

The Problem with Inductive Bible Study by Eli Bernard

One of my favorite cartoon strips is **Baldo**, by Cantu and Castellanos. In one Sunday edition, Gracie (Baldo's little sister) and Nora (her best friend) are exploring in the woods.

Gracie tells Nora, "I think we're lost."

"How can you tell?" Nora asks.

Gracie replies, "See that giant maple? This is the third time we've seen it. You know what that means, don't you?"

"Uh...The giant maple is following us?" Nora guesses.

"No, no, no," Gracie quickly corrects her. "It's lost, too!"

Induction is a process of observing details and extrapolating generalizations from those observations (specific, smaller pieces of information used to shape general, larger conclusions). Inductive reasoning is what led our ancestors to believe the earth was flat, that the earth was the center of the universe, and that all other celestial bodies in the universe orbited around us.

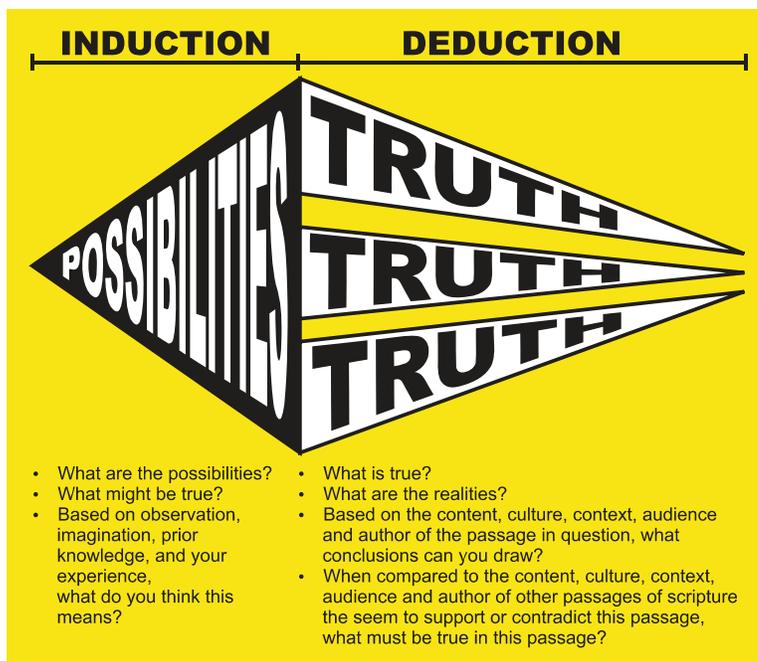
Inductive Bible Study is a process whereby the participants examine and evaluate details - facts, feelings, prior knowledge and impressions - of Biblical passages as the basis for gaining "insight" into general Biblical truths. While there is a place for Inductive Bible Study, the potential for errors from context, meaning, culture, and overgeneralization can be common. Too often, Inductive Bible Study

gravitates downward to a mutual observation society, where answers to the question "What do you think?" sets free a lesson to "go where it will."

The result can be great confidence in "Biblical truth" that is much like knowing with absolute certainty that the giant elm tree is "lost, too".

Inductive Bible Study has gained popularity because of two key elements in successful small group dynamics. Preparation for the leader is easier than traditional lecture-based Bible studies, and group participation is very important in developing a bond and community among the participants. But how do we take advantage of these benefits of Inductive Bible Study, and avoid the negatives?

The solution is Deductive Bible study.



Deduction is the process of aligning all pieces of information in the effort to ascertain the singular, specific truth (large and small, generalizations and facts, analyzed and filtered to find specific truths). Deduction, for Gracie, would include the contextual truth that trees can't be lost.

It is like a detective starting with all available information, trying to find the one single truth for his case.

However, even detectives practice Induction if they are effective. They just don't end with an induced conclusion. Induction allows you to imagine a wide range of possibilities, which could actually start you down the path to a previously unconsidered truth. But deduction has to take priority in order to find truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Articles of DISCOVERY

Induction asks the question, "What might be true?" Deduction asks the question, "What is true?"

The key to effective Biblical Facilitation is for the Facilitator to know what concept (the single truth) is to be discovered, and to develop a lesson that guides the class/group to the parameters, details, and ideas that create the shape of this truth. The Facilitator should use the function and flow of questions to guide participants toward discovery of the gold nugget of the passage. To do this, a great facilitator will often promote induction early in the study - "What might be true?"

However, to find the nugget, the facilitator will turn the study to deduction, analyzing context, content, culture, audience, and author against the induced ideas. In this analysis, a great facilitator can help his group discover truth.

Jesus was a master of this strategy. For example, in Matthew 21:23-27, the chief priests and elders confronted Jesus with their induced truth. He asked them a question that caused them to analyze the context, content and culture of the question. The sad thing for them - and for Jesus - was that when they were faced with the only conclusions possible, they chose to ignore the truth. They had only one more step to a great deduction, and their own comfort zone kept them from taking it.

There is a danger in failure to analyze. Our ancestors looked at the movement of the stars and concluded that we were the center. Because they came to a singular conclusion, it probably felt much like deduction, but was in fact error for lack of qualified information.

Great detectives strive for truth, not conclusions. We need to be able to say, "I don't know what that means." We need to be able to continue the search for truth after the Sunday School hour is concluded. In our analysis, let us never make the mistake of eliminating falsehoods or partial truths so that we can "conclude" with another singular falsehood or partial truth.