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What Scripture says, God says, for, in a manner comparable only to the deeper mystery of the Incarnation, the Bible is both fully human and fully divine.

JAMES I. PACKER

The Word of the Lord is a light to guide you, a counselor to counsel you, a comforter to comfort you, a staff to support you, a sword to defend you, and a physician to cure you. The Word is a mine to enrich you, a robe to clothe you, and a crown to crown you.

THOMAS BROOKS

We are directed to expect the teaching and assistance of the Holy Spirit only within the limitations and by the medium of the written Word.

JOHN NEWTON

We are quickly confounded when we seek to plumb the depths of God. No mortal can exhaustively comprehend God. The Bible reveals things about God that we know are true in spite of our inability to understand them fully.

R. C. SPROUL

RAISING SOME CONCERNS OVER THE "INDUCTIVE METHOD" OF BIBLE STUDY

David G. Moore

In college I learned a method of studying the Bible that was immensely helpful. A few years later while attending Dallas Theological Seminary I honed my understanding of the method of Bible study popularly called the "inductive method." The threefold process of observation, interpretation, and application/correlation was extremely valuable to learn. I continue to believe that it is a good approach to Bible study *as long as certain considerations are kept in mind*. My concern over the teaching and learning of the inductive method, however, is that important cautions and clarifications are not always given. The result of learning this particular method of Bible study without the proper perspective can give a misplaced confidence in how clearly God's Word speaks on certain¹ doctrinal themes/issues. A brief look² at a church history will hopefully illustrate these concerns.

During the Medieval Period, Peter Lombard (ca. A. D. 1100-1160) wrote his famous theological work, *Book of Sentences* (A. D. 1158). Lombard's work was the first major attempt to use "the logical method to arrive at a definition of orthodoxy." He sought to give a "coherent, objective statement of Christian belief."³ *Book of Sentences* was the major theological text used by candidates in theology at European universities until Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* replaced it during the seventeenth century. It is noteworthy to observe that from Lombard and Aquinas "modern theology derives its systematic urge. . . ."⁴

The study of theology in the Western church also moved from the monasteries to the universities during the Medieval Period. Theology increasingly became a *separate* discipline that one studied in the university classroom.

In the Eastern tradition, theology has never left the monasteries and churches. Theology is "learned" in a worshiping environment, not as a separate field of inquiry. In the Orthodox tradition, there is a popular saying that, "The rule of prayer is the rule of belief and action."⁵ In other words, there is no dichotomy⁶ between what one "knows" and what one does with that knowledge.

In the Western tradition of the Church we find a spate of systematic theologies. In the East, there is clearly a reticence about organizing the Scriptures in this sort of logical fashion.⁷

During the Renaissance, Francis Bacon developed what became known as "the inductive method." The age of modern science had arrived. Proving something to be true involved tests that utilized skills such as carefully observing data, interpreting one's findings, and applying the conclusion to the world at large. Conclusions were understood to be tentative at times. Many times they were operating assumptions which others challenged and eventually refuted. One thinks here of the discoveries of Galileo and Copernicus in upending long-held "conclusions" about the physical universe.

Later, the Enlightenment presented a new challenge to the Christian faith. We think of the assaults of thinkers like Voltaire and others. These skeptics believed that the Christian tradition was antiquated, even dangerous. They could point to wars that were spawned by religious passions. The Thirty Years War (1618-48) was one very recent example that they could readily point out. Instead of superstitious religious tradition, autonomous⁸ human *reason* was understood to bring the "good life." People don't need to submit

to any authority, especially religious ones. Even where the concept of a deity was still invoked, it turned out that he was made in the image of the philosophers.

Human reason, operating by means of careful observation and checking its conclusions by further observation or experiment, could for the first time in the history of man reveal the mechanism of the natural world in which he had lived for so long like a fearful and wondering child. Nature, instead of being a mere collection of phenomena, a hotch-potch (sic) of occult influences or the canvas on which an inscrutable Providence painted its mysterious symbols, was a system of intelligible forces. *God was a mathematician whose calculations, although infinite in their subtle complexity, were accessible to man's intelligence.*⁹

In the middle of the nineteenth century there were other events which put the Church on the defensive. The challenges of Darwinian evolution and German higher criticism resulted in varied responses from the Church. Some Christians decided to remove themselves from the scholarly debates. Forsaking the fray these Christians built their own protective environments in which to shield themselves. Evangelical sub-cultures kept the heretics from encroaching and thereby polluting sacred territory.

Other Christians chose to challenge the hegemony of scientific rationalism. Many of these believers were heroic in their efforts. The value they placed on the scientific *method* however, was sometimes misguided. For instance, the same year that Darwin's *Origin of Species* came out, a book entitled *Organon of Scripture or The Inductive Method of Biblical Interpretation* was published. The author, James S. Lamar, confidently proclaimed that, "The Scriptures admit of being studied and expounded upon the principles of the inductive method, and . . . when thus interpreted they speak to

us in a voice as certain and unmistakable as the language of nature heard in the experiments and observations of science."¹⁰ Many well-intentioned Christians wanted to show that the Christian faith was just as rational, even more rational¹¹ than any other philosophy or religious viewpoint. As these debates wore on into the present century, it was not uncommon to see Christian theologians say, "Systematic Theology is the collecting, scientifically arranging, comparing, exhibiting, and defending of *all* facts from any and every source concerning God and his works. . . ."¹²

The philosophy of "Common Sense Realism" also had its impact on the Christian understanding of Scripture. Simply stated, this is the view that sought to answer the skepticism of David Hume by saying that human beings have the innate ability to perceive reality accurately without any significant distortion. Though some have argued that "Common Sense Realism" was the main reason for the modern Church holding to the doctrine of inerrancy, others have persuasively shown that inerrancy has always been the historic position of the Church.¹³ Notwithstanding this fairly common error of chalking up inerrancy solely to the influence of "Common Sense Realism," we do see how the strong confidence placed in reason affected the study of theology. Conservative scholars at Princeton Seminary provide one example.

The apparent contradiction between Princeton's trust in Common Sense [Realism] and its adherence to the doctrine of universal human sinfulness had little effect on these professors' assertions about the scientific character of theology. In his introduction to *Systematic Theology* (1872), Charles Hodge had argued that the theologian should strive to be just as scientific as the chemist or astronomer. "The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science," he wrote. "It is his storehouse of facts." In similar terms,

Warfield, who like Hodge before him was the chief name at Princeton, claimed that the theologian needed to think through and organize Christian teaching not merely in order to defend it but to attack opposing views. Christianity, he argued, "had been placed in the world to reason its way to the dominion of the world."¹⁴

These historical events are briefly described to show why we Western Christians would have a natural penchant to latch onto the inductive method of Bible study as the method of choice. Our fondness for systematization, reason, and one hundred percent certitude causes us to be more interested in methods which promise clarity and confidence. Let me tease out some further implications:

1) It is historical naiveté and intellectual pride to think that the inductive Bible study method is the best or only way to familiarize oneself with God's Word. The Eastern tradition employs other "methods." Even the Western tradition has utilized other approaches like *lectio divina*¹⁵ which self-consciously rely more on meditation, thoughtful reading,¹⁶ and prayer. Houston has wisely said, "Over some sixteen centuries *lectio divina* has proved itself capable of transforming the reader in a remarkably long-lasting and institutionalized tradition."¹⁷

2) It is impossible to be totally detached and completely objective¹⁸ in studying anything—science¹⁹ or theology. We all have assumptions about life and God which color our view of Scripture.²⁰ This is clearly a strong warrant for a growing and mature understanding of Church history. We must acquaint ourselves with what other Christians have believed throughout the sweep of Church history. The profound arrogance and destructiveness of believing that "all that I need is the Bible" has shown itself on many sad occasions.²¹ In fact, Professor Howard Hendricks, from whom I learned the inductive method of Bible study, would say

while holding his own Bible in the air, "If this is the only book you ever know, you will never know this book."

3) Realizing that theological systems are human constructions should lead neither to skepticism on one hand nor to pride on the other. Mark Noll states the proper balance:

It must be remembered that truth about God is absolute in the sense of being true without exception. It does not change. Thus, when the Bible speaks of God and this is the source of doctrines, these doctrinal truths can be stated in a final form. However, caution must be exercised, since doctrinal statements are the interpretive constructions of man and so capable of including error, of being inadequately conceived or stated. They are also capable of growth as the church's knowledge of the Scripture grows. So while truth is certain and absolute, men's knowledge of truth is not in every case equally absolute or final.²²

4) *Sola Scriptura* does not mean that we discount the role of tradition. It simply means that the Bible is the ultimate and final authority. For example, Wesleyans have a very helpful way to remember this in their quadrilateral. Scripture is the ultimate and final authority, but reason, Church history (tradition), and even experience can provide checks on how well we may have understood God's Word.²³

5) It is fine to use color-coded pencils and make charts of the Bible. They clearly have their place as aids to memory, but we need to keep in mind how seriously they can be abused. If one gets the idea after charting a certain book of the Bible that he now *completely* understands it, his confidence in what the inductive method has accomplished is misplaced. For example, when people study 1 Thessalonians with the inductive method and conclude that dispensational premillennialism is "the only reasonable position

because it is so clear and compelling," it is time to remind them that many godly and scholarly Christians beg to differ. Proponents of other eschatological positions make the same error as well.

6) We must be careful what our expectations happen to be with respect to the Bible. If the Bible is believed to be merely a "how to" book we will grow impatient with sections that don't easily lend themselves to simple application points on how to have a great marriage or raise one's children. The Scriptures, of course, have much practical advice on these and other topics, yet the Bible is much more than a "how to" manual.

Since all of Scripture is inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16) it is incumbent that we familiarize ourselves with *all* of it. This keeps us balanced in the best sense of that word (Acts 20:26-27).

Because the inductive method puts application in such a prominent position (rightly I believe), it is important to state explicitly state that all the Bible is important, even if certain parts do not lend themselves to practical applications. It is this latter point that could be spelled out more clearly when the inductive method is taught.

It is my experience from hearing the inductive method taught that the teachers will voice their desire that others discover for themselves what the Scriptures say. This is all well and good. Unfortunately, there are too many times when this encouragement to be a "Berean" is contradicted by the teacher's impassioned plea that a particular theological system or position is clearly the correct one.

I continue to teach the inductive method of Bible study and find it to be quite helpful. It needs however, to always be accompanied by a clear *caveat lector*.²⁴

Author

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Ministries in Austin, Texas. He is the founder of the Ezra Institute of Biblical Studies. His articles have appeared in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, *Current Thoughts and Trends*, *Stulos Theological Journal*, *Touchstone*, and he reviews books for *Reformation and Revival Journal*. He can be reached at www.twocities.org or dgm@twocities.org.

Notes

1. The clarity of Scripture refers to cardinal doctrines like the deity of Christ, not to secondary, and certainly not to tertiary, doctrines.
2. This article certainly does not purport to be the final word on this important topic. There are many more avenues for further study and reflection. This is simply an attempt to highlight *some* of the significant issues.
3. Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1984), s.v. "Peter Lombard," by R. G. Clouse.
4. Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 230. A similar observation can be found in Leon J. Podles, *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity* (Dallas, Texas: Spence Publishing, 1999), 110-11.
5. Daniel B. Clendenin, ed., *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1995), 7.
6. There is no dichotomy in the Western tradition at its best either.
7. Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1994), 53. This does not mean to diminish the reality of substantial Biblical scholarship taking place in the Orthodox tradition. Anyone who is familiar with this tradition knows that this is patently not the case.
8. Literally, this means "self-law." My adaptation of this word, which is tragically apropos for our modern age, is "self as law."
9. Norman Hampson, *The Enlightenment* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 37-38. Emphasis added.
10. As quoted in Christopher A. Hall, *Reading the Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 25-26. Emphasis added.
11. I have heard this said by many ministers and confess that I am guilty of saying it myself.
12. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 1 (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), x. I am grateful for Christopher A. Hall's fine book, *Reading the Scripture with the Church Fathers*, which jogged my memory of this quote.
13. The best treatment is John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1982).

14. As quoted in D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1995), 25. The original sources are Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1975), 10, and Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, "Introduction to Beattie's Apologetics," reprinted in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield, II*, John E. Meeter, ed., (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973), 99.
15. For a helpful introduction to this approach see Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1997).
16. One friend sheepishly asked me if it was "okay" to just slowly read and meditate on Scripture. Guilt nagged her because she did not naturally gravitate toward the inductive method. I allayed her fears by informing her that I rarely use the inductive method even in sermon preparation.
17. James M. Houston, "Toward a Biblical Spirituality," in *The Act of Bible Reading*, Elmer Dyck, ed., (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1996) 161.
18. Lest the reader think that I am fascinated by the irrationality of various Postmodern methodologies, I am not. I simply want to underscore that the Christian faith is neither modern nor postmodern. It is premodern.
19. Michael Polanyi has done some ground-breaking work in this regard. I am indebted to Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt & Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 39-44 for introducing me to Polanyi.
20. Though most of deconstructionism is wrongheaded, it does remind us that we study texts as subjects/persons. The subjective element in Bible study cannot be totally eliminated. In other words, robotic detachment and complete objectivity are an impossibility.
21. One thinks of examples like Victor Paul Wierwille, founder of The Way International. Fed up with intramural theological debates, Wierwille took his theological library of over 3,000 volumes to the city dump. Shortly thereafter, he denied the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith.
22. Mark A. Noll, "Who Sets the Stage for Understanding Scripture?" *Christianity Today* (May 23, 1980), 16. I am grateful to the following book which gave me the quote by Noll: Elliot E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1990), 288.
23. See Allen Coppedge, "How Wesleyans Do Theology," in *Doing Theology in Today's World*, John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edmund McComiskey, eds., (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1991), 267-89.
24. I am grateful to Warren Culwell, Mike Field, Colby Kinser, Prof. Robert Pyne of Dallas Theological Seminary, Barbara Miaso, and my wife Doreen for various input and assistance on earlier drafts of this article. They certainly bear no responsibility for the finished product. Also, I sent copies of this article to Prof. Howard Hendricks of Dallas Theological Seminary and Kay Arthur of Precept Ministries. Both of their busy schedules prohibited any feedback.