#1 – Establishing Our Starting Place

With Study Questions

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My Remedial Body

Not long ago I was on campus at UCLA to watch a sporting event. I was accompanied by a couple of friends, one of whom happened to be a track and field coach for the university. We thought it would be fun to go out to the track and have a little high jump competition. The high jump was an event I did in college. In fact, about twenty five years ago I got a track scholarship as a high-jumper. The competition began.

We started at about four feet—all clearing the height easily. Slowly we inched the bar up to five feet; a height I had made in the eighth grade. They made it, I missed it. I felt the old competitive nature start to well up in my soul. I wasn't about to lose this competition. My opponents weren't even high-jumpers. On my second effort I gave it the old college try. I remember learning about muscle memory in my exercise physiology classes. My muscles started to remember. They remembered the injuries and abuse I had put them through as a youngster. They retaliated with surgeon-like precision and gladiatorial cruelty. I limped off the track with a pulled hamstring, vowing never to return again.

I spent the first half of my life abusing my body and I'll spend the second half trying to undo the damage. This is a pretty common scenario. People spend fifty years smoking or eating a cheese-based diet thinking their body will forgive and forget—until their first heart attack. Then we get all nice to our bodies. No smoking, maybe a little jogging and a little tofu—this is remedial living.

Defining Remedial

Remedial, according to Webster means, *to correct a deficiency.* If someone is remedial they need to unlearn wrong things and re-learn them the right way—they need to undo the damage and reconstruct the damaged area correctly. Remedial classes in college aren't for people who have no background in English or math. Technically they're designed for people who have learned English or math incorrectly; this makes it a more difficult task. It's much easier to build a house on a vacant lot than it is to remodel a damaged house. Sometimes it's better to just demolish the old house and start from scratch; like the military flight instructor who opens his class by ordering all his students (many with past flying experience) to forget everything they know.

For thirty years I have been a Christian. During the past twenty years I've been correcting the deficiencies, or errors, I acquired my first ten years. I've been practicing remedial Christianity. This is not to say that I don't still absorb new errors, but quite frankly, in most cases it's the difference between a complete u-turn and a moderate adjustment in the wheel. I've had to make some huge u-turns in my understanding of Christianity. I'm remedial and I'll bet you are too.

Remedial is different than immature. It's easy to teach the immature. They don't have any bad habits yet. As a remedial Christian I found it much more difficult to be properly trained. I had all sorts of bad habits. I misunderstood verses and passages in the Bible, concepts about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, God's law and the very nature of salvation. I didn't merely have to learn about these things, I had to unlearn the wrong things I had been taught.

Admitting I was wrong about God was a hard thing for me to do. I had taught many of these things to others. There was a lot of pride tied up in my thoughts. I also had an emotional investment in my thoughts about God. The image I had of God in my thoughts and prayers was slowly being shattered or, at very least, altered significantly.

I imagine I'll spend the rest of my life unlearning wrong things and learning them the right way. This doesn't really bother me—it means I'm growing. After all, most of the epistles in the Bible were written to correct errors. The lessons here are directed to people like me, and the other remedials to whom I have had the opportunity to minister. A good eighty percent of my time as a pastor, teacher, counselor, and radio host has been dedicated to helping people unlearn wrong thoughts about God and relearn them the right way.

Learning New Errors

At least one question is in order at this point. How do I know I'm not just learning new errors? How can that be guaranteed? I have found that when I have been properly corrected, my errors become obvious to me. Simple and wise correction can be overwhelmly effective. For example, people go their whole lives living as skeptics and asserting that they don't believe in anything they can't see. In a few seconds you can point out that they believe in many things they can't see; time, energy, space, mass, etc. In fact they can't see the statement they just made about not believing anything they can't see.

The first half of the remedial process (unlearning the wrong stuff) can be as simple as that. We must be willing to be corrected all of our lives. In time, like cross hairs dancing across a target, we are slowly being brought closer to the truth. I can't think of anything more fundamental to this pursuit than humility. The Bible teaches that

God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (1 Peter 5:5).

I am not asking you to be humble before me. Lest you think I am seeking to make you overly malleable to what I have to say, the Scriptures also instruct us,

Test all things; hold fast what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Determining Our Control Belief

Test what I am saying. If what I have to say is senseless, throw it in the garbage with the rest of the trash. This, however, brings us to our first issue; by what standard will you determine if what I, or anybody else, says is true? What

is your control belief? What is the bedrock of your measurement of truth? What is your starting place of knowledge? You open a book or a newspaper; listen to a lecture or a television or radio broadcast, and then begin to make your evaluations. On what authority do you rely to make this evaluation?

If I were to say that I think it is all right for me to lie, cheat, steal, and maim in order to secure my own happiness, by what authority would, or could, you refute such a self-centered standard of living? You could say, "It's just wrong," or "It's obvious," but I am not sure how convinced I would be by such an argument.

I am regularly invited to speak at a college ethics class on the issue of homosexual marriage. I am usually expected to make my argument against homosexual marriage by marching in a bag of statistics showing the damaging effects of homosexuality on a society or some such thing. There is one big problem with that. There must be some agreement on what a damaged society looks like. I might argue that a damaged society is one where homosexuality is viewed as an acceptable alternative lifestyle; but then I am begging the question—my conclusion is contained in my premise. I don't approach the subject that way.

I usually pick some other moral issue. One by which all the students will be repulsed—usually pedophilia. They all agree this is wrong and I am considered near mad to compare homosexuality to such a deplorable sin. The field has now been tilled and is ready for seeding. "What," I generally ask, "is the standard you have used to accept the one (homosexuality) and reject the other (pedophilia)?" I am quick to remind them that fifty years ago, if I were to compare something that was becoming acceptable then (say living together out of wedlock) to homosexuality, I would have received the same reaction; the ninety-year-olds in the retirement home Bible study still can't believe homosexuality is so widely accepted.

Be that as it may, why are these eighteen-year-olds so accepting of homosexuality while holding pedophiles in contempt? The answer they give is usually something like: "The former are consenting adults and the latter is against the law," at which time the classmates, frustrated with the idiocy of my presentation begin their mob-like chorus of "yeah, right, chh, etc." But then I ask why they think people must be willing to consent; where is that written? Then they say, "It's written in the law books," end of argument, time for lunch. "So," I ask, "you all believe that if it's the law it's right?" They respond, "Well, no." "How do we determine," I continue, "which laws are right and which are wrong?" Now the mob is transformed into deer in the headlights.

The first half of remedial instruction (recognizing the error) has been completed. They now realize they have no idea, whatsoever, how to determine what is true or right or ethical. Philosophers would say they are not *epistemologically self-conscious* (epistemology is the study of the theory of knowledge). In other words, they don't know *why* they know what they know.

Now comes the second portion of remedial instruction—the actual correction of the deficiency. As a Christian I believe this can only happen as a result of the grace of God. This is not due to insufficient information but because once you begin to acknowledge the truth, you must recognize that it has a claim on your life; there are certain things that are simply not okay. Jesus sheds light,

> **And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed (John 3:19, 20).**

If Jesus is right, and I tend to think He is, the problem in terms of embracing the light or truth is not a matter of sufficient evidence or argumentation, but because people prefer darkness to the light. The reason people prefer the darkness is because the darkness, at least for a while, hides our evil deeds.

All this to say, that the beginning point of our instruction must be to establish what our control belief is. What is the starting point (or presupposition) of determining truth? What is the authoritative and absolute beginning of genuine, inerrant (without error) knowledge?

The Bible

The answer the Christian gives to this question is the Holy Scriptures. We are informed by Jesus that **"Your (God's) word is truth" (John 17:17).** But why would we consider the Bible the word of God? What is the Bible and why should we believe it? Who is God, how do we know He is God and why should we trust Him? If, in our remedial instruction, we have established that the common methods of determining truth are insufficient, perhaps we are ready for the correction of the deficiency.

But what will we find in the Scriptures? What does the Bible have to say about what the Christian faith actually is? Is Christianity the headlong pursuit of getting people to ask Jesus into their hearts during an altar call? Is Christianity power living? Is it a matter of figuring out the secret of the Spirit-filled or Spirit-led life? Is it being a good-deed doer? Is it immersing oneself in church programs? Is it a matter of losing your personality and becoming timid and compliant beyond all recognition? Is it being a republican? Is it becoming monk-like and denying all worldly pleasures? Is it wearing religious jewelry or putting a fish on the bumper of my car? Must I quit dancing and drinking and laughing and become a teetotaler with no rhythm or sense of humor? If you think the essence, or heart, of the Christian faith is any of this, you need a good dose of remedial Christianity.

In short, I will state (just in case you can't manage to get through all these messages), that the essential message of the Bible is that there is a righteous and holy God. God is—God exists. Furthermore we will learn that men, because of their sin, have broken fellowship with God and have souls which are in peril. The Bible teaches that God has provided a Savior to rescue sinful men from that peril. And this Bible, in no uncertain terms, reveals that Savior, Jesus the Christ (the one anointed by the Father for this task). We are to trust in Him as the Savior of our souls and Lord of our hearts.

But I have jumped ahead. I am giving information from the Bible. Our questions now are, "What is this Bible?" and "Why should I believe it?" Answering these two questions will be next on our list.

Questions for Study

1. Define Remedial (pages 1, 2).
2. What is the difference between remedial and immature (page 2)?
3. Why would it be hard to admit having incorrect thoughts about God (page 2)?
4. What is one of the most fundamental character traits necessary for learning the truth (page 2)?
5. What is your control belief (page 3)?
6. How do you know that your control belief is sound (page 4)?
7. How do you determine behavior to be acceptable or unacceptable (page 4)?
8. Why do people (according to Jesus) resist the truth/light (page 4)?
9. What is the control belief/starting point of knowledge for the Christian (page 4)?
10. What is the essential message found in the Bible (page 5)?