PUTTING THE INDUCTIVE METHOD TO WORK IN SMALL GROUPS
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There are a lot of ways to study the Bible. Different methods, different hermeneutical approaches. But, in my opinion, the inductive Bible study method is one of the worthiest methods – it can lead to lasting spiritual transformation. And if you endeavor to use this method for your personal time in God’s Word, you can expect just that – to be changed by it. But – and this is the biggest BUT EVER – you’ll experience more joy and more fruit if you use the inductive method with a small group.

Growth happens best in community. So, I strongly suggest you get with some ladies, some friends or coworkers, and work through one book of the Bible at a time together as a group. This model is genuine, organic discipleship at its best: teaching someone to make a meal for themselves from the Scriptures.

A. SMALL GROUP PROCESS

(1) Read together

Our church is offering a Bible Boot Camp to our women. It’s a weekend training event for learning how to study the Bible. But the most important part of the event happens after the event is over. We’ll close our time together with a Bible reading challenge of John, chapters 13-21. We will study one chapter a week until Easter. However, you could choose any book of the Bible and work through at your own speed. It is our goal to have the ladies form their own groups to read through John. We won’t assign them to a group or try to fill leadership slots. We are simply challenging them to find women who are already in their sphere of influence and form organic small groups to read through Scripture together.

(2) Process together

• Facilitate discovery in guided tours of a passage

Gathering a small group to read through a book of the Bible together is not as difficult as you might think. Here’s how the process could look. First, read an assigned passage and then guide your group through it using a template or worksheet. The key is to
streamline the process so you get a sustainable system in place. It’s for this reason I prefer to offer a blank worksheet or template for the women to follow. Using a template helps the women remember what they’re supposed to be looking for and what questions they are supposed to be asking of the text. It helps guide them through a passage.

It’s also a good idea, to follow the natural divisions of the text when planning your reading schedule. For instance, if you’re working through the book of Titus, you might work with one section (usually a couple of smaller paragraphs) at a time. Simply follow how Paul has organized his thoughts. If you’re working through one of the gospels, you might work with individual stories in a chapter or groupings of stories. Organizing your reading in this way helps you stay faithful to the author’s intent (how he organized and arranged his book or letter). It also helps your group from trying to process too much information in one setting and getting overwhelmed. It’s hard to summarize an entire chapter, especially if it records several separate events! So, keep it simple by guiding your group through the natural divisions of the text.

- **Facilitate discovery by asking inductive questions**

For the first few weeks, you might have the women read the passage before they come to your meeting so they are familiar with it. Then, fill out the inductive worksheet together, prompting them on what to look for. But as the women grow more comfortable finding those answers or clues on their own, ask them to complete their work on their own before you meet.

In this way, you aren’t spending your group time *doing* the study but in *discussing* their discoveries and questions about their studies. This is a real turning point in the group and should be celebrated. Praise them for getting their work done and attempting to understand and discern the meaning in a text. When women begin to study the bible on their own before class, they come to class better prepared. Ownership has been transferred to them and they become more accountable to the group. Additionally – and this is the cool part – they are more likely to meditate on what their learning throughout the day. This is, unintentional of course, but true, nevertheless. When women get their work done outside of class, more of God’s Word gets into them.
Once your group shifts to primarily discussing a passage together instead of studying it together, continue to guide your women through the passage by asking inductive questions. This helps the group articulate biblical thoughts and principles with clarity. By the end of your time together, they will likely surprise themselves at the depth of truth and wisdom they are able to extract on their own. It really is an exciting process to facilitate.

Here’s some ideas for learning to facilitate inductive discussions.

First, discuss their observations. This is a fairly straightforward exercise, but it is always fun to stretch the group in making their own observations. Instead of simply asking them to answer the 5 “W’s,” ask them what they noticed about their observations. This encourages them to look more deeply in a passage, such as uncovering patterns in the story or characters. And remember, that your goal is to uncover facts in the passage, not everyone’s opinions! We are most interested in the author’s intent or motivation for including a detail. If a claim is made, encourage the group to support the claim with evidence from the passage.

Next, proceed to interpretation. Begin by asking the group to share their MIT (main idea of the text). Give everyone a chance to share their summary and compare answers, praising those who articulated and summarized the message of a passage with clarity. This is usually a fun part of the process, because the group gets to hear a unique spin on the same truth.

This is also a valuable time for group members to correct or clarify their own summary to bring it in alignment with the message of the passage. The women will likely start off being hesitant to share their summary of the passage, so be generous with praise and strive to withhold criticism. Correcting false doctrine should be addressed but in a tone that encourages the student to continue to return to the passage once more to clarify what she means.

If the main idea remains muddled, return the group to the overall context of the passage. Spend time searching out the different kinds of context of a passage and how each might aid in rightly understanding its core meaning (historical context, immediate
context, theological and literary context, etc.). Also, be sure to give the group time to think and respond. Consider questions such as:

--What do you think Jesus meant when he said....?
--Why do you think Jesus did that?
--Why do you think that detail is significant?
--How does the author use a particular theme or key word?

If the discussion moves away from the author’s intent in writing, be sure to pull the group back to the main idea of a passage. Sometimes it’s as simple as asking how a detail or thought falls in line with the main idea.

Overall, in asking interpretative questions, your goal should be to help the group learn to draw their own conclusions and identify how a text supports their conclusion. In asking inductive questions, you are helping them learn how to connect the dots the author purposefully put there.

Based on Mark 8, here is an example of the slight difference between observation and interpretation questions.

**Observation Question:** What method does Jesus use to heal the blind man? (One answer).

**Interpretation Questions:** How is Jesus’ interactions with the man unusual? (Many possible answers based on the passage).

These questions may sound similar and even generate similar responses, but one is based on facts revealed in the story and the second invites the reader to draw conclusions based on those facts. Observation questions are descriptive in nature; interpretation questions are explanatory. For more examples of inductive questions, see *Effective Bible Teaching* by James Wilhoit and Leland Ryken, 118-123.

Finally, move to application-oriented questions. Follow the method outlined in the indicative method for making applications; move from general to specific. How can we apply this passage to our lives becomes more personal when you ask a group member how God is asking her to respond? This will probably the most encouraging part of your group time. It can also be the most encouraging time for you as a leader, because you
get to see how God grows a woman in his Word right before your eyes. It is always fun to be able to enjoy the fruit of the seed he planted and you watered.

In *Effective Bible Teaching*, the authors also suggest asking “bridge-building questions.” These questions require the group to first identify the culture and problems at play among the passage’s original audience. Then, the group builds a bridge from “then” to “now.” How would you apply this principle to your life today? What similarities exist between the first century church as its described in this passage and the church today? You can also build bridges around certain characters in a story or around certain groups of people the Bible describes. What would a modern-day Mary or Titus look like in my world? Or for instance, using Paul’s descriptions of false teachers in the church at Crete, who would he consider a false prophet in our false culture today?

These bridge-building questions help do the work of application by bringing a timeless principle into our present context. Along with gospel-focused questions that prompt a reader to ask where the gospel can be seen in this passage, bridge-building questions can be powerful tools to guide women to respond to a passage with their heart, first.

**3) Pray together**

The final step in your small group time is to pray together. Pray over what you read, praising how God’s character and activity is revealed, and that it might be reflected in your life. Give each woman in the group a chance to respond to God’s prompting in her life by praying her application out loud. This can be a both a powerful tool of accountability and a faith-growing exercise! In guiding another woman through a passage in the Bible, you have taught her how to self-feed on the Scriptures and how to think critically and biblically. And all you needed was a Bible and a pencil.

**B. SMALL GROUP STRATEGIES**

**A. Set attainable reading goals**

There are a few things you can do to set your small group up for success. First, along with reading a book according to its natural division, be sure to set attainable reading goals for your group.
For instance, studying a chapter a day in the book of John is likely too much for a working mother of three to handle. Let’s be realistic about what we’re asking women to accomplish. However, the same woman could manage studying a chapter a week. Overall, weekly reading challenges are easier to digest than daily challenges, especially for women who are new to studying the Bible on their own. New Bible students are likely to fall behind, experience despair, and stop participating in your group altogether.

To equip women to read and study the Bible diligently, it is best to set loose parameters that establish early success. We want them to build their confidence as they practice the study method consistently. If they fail to do their studies before class, encourage them to still attend the group meetings. In this way, you are encouraging them to continue to feed themselves on gleanings from the table and keeping the connection going.

### B. Set long-term discipleship goals

Learning to study the Bible is a successful way to disciple the women in your small group. Period. However, if you want to maximize your impact, think about working with your local church leadership to set long-term discipleship goals for the women in your care. Instead of picking a book of the Bible at random, be strategic in the books you select for study.

#### 1. Select biblical book to study based on spiritual literacy gaps

First, select biblical books based on the spiritual literacy gaps of the women in your church. Be a good student of not just the Word, but also of the women in your church. What gaps are apparent in their Bible knowledge? What struggles do they experience regularly? What trends do you see in their lives and relationships? What materials are they consuming for their spiritual diet? Sometimes the answers to these questions can’t be discerned by simple observations. It takes having intentional conversations with them and taking your thoughts to God in prayer. After you have a sense of what gaps are present in their lives, these observations will help guide you to pick the book of the Bible that will hit its mark in the hearts of your women. Map out a series of books of the Bible that will help them grow to maturity.

For instance, if you are ministering to women from an unchurched background, they likely struggle with biblical literacy. A chronological study of God’s Word might be the
most helpful. Instead of looking at a single book of the Bible, you could select 10-12 significant stories in the Bible and trace them chronologically from Old to New Testament. Giving women a birds’-eye view of the big picture of Scripture sets the stage for sound doctrine and sound living.

2. Select biblical book to study based on direction of local church

Better yet, ask your church leadership the specific ways they want to see the women in your church grow. Consider the church’s vision and mission statements and what books of the Bible might stimulate growth and unify the church.

In a previous church, we mapped out the following discipleship strategy according to areas we wanted the women to experience growth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge gap: Identity in Christ</th>
<th>Knowledge gap: Self-feeding on Scripture</th>
<th>Knowledge gap: Kingdom service</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Book/passage studied: Ephesians 1-2, specifically on key doctrines of salvation.</td>
<td>Book/passage studied: Ps. 19:7-14 and training on how to study the Bible</td>
<td>Book/passage studied: Matthew passages that pertained to the kingdom of God.</td>
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In my current church, our church leaders wanted us to emphasize spiritual maturity. After much prayer, we selected the book of Colossians (a book written to gentile believers in a pagan culture) because the main message centers on spiritual growth. The following year, we built on the book of Colossians by walking through the book of Titus, a little letter on what sound faith looks like as it grows to maturity – sound doctrine and sound living. Much fruit has been produced after looking at these two New Testament books – our women are more deeply rooted in Christ and his Word and reaching out other women around them to begin discipling relationships.

Our church could have easily launched a discipleship program and began pairing women in groups of two. However, we did not want to begin to manufacture our own spiritual fruit. Instead, we took the longer route, talk women how to study God’s word, and then watched as the Spirit of God did all the work for us. He brought the Scriptures, and the
specific messages of Colossians and Titus, to life in the heart of our women, accomplishing far more than we ever could.

The Bible truly is the best discipleship curriculum. Reading together. Processing together. And praying together. That’s all it took.