The Story of My Work with IBS

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Introduction

I’ve taught Inductive Bible Study (IBS) on Asbury Theological Seminary’s Florida–Dunnam campus (Orlando) and online since the 2000–2001 academic year. I dedicate this essay to David Bauer and David Thompson who were my principal instructors and mentors in IBS methodology. As I look back at my journey with learning and teaching IBS, I’ve seen it intersect with my passion for biblical studies, preaching, and the mission of the church.

Early Years (1969–1987)

I grew up in Hope church, a medium sized United Methodist congregation in Akron, Ohio. My parents were adult converts to the Christ following movement. Fortunately, Hope church valued Bible study. My parents to this day remain students of Scripture and I recall them reading the Bible together when I was young.

Two of the three pastors who served Hope church during my early years had attended either Asbury Seminary or Asbury College (now Asbury University). Looking back, I can see the influence of
IBS in their teaching and preaching. These pastors taught and preached from both the Old and New Testaments. They encouraged the congregation to read Scripture daily and recognized members who completed the annual challenge to read the Bible cover to cover.

I made the Christian faith my own during my sophomore year in high school. One evening in early March 1985, I consciously took the decision to embrace the challenge that my youth pastor, Steve Miller, had given our youth fellowship a few months earlier on New Year’s Eve. He had exhorted us to read the entire New Testament. I remember picking up my Bible and praying, “If you are real, Lord, reveal yourself to me.” This simple prayer altered the course of my life. I began the habit of reading Scripture daily, and a couple of weeks later I surrendered my life to God.

Scripture came to life for me; I was hungry to learn. By the time I graduated high school, I had read the entire Bible three or four times. I attended morning and evening worship, youth group, and even started a bible study at my house for a small group of my friends. To learn more, I listened to AM radio (this was the pre-internet era in the 1980s) to hear Bible teachers such as J. Vernon McGee, Chuck Swindoll, Haddon Robinson, and D. James Kennedy. All of these teachers referred frequently to the original languages. This spawned a desire in me to learn Hebrew and Greek so that I too could gain a deeper understanding of the Bible.

During the early years of my faith, I was looking for certainty and struggled with parts of the Bible that didn’t fit together seamlessly. For example, the different accounts of Judas’s death or the number of angels present at Jesus’s tomb raised questions for me about the truthfulness of the accounts. When I asked my pastor about the tensions in the text that I observed, he offered harmonizations that I found forced and unconvincing. When I pressed him for better answers, he said, “Don’t ask questions; just believe.” This statement disappointed me, but ultimately drove me to look for answers inductively.
I was academically gifted from childhood. Although I grew up in blue collar, hardworking, post-industrial Akron Ohio, I gravitated to books and study. I was particularly good at mathematics and science. My post-high school plan had been to study engineering. At the same time, I had begun to sense a call to pastoral ministry. Feeling this tension, I enrolled in the University of Akron in electrical engineering. This was my hometown university, so this decision allowed me to stay active in Hope church. Little did I know that this choice of school would be pivotal in preparing me for a vocation involving the study of Scripture.


In the spring of my freshman year, I responded to my call to ministry by changing my declared major from a B.S. in electrical engineering to a B.A. in history. This shift opened space for coursework in ancient history and in classical languages. Principally, this allowed me to take six semesters of Classical (Attic) Greek as well as multiple courses in ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman history. The opportunity to study Classical Greek at an advanced level was pivotal in my success in biblical studies upon my arrival at Asbury as I was able to navigate the Koine Greek of the New Testament with ease. The history classes provided me with key background information about the world that produced the Bible.

Also, during my freshman year, I became a candidate for ordained ministry in the United Methodist Church. My pastor Paul George invited me to serve as his intern during the summer of 1988. He gave me the opportunity to preach three sermons. These were my initial attempts at the public interpretation of the Bible. These first sermons marked the beginning of my love for preaching and teaching in local churches. I also recognized my need for more training in interpretation. I graduated in May 1991 with a B.A. in history and began my studies at Asbury Seminary in September 1991.

I took my first IBS course during the Fall 1991 semester under the instruction of Dr. David Bauer. Without a doubt, Matthew (IBS) was worth the price of my entire M.Div. Bauer astonished me with his ability to leverage a rigorous methodology in the service of rich and deep insight into the meaning of the Bible. I remember one of our initial assignments was to do a simple segment survey of the genealogy of Matthew’s Gospel (1:1–17). I went to his office and joked that I had always skipped the genealogy to get to the “good stuff” in Matthew. Bauer responded in his matter of fact yet humble way, “Brian, you shouldn’t skip any part of the Bible. In fact, I published an essay on the Christology in Matthew’s genealogy.” I can only imagine the look on my face as his words sunk in. As I listened in awe to his in-depth presentation in class on Matthew’s genealogy, I thought, “I want to work with Scripture at Dr. Bauer’s depth of engagement.” I was hooked.

As a teacher, Bauer was systematic and clear in his presentations. He presented substantive readings of portions of Matthew’s Gospel that often astonished me with their comprehensiveness, nuance, and depth of understanding. I remain grateful for the rigorous application of IBS method that Bauer modeled class after class. Moreover, Bauer was generous with his time and always maintained an open-door policy regarding office hours. I learned as much from Dr. Bauer outside of the classroom as I did inside it.

Dr. Bauer also modeled the use of Greek in interpretation even though IBS in those days was called “English Bible.” He met with interested students weekly in the dining hall to read Greek during the lunch hour. Following Bauer’s example, I did most of my interpretive work for Matthew using the Greek New Testament. I had only one additional course with Dr. Bauer (“Historical Books”), but he served as my advisor, frequent conversation partner, and guide for the three years as an M.Div. student. He has not only remained a friend
through the years, but I am now his colleague. His landmark work with his mentor Robert Traina, *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* (Baker Academic: 2001), remains the definitive presentation of IBS methodology for students and teachers.

Dr. David Thompson was the second major influence in my work in IBS. I had Thompson for two IBS courses (Pentateuch and Minor Prophets). If David Bauer convinced me of the necessity and value of a rigorous methodology especially in the stages of Survey and Interpretation, Thompson helped me to understand how to channel rich insights from the biblical text into profound teaching for contemporary audiences. I appreciated specifically the time that he spent in class on Evaluation and Application. He offered two key insights that have impacted me. First, for evaluation, he taught a process that he called canonical dialogue.¹ Second, he illustrated possible avenues for application through use of a diagram of a wheel with the spokes representing various spheres of life that we should be mindful of when appropriating Scripture in the modern world. In addition, Thompson was an outstanding preacher and he inspired me to become a better communicator.

Last, I had the privilege of taking Dr. John Oswalt for Isaiah (IBS). This course gave me the opportunity to hone my understanding of IBS methodology and apply it to the entire book of Isaiah. Also, like Thompson, Oswalt was an outstanding preacher and I experienced the end product of IBS methodology by listening to many of his sermons.

**Asbury Theological Seminary:**  

While teaching biblical languages and OT survey during the 1994–1995 and 1995–1996 school years, I continued to read widely in academic

biblical studies and I simultaneously served a small United Methodist congregation (Lawson’s Chapel). The latter kept my studies firmly connected with the life and questions found within a local church. The necessity of bringing the Bible to life in a worshipping community forced me to focus on Evaluation and Application.

Union Presbyterian Seminary (1996–2000)²

In the fall of 1996, I moved to Richmond, Virginia to follow in the footsteps of David Bauer and Joseph Dongell who both studied at Union. During my residency at Union, I met and became friends with James Miller. Jim is now my Orlando based colleague and teaches IBS and New Testament.

At Union, I studied under S. Dean McBride, Jr. He was a classic historical critic who also showed a keen eye for literary structure. I primarily used my training in IBS for my exegetical work at Union, but McBride showed me ways to enhance a text-centered approach with insights from the world behind the text. Also, I preached regularly in Presbyterian and United Methodist congregations and served as a local pastor during my final three years in residency at Union. Throughout my adult life, my frequent preaching and teaching in local congregations has provided a vehicle for putting to test the fruits of my academic work.

Asbury Theological Seminary (FL, Dunnam): Professor of Biblical Studies (2000–Present)

I began teaching on the Orlando campus in fall 2000 and have taught a wide range of courses: OT and NT introduction, biblical narrative,

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² Union Presbyterian Seminary is the current name for the former Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, then Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education. I began my studies when it was Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, but it had changed to Union–PSCE by the time I graduated.
OT and NT exegesis, biblical languages and of course IBS (Matthew, Pentateuch, Psalms, and Minor Prophets). My role in Orlando is distinct from my colleagues in Wilmore who typically teach within the OT, NT, or IBS departments without much crossover. The opportunity to teach both OT and NT exegesis as well as IBS has helped me to forge a synthesis between the disciplines.

Dr. Joel Green was a professor of NT and Dean when I began teaching. Although not trained in IBS, I found him to be a fruitful conversation partner regarding hermeneutics and he pushed me to become a more effective instructor. One of his critiques of IBS was that students were often better at pointing out “interesting things about the Bible” than actually interpreting it in ways that spoke to 21st century people. He suggested that some students substituted IBS technical language, especially the structural labels, in place of digging deeper into the text to draw out its full meaning and implications. We can debate the fairness of this criticism, but I chose to allow it to serve as an opportunity for my growth by reflecting on ways of motivating students to learn not only to discover “interesting things about the Bible,” but also to provide a vision for dynamic application and appropriation of the text for life. Thanks to Green, I was poised to make a big leap in my thinking and teaching.

**Missional Hermeneutics and IBS**

My scholarly career shifted to a focus on the relationship between God’s mission and biblical studies during the 2004–2005 academic year. The rest of this essay will explore experiences, questions, and people that have contributed to my growth as an IBS professor and briefly discuss some specific examples of how I leverage these in the classroom.

During the 2003–2004 academic year, I reconnected with Rev. Eric Hallett whom I had met during my M.Div. days. After leading a successful church plant in Maine, Eric took a year to retool in Asbury’s Beeson D.Min, program under Dale Galloway. During this
iteration of the Beeson program, the emphasis was on leadership and preaching for church planters. Eric then moved to Orlando to serve as an executive pastor while completing his dissertation. Eric and I began meeting for breakfast and talking about our work. He introduced me to the literature of church planting and the missional church movement. He invited me to serve as part of a team exploring the possibility of a new church plant in Orlando.

To facilitate this, in October 2004, Eric and I attended a dynamic conference hosted by Willow Creek Community Church called “Communicating in Today’s Reality.” The presentation that most impacted me was by Erwin McManus (pastor of Mosaic in Los Angeles). In a talk entitled “Speaking from Mar’s Hill,” he taught about the need to read the Bible not merely for the church but also through the eyes and ears of unbelievers. I believe that this was the first time that I had heard about reading Scripture “missiologically.” Given the brevity of his talk, he did not present any concrete methodology, but my ears perked up. How does one read Scripture missiologically? What did it mean to read and teach the Bible for persons who didn’t already know the basic Gospel message? How can I leverage my Ph.D. in biblical studies to maximize my ability to communicate the Gospel in the 21st century in which there are 5,000 fewer Christians in the Western world every day?

In January 2005, I had the opportunity to connect with Erwin’s brother Alex McManus during a visit to Orlando. We met for coffee at a local Barnes & Noble. This was a pivotal encounter for me. It was life changing and unforgettable in the same way that my conversation with David Bauer about Matthew’s genealogy had been. Almost as soon as we sat down to talk, Alex asked, “What business do you have training pastors at a seminary if you’ve never planted a church?” Of course, he was being provocative, but this question served as an impetus for a lasting shift in my priorities and thinking. Alex’s inquiry

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3 McManus also briefly mentions this concept in his book, *Unstoppable Force: Daring to Become the Church God Had in Mind* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2001), 72.
led me to ask more new questions: What is the relationship between academic biblical study and God’s mission in the world? How can IBS serve church planters and communities of faith actively engaging the world with the Gospel? How can a commitment to active participation in the *missio dei* contribute to the teaching of IBS?

My conversion to the centrality of mission led me to work on helping IBS students to make more specific applications of biblical truth. With this background, I will sketch out its growing edges.

My comments here assume that a student has already moved through the process of Survey/Observation, Interpretation, and Evaluation. The evaluation phase ends with an evaluative synthesis, which is a statement rooted in the interpretation of the text in conversation with a broader canonical analysis and assessment of the contemporary context.

There are three main areas in which I believe a missional hermeneutic can enhance the work of Application/Appropriation: (1) the role of social location and mission, (2) our conscious intention to read Scripture for both church and world, and (3) the use of new heuristic questions.

**Social Location and Mission**

When doing the work of application, it is critical for students to recognize the impact of their reading context or social location on the process. A missional approach assumes the centrality of the *missio dei* to the ongoing work of the church. To read Scripture faithfully

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5 I plan to address the specifics in more detail in a future publication.


involves locating ourselves as readers in the *missio dei*. Michael Barram wrote, “Ultimately to read the Bible from a missional perspective is not an eisegetical enterprise but merely an honest acknowledgement of our primary interpretive location as we seek to read the Bible more faithfully today.” Practically, this means that interpreters must read Scripture for the missional reality of their local context.

One of the most significant experiences for me was my involvement in the church plant that became Awaken Orlando (2005–2008). I do not believe that my growth in IBS would have been possible without my concrete weekly experiences of preaching and teaching within a missional community in which I regularly engaged, lived among, and taught. This diverse community included longtime Christ followers, college students, large numbers of homeless men and women, curious members of other faiths (Muslim and Hindu) and secular professionals. How did I need to change as an interpreter to be able to present Scripture in compelling ways to all who gathered for worship? How could I simultaneously spur longtime believers to a life of holy love while inviting persons not yet following Jesus to align themselves with the Gospel for the first time? As I studied Scripture weekly to prepare messages, this dynamic context forged a new understanding of the process of Application/Appropriation. I have become convinced that for the 21st century we must take serious consideration of our social location for reading and make certain that we listen to Scripture from a vantage point that is most helpful for advancing God’s mission in our day.

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8 Barram, “Bible, Mission and Social Location,” 58.
Reading Scripture for the Church and World

If readers of Scripture locate their reading within the *missio dei* in order to explore their role in the sanctification of believers and the proclamation of the Gospel to those who do not yet follow Jesus, the task of reading the Bible expands from a traditional position that “preaches to the choir” to one that also “preaches to the street.”9 As I pondered this reality, I began to think of appropriation as always involving two audiences. Scriptures calls believers (insiders) to realign continually with its message while simultaneously inviting not-yet-believers (outsiders) to align themselves with the Gospel. The key in application is to recognize that there is always a word for both *insiders* and *outsiders.*10

Asking New Questions

One of the areas that I appreciated most about the teaching of David Thompson was his ability to make profound applications from Scripture. In his classes he used a diagram of a wheel with spokes to illustrate the potential range of application. He listed various categories to consider when applying the text. I found this a helpful guide because it encouraged specificity from students, but as I’ve worked to leverage Thompson’s insights, I’ve adopted a modified approach using some broader categories. These have emerged from my reflection on missional hermeneutics.

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10 Of course, care must be taken during the Evaluation process to assess the range and limits of the original text’s application. Nevertheless, once this is understood interpreters still must reflect critically and missionally on the message of text for *insiders* and *outsiders* if both will be present for the teaching or proclamation.
I utilize two acronyms to serve heuristically for achieving compelling, specific, and formationally rich applications and appropriations of biblical truth: GPS and MAP.

The first acronym is GPS:

- **Global/local Mission (Mission)**
- **Persons in Community (Community)**
- **Spirit-Transformed (Holiness).**

I use GPS as a means of helping students to find substantive applications for both insiders and outsiders.¹¹ GPS relates to three broad categories: Mission, Community, and Holiness.¹² I do not make any claim that every text will address all (or even any) of these themes and I warn students against making this assumption. However, I have found that GPS and its related questions have raised the level of application in my own work and the impact of my teaching and preaching. Likewise, it has helped my students to produce more dynamic and substantive work.

Here are the questions that I share with students. Note that I explicitly ask for reflection on how a text speaks to an insider as well as an outsider.

**Global/local Mission**

**Insider/Believer:** How does this text envision God’s work in the world? Where do God’s people fit into this mission? How do God’s people need to change to participate more effectively in God’s work? How does this text inform our present engagement in our local community of faith as well as with culture and those outside of the Christian faith?

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¹¹ Thompson’s “Wheel of Application” functions within the GPS rubric quite well, but space limitations will necessitate leaving this discussion for another time.

Outsider/Seeker: What sort of world is this text inviting me to spend my life working to create? What would my life look like if I joined this mission? How does this text give me a “why” for joining the Christ following movement?

Persons in Community

Insider/Believer: How does this text envision the corporate life of God’s people? How does this text shape an ethos for the people of God to embody in its witness to the world? How do God’s people need to change in order to embody the portrait of community assumed in this text?

Outsider/Seeker: What type of community is this text inviting me to explore? How is this text inviting me to participate in a community that exists for something greater than my own wants and desires? How do the community ideals of this text compare/contrast with my present understanding and experience of community outside of the Church?

Spirit-Transformed (Holiness)

Insider: What does this text tell us about the character or ethos of God and God’s people? What are God’s people supposed to become? How do God’s people need to change in order to reflect more profoundly the character of God as exhibited in this passage? What sort of person(s) do I/we need to become in order to live out this text?

Outsider: What type of lifestyle/character is this text inviting me to embody? How would my life be transformed by aligning my character with the vision of this text?
The second acronym that I’ve introduced in teaching is **MAP**:

- Missional Insight
- Attitudinal Alignment
- Plan of Implementation

MAP is designed to help an IBS student work at applying the text concretely in ways that transform a person’s inner life and outward actions. MAP is the end product of application and seeks to make specific and tangible the insights gained from the questions asked in the GPS step. Each of these steps corresponds to a key element of a formational encounter with Scriptural truth. My growing conviction is that Application/Appropriation involves changing our thinking, changing what we care about, and then putting skin in the game through conscious (and *immediate*) action.

**Missional Insight**

What is the specific insight that I/we must embrace and work into my/our thinking theologically, ethically, and missionally?

**Attitudinal Alignment**

How must I/we shift my/our allegiances or the persons/things that I/we care about most deeply?

**Plan of Implementation**

What concrete actions steps must I/we take now?

I’ve found these two acronyms to be helpful supplements that build on the seminal work produced by my forerunners in the IBS movement. I look forward to continuing to reflect critically on method, to developing and honing my presentation of IBS to students, and to realigning my life with the good news of the Gospel through my study of Scripture.