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A Faculty Member's Response to David Bauer's Article

This paper was part of an oral panel presentation that was given on October 12, 2012 at Asbury Theological Seminary. The panel was asked to engage with the question of Inductive Bible Study and its relationship to the global church. The paper is only minimally revised from its original oral presentation.

Unlike others on this panel, I come to Inductive Bible Study (IBS) as an outsider. I did not study at Asbury or at another institution that taught this particular method. However, I do come from programs that are also deeply concerned with a close reading of the biblical text and with the detailed observation that is part of that quest. When I first came to Asbury back in 2000 I was able to sit in Dr. Bauer's Matthew class, to discuss some of the interpretive issues that arose in that context, and to think about the IBS method. I have found Dr. Bauer and my other IBS colleagues to be good and gracious conversation partners on questions of interpretation. Over the years I have read Dr. Traina's *Methodical Bible Study*, Dr. Thompson's *Bible Study that Works*, and now the joint volume by Bauer and Traina *Inductive Bible Study*. In addition, I have taught 600 and 700 level exegesis here at Asbury for more than a decade. Almost every student that I have had in those classes comes to me having taken IBS as a prerequisite for further exegetical work, and to some extent student's facility with interpretive questions has been impacted by their engagement with the inductive method of study. I'm also well aware from conversations with my colleagues that there are different perspectives on IBS and on how it is taught. So, while there is agreement amongst my IBS colleagues, there are also areas of difference. My own comments today will be a reflection on the recent volume *Inductive Bible Study* by Bauer and Traina.

In my remarks today, I want to affirm many strengths that I see within the IBS method while also drawing attention to some particular critiques that I have as well. Finally, I want to raise some questions for consideration as we think together about the needs of the global church and the potential contribution of inductive biblical study. Let me begin with the strengths.

First, IBS teaches a method or approach to the text. In other words, this form of study is, as Traina called it in his earlier book, methodical. It presents an order for students to follow as they approach the text. They are not “left on their own” to somehow, someway come up with some insight from the text. This is especially helpful for students that are new to biblical study and who need a guide to follow. Bauer and Traina’s book aims to present a comprehensive description of the method. This can be a deterrent since it can take a long time to read and digest this book, especially for the beginner, and because the method can seem overwhelming and intimidating. On the other hand, the information that is needed to work with the method for many years is supplied in this guide. In any case, whether one begins with a book like Thompson’s *Bible Study that Works* or delves into Bauer and Traina’s *Inductive Bible Study*, you will find a methodical approach to the study of the Bible.

Second, IBS has long championed book level and segment level context as particularly important areas of study. This is a particular area of strength that I want to affirm within the IBS method. Knowledge of a whole biblical book, its structures, its textual markers, and its style helps the interpreter to study the smaller parts of the book more effectively. It helps the interpreter to see both the big picture and the smaller details at the same time. This is a very important area of study that can also be one of the more difficult areas of study. I think that this is especially true when it comes to larger books where there is a lot of material to be analyzed in comparison to some of the smaller biblical books. At this point, Bauer and Traina lay out good procedures for beginning this type of study. This includes multiple readings of the whole text, labels for particular parts of the text, attention to repeated textual markers, and other elements that help to structure the whole of the biblical book under consideration. This type of study helps protect the interpreter against proof-texting and other types of reading that rip verses from their literary context. This attention to the whole of the book in its final literary form is another strength of the method.

Third, IBS gives attention to the book in its final literary form and also gives attention to the shape of the canon as a whole. This is particularly helpful for those who will use the book in ministry within the church and in other contexts where the Bible is read in its final form. At the same time, it does raise question about the value of other types of criticism—those criticisms that have been typically labeled as “historical criticism.” However, that is an issue that I will leave with Dr. Arnold for further discussion.

While IBS has strengths to commend it, there are also some critiques of the method that can be offered.

First, throughout the *Inductive Bible Study* volume special terminology is employed with many categories ending in – “ization” (plain English should be preferred – why not just call it summary rather than summarization or talk

about a crucial turning point rather than cruciality?). Some students think that they have accomplished something by giving a label to the text, but simply being able to label the text does not indicate that they have deeply grasped the meaning of the text. Related to this issue is the construction of the categories themselves. It is quite tempting for students to take the categories that are given and to begin to employ them without raising questions about where the categories come from, or who determines them, who decides what to look for. Although this may not be the intent of Bauer and Traina, it is difficult for students to question the categories that are given. In one sense, if students accept IBS categories as simply something to learn and employ without any engagement at the “meta” level regarding the identity of these categories, then IBS categories become the new set of presuppositions about what the text will contain and what will be found in the text. Thus there is a tension between an “inductive” approach and the giving of categories, which has the appearance of a deductive method. On the one hand, the argument is to study the text on its own terms. And I am very sympathetic to that approach. However, as soon as one turns to the actual methodology, one is introduced to category after category—different “general materials” (persons, events, chronology, geography, and ideology), different “relationships” (recurrence, contrast, comparison, climax, particularization, generalization, substantiation, cruciality, summarization, etc.). Too easily these can become logical categories into which the text is slotted rather than tools or aids in the interpretive process.

I want to finish this first critique by talking about the role that learning styles and types of intelligence have in the appropriation of IBS as a method. IBS relies highly on two types of intelligence—Logical-Mathematical and Linguistic—those who have these types of intelligence are generally “pattern smart” and “word smart.” In other words, seeing the patterns in texts comes easily to them and engaging words comes readily to them. However, there are other kinds of knowing and these are less easily accessed through the IBS method as it is currently presented. Some of these include spatial intelligence, kinesthetic intelligence, and existential intelligence. Might a different type of knowledge and an equally valid understanding of a Scriptural text come about through acting out the text? Painting a text? Through meditating on the text? Through manipulating concrete representations of the text as children do in *Godly Play* types of curriculum? What role do intuition and imagination play in the interpretation of the biblical text? In other words, does the IBS method rely too heavily on logic and linguistics without enough inclusion of other types of learning?

My second critique relates to the topic of presuppositions. There seems to be ambivalence in the volume between an acknowledgment that everyone has presuppositions and a desire to rise above these or to in some way put

presuppositions aside. This is a repeated tension that is evidenced in the book, especially in the first 35 pages. There is a well written and well thought out appendix at the end of the book that deals with the role of presuppositions in our approach to the Bible. There is much that I find helpful in the appendix, but I wish that that material had been included in the book itself and that the insights about presuppositions (especially their inescapable nature) had been incorporated more fully into the book itself. One of the issues that I want to raise is that one cannot rise above presuppositions. There are always presuppositions ready to take the place of those that have been revealed for what they are. One can hope to continue peeling back layers of presuppositions, but the desire to rise above presuppositions is a false hope. In addition, there are whole sets of presuppositions that we have that are extremely difficult to peel away. Many of these were imbibed along with milk when we were infants – the mother-tongue that we speak, the cultural water that we swim in, and the familial lives that we live all contribute to the sets of presuppositions that allow us to function in the world and even to read and comprehend the biblical text itself. Again, these can be pressed against (or even peeled back); we can become fluent in another language (although the older one becomes the more difficult that can be); we can move to other parts of the world and live among other cultures (this is an especially effective way to reveal cultural blinders), but there will always be presuppositions that impact and influence our understanding of the text.

Third, IBS sees the text as an “object of study” (albeit one that should be near to the interpreter rather than held at arms length and one that should be experienced as transformational), but it is an object to be appropriated rather than a “narrative to be told” in such a way that the past becomes a real aspect of the present (cf. Willie Jennings, p. 55). In a similar way, there is attention given to the personal needs and questions of the interpreter, but these are approached as a matter of attention and analysis rather than as part of the narrative that forms the identity that engages the text. Let me contrast the IBS method of study with the kind of narrative attention that I’m talking about. In his book *The Christian Imagination* Willie James Jennings describes someone who is a “place-maker” – a person who is a guide to the bond between places and bodies. This story teller has the task of telling the story in such a way that they are “creating in the process a vivid sense that what happened long ago – *right here, on this very spot* – could be happening *now*.” (Jennings, p. 55). This is a form of narrative reading that invites the hearer to participation and to a sense of the self as one of many who have participated in the unfolding story. And as such it presents an alternative way of thinking about both the method itself and the purpose of the method. The text is no longer something to be applied but rather something to be experienced.

Finally, in this context I have one last set of concerns to raise. Part of our discussion today is around the topic of whether or how IBS might be appropriated for the global church. Here are some questions that I would like to raise about that topic.

1. To what extent does IBS rely upon a high level of literacy in order to be effective? Are there other methods that are more suited for oral cultures or for persons with a low level of literacy or with limited access to the printed text of Scripture?
2. To what extent should persons from other cultures be invited to construct their own way of seeing and approaching the text? In other words, does the idea of taking IBS to other cultural settings urge them to adopt the same categories and language that is already in place around this method? To what extent would this be a benefit and to what extent a hindrance?
3. How might IBS be changed by an encounter with non-western, non-linear ways of thinking and engaging? For example, what implications might the high value placed on oral story telling in many other cultures have for IBS?

Thank you for the challenge to read and comment on this comprehensive guide to Inductive Bible Study.

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