible study on the basic level is simply careful instruction in the meaning of the Biblical text. It produces students of Scripture rather than students of doctrine.

A simple inductive study involves three steps:

- 1) Observation of the scripture (what does it say?)
- 2) Interpretation of the scripture (what does it mean?)
- 3) Application of the scripture (what will I do in response?)

The purpose of inductive Bible Study is not to build doctrine (although over time people do begin to form doctrinal understandings based on the scriptures they have read). Rather, it is textual in nature, demanding careful examination of the Biblical texts in order to know what they mean and how we should apply them to our lives. The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to lead students into a knowledge and understanding of scripture that moves them towards practical application (2 Timothy 3:15-41). The ultimate goal of a faithful Bible teacher should be to raise his students up to his level of understanding and obedience, so that they may eventually instruct and correct him (Ephesians 4:11-16).

A common objection to the simple inductive process is that people will become so focused on the details of the text, that they overlook the larger picture. It is true that a person or group looking at one text or passage can interpret that passage incorrectly. In our post-modern age of personal insight and personal application that is a valid concern. However,

the objection ignores the fact that over time, the group will self-correct if taught correctly. Any imbalance is corrected over time through a balanced approach to the entire body of Scripture. As new scriptures are introduced, the group learns a vital principle of interpretation – that scripture interprets scripture. Without fail, they adjust and grow in their understanding of scripture at a deeper level than the deductive approach would ever have produced.

### **How Deductive reasoning destroys groups**

The biggest failure of the deductive approach is that it does not lead naturally to obedience. Rather, it most often leads to disagreements and arguments between group members. This sometimes happens so subtly and suddenly, that an inexperienced facilitator is easily caught off guard. Christians, especially, are so programmed to think deductively that some of them almost never “get it.” For example, let’s look at an all-too-common interaction when Christians attempt the Discovery process:

Facilitator: What is this passage in Genesis 1 saying?

John (unbeliever): It says to me that God made everything (inductive conclusion).

James (new believer): This passage tells me that God made everything around me. If that is true, then we have a responsibility to look after it. This week, I will make a point of picking up litter and looking after the world that God created (inductive conclusion and obedience statement).

John (unbeliever): It seems to be saying that God made everything in six days and then rested on the seventh day. I have been working a lot lately, but if God saw the need to take time to rest, then I also need rest. I will take time this week to rest and spend time with my family (inductive conclusion and obedience statement).

Mary (believer): Well, I don’t believe God made the world in six literal days. If you allow me, then I can show you that the days were not literal, but figurative. Also, Jesus did away with the Sabbath. In Hebrews it says . . . (approaching scripture with a doctrinal premise and using scriptures to try to prove a point).

Facilitator: Mary, let’s try to stick with this passage and learn what God is saying to us through it – how we can obey Him.

Mary (gets offended): Well, if you don’t want to hear what I have to say then tell me so. I think it is important for these new believers to understand what the Bible really says! They can easily fall into error, you know!

What is taking place in this interaction? The unbeliever and new believer easily follow the inductive approach. They deal with the passage before them and instinctively follow the process of “simple truth simply obeyed.” The believer enters the discussion loaded with deductive reasoning and defensive doctrine. She believes that she is the defender of truth. Unaware of the consequences of her actions, Mary continually interferes with the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the others present. She uses her doctrines to avoid simple obedience. Her statements muddy the waters, making it difficult to see the simple truth in the scriptures before the group. The ideal is to never have unbelievers and believers together in the same group. In reality, this is not always possible. In this case, Mary will need to be confronted gently until she changes or leaves. Left unchecked, her behaviour will destroy the group.

### **How deductive reasoning destroys replication**

The inductive process keeps the Word of God as the central authority in the group. This is easily replicated. The group does not need a Bible expert to lead the group – they simply need a Bible. Members of the group quickly understand this and develop a boldness to start groups of their own.

However, when the group falls into a deductive mode, members become passive. Stronger leaders that dominate the conversation quickly emerge. These leaders become the “experts and defenders” of Biblical truth. Members of the group stop participating for fear of being shot down by the experts. Replicating the group becomes impossible, or at best extremely slow, because each new group needs another expert in order to survive. Groups based on deductive reasoning cannot effectively replicate.

### **Inductive rules**

A simple set of rules have helped us to keep the Discovery groups faithful to the inductive process. These rules guide the group discussion.

Rules for a Discovery Group:

- 1) The passage preaches, not any person. Stick with the passage of scripture in front of the group – no “hyperlinking” to other passages!
- 2) No individual may impose his or her “insight” on others – stick with the plain and simplest meaning of the passage in front of the group.
- 3) Any individual may challenge any other individual in the group with one simple question, “Where does it say what you are saying in this passage of scripture?”

The rules are not fool-proof. We still have people resorting to deductive reasoning. But the rules have helped us to stay reasonably faithful to the process – even in a church context. In order to work, every member of the group must “own” the rules. Every member of the group becomes a policeman of the process. And yes, people with a Western church background are by far the most difficult to manage in this process!

### **Curriculum Design**

It is vital that those who design and determine curriculum, have a deep understanding of the inductive process. Curriculum cannot be scripture-based – it must be scripture-only. Curriculum designers cannot begin with a premise and then attempt to piece together passages that support that premise. The meaning must flow from the simplest interpretation of the passages. This becomes even more complex when working with various translations, cultures and languages. The basic test for curriculum designers is, “Does the simplest interpretation of this text inside the target culture and language, using the translation that people will be reading, consistently lead to the desired truth discovered and obeyed?” Application is often personal, but the interpretation should be consistent. This kind of curriculum is something that is only arrived at through careful research, practical testing, intensive review and a dynamic process of continued self-correction. *(In my opinion this is where the deductive process occurs – ie when leaders with Biblical knowledge and insight into the target group design a faithful curriculum - DM )*

### **Conclusion**

The Discovery process is a powerful method for leading people to become obedient followers of Christ. But in order to work, it needs to stay with an inductive approach to scripture. Curriculum designers must stay engaged through a dynamic process of testing and self-correction. Outside leaders must carefully train the inductive method. Facilitators must ensure that the approach to scripture remains inductive. Any member of the group

that enters into deductive reasoning can potentially destroy the process. When every person in the process becomes a guardian of the inductive process, it never leads to heresy, but rather releases the life-transforming power of the gospel.

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***Discovery Bible Study Process - some additional guidance (-DM)***

- 1. Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to lead your discussion*
- 2. Let the text speak, look carefully at the character interaction, locations, and descriptive words, to see what the passage means. The goal is a personal and group encounter with the Bible.*
- 3. keep within the passage - try to understand this story as it stands, jumping around the Bible disempowers new believers from seeing themselves as DBS leaders*
- 4. limit talk about great sermons you have heard or commentaries you have read - this may be good but can easily inhibit open honest personal encounter.*
- 5. listen to other group members and look to allow all members to contribute. You want to hear others real thoughts. No one person should dominate the discussion or talk over the top of other people.*
- 6. facilitate – ask questions, avoid telling, if teaching is needed use this gift in bite sized pieces to allow discovery, digestion and interaction.*
- 7. be prepared to state the obvious as this leads to further discussion and insight into the less than obvious.*
- 8. Call people back to the Bible if the discussion wanders or if unusual ideas are offered. Ask “Which part of the text sparked that idea? What was your chain of thought?” or for a potential distraction: “Which part of the passage prompted you to think that?” for a red herring: “Thanks for that idea, but can we hold that thought as we need to come back to the passage or we will run out of time” etc.*
- 9. Questions about context, people, are usually answered by the Bible, look for the clues in the passage first before you draw on other sources of information.*
- 10. Do not be worried about some silences as people read quietly at times, some are encountering the story for the first time and they need some space to reflect and to get a sense of the story. Don’t fill silences with your answers.*
- 11. For non first language speakers it may help to write down the answers people are giving so all can see them as you go.*

*Dave Milne*