

In What Manner the Christian Should Study in His Own Book

Juan de Valdés

Reformed · Reformation · Dialogue

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INTRODUCTION

Structured as a dialogue between a questioner and Valdés himself, this short piece answers a deceptively simple question: what is 'a Christian's own book'? Valdés's answer is that the true book each believer must study is his own mind and conscience, read attentively for the mixture of faith and doubt, humility and pride, love and self-interest it contains, with Scripture serving as the interpreter that makes sense of what's found there. It's a compact, practical piece of spiritual direction from one of the more quietly influential figures of the Spanish and Italian Reformation, whose circle shaped reform-minded readers on both sides of the confessional divide.

In what manner the Christian should study in his own book, and what fruit he would draw from the study of it, and how the Holy Scriptures serve him as an interpreter, or commentary.

Proposition

Having frequently heard you say that a Christian's proper study ought to be that of his own book, having it always open and constantly reading in it, I have wished to know what is my book, how I ought to study in it, and what advantage I shall gain from the perusal of it, in reference to my Christian knowledge. And since you, by your language, have awakened this desire in my mind, it will be but just that you should also satisfy me.

Reply

Whilst a man studies merely in the books of other men, he becomes acquainted with the minds of their authors, but knows not himself. Now as it belongs to a Christian's duty to know himself, to know the state of being that he possesses as a child of God through Christian regeneration, I am accustomed to say that a Christian's proper study should be in his own Book. For reading in this, he learns to know himself; and so much the more and the better he knows himself, so much more easily he becomes disenchanted of himself and of the world, and becomes enamoured with God and with Christ. Such ought to be your

purpose in this reading of your own book. And therefore you must be advised, that in the perusal of your own book, you must not think that God will consider you such as you imagine yourself to be, but you should be convinced that he will consider you in the degree in which you stand incorporated in Christ. This rightly understood, which is of great importance, know then that I am accustomed to call my MIND MY BOOK; because in this are contained my opinions, as well the false as the true. In this I discover my confidence and my diffidence; my faith and my unbelief; my hope and my negligence; my charity and my enmity. In this also I shall find my humility and my presumption; my meekness and my impatience; my modesty and my arrogance; my simple-mindedness and my curiosity; my resolution against the world and my deference to it; my firmness against myself and my own self-love. In short, in this is found whatever I possess of good by the favour of God and of Christ, and whatever evil I have acquired by my natural depravity. THIS IS MY BOOK. In this I read at all times and every hour of the day, and there is no occupation that hinders me from this reading. Sometimes I turn to examine the opinions I entertain in the Christian concern; on what I rest them, how I understand them, and how I feel them. At other times I set myself to examine what degree of confidence I have in the promises of God; how far I depend under all circumstances upon him; and with what alacrity I put in practice what I know to be the will of God. Again, I take into consideration how firm and constant I find myself in faith in Christ, believing myself pardoned by God and reconciled to God in Christ and through Christ. I consider whether the Christian's faith has its efficacy within me, causing me to change my natural disposition; and whether the Christian life has made me change my former state and manners; because such alteration is the Christian renovation and regeneration. At other times I reflect whether there exists in me such a desire of the coming of Christ to judgment as exists in those who, longing for it, expect it; or I imagine in what degree of liveliness this desire and reflection are found in me. I enter at other times into a very strict account with myself, examining how far I love God and Christ; whether I love him more than myself; and how far I love my neighbours, and whether I love them as well as I love myself. From these I go forward examining all my views and the purposes which move me to put them into practice; and I constrain myself not to allow myself to be deceived in any of them.

If then I perceive that I am going forward, purely directed to the glory of God and of Christ, and to the spiritual and eternal good of my neighbours, I know that I go forward in charity. But if I see that I proceed in attachment to my own honour and my self-interest, I know that I am living without Christian love, and I at once fly for succour to Christ, bringing to my thoughts that God will require in me what [I see] in Christ. At other times, taking a general review of my religious concerns, I estimate the measure of my humility and presumption; my meekness and impatience; my humility and my arrogance and pride; my simple-mindedness and my vain curiosity; my disregard of the world and my respect to it; my firmness with myself and my self-love and sensuality. If, when making this review, I discover nothing wanting to be carried out in my conduct and intercourse among men, I go on thinking how I should behave myself under such or such a circumstance which occurred to such and such an individual. Should I then continue unwavering in confidence, firm in faith, earnest in hope, fervent in charity? How then should I be humble, tender-minded, decided with regard to the world, not valuing its honours or its dishonours, resolved with regard to myself, not esteeming my interests nor my inconveniences, my outward enjoyments, nor my adversities?

This is the way I study in my own book. The fruit I gain from such perusal is, that I arrive at a much better knowledge of what I am and of what I am worth in myself, and what through God and through Christ; and so I arrive at a more intimate knowledge of the benefit to be received from Christ. Thus I learn entirely to mistrust myself, entertaining a much lower estimate of myself, and learn to rely unreservedly on God and upon Christ, having the highest conception of both; and I come to accept afresh the justification by Christ, in whom I know myself justified, whilst I always know myself, in virtue of myself, unjustified. And this is the consequence, that the more continually I read in this my book, so much the more the life I have by the grace of God and of Christ grows within me, and that which I have as a son of Adam becomes less. Whence it comes, that finding always fresh things to read in this my book, and seeing how much I advance by studying it, I so much enjoy the perusal of it, that I find no time to read in the books of others. Indeed, I have closed them all; leaving open only the holy Scriptures, which I use as an interpreter or commentary, the better to comprehend my own book, passing lightly by all parts that do not serve me to this purpose.

When I wish to examine whether my opinions in the Christian faith are false or true, I go forward comparing them with those which I read those holy men held who wrote the sacred Scriptures. Considering the confidence David entertained in God, and how he referred all things to him, I know my own confidence and mistrust, and begin to renew my confidence. Reading the holy faith of those Christians of the primitive Church who were acknowledged to be justified and sanctified in Christ and by Christ, I know my own faith and my unbelief, and ask of God that he will increase my faith. Reading the parables delivered by Christ, exhorting us to stand continually upon the watch, expecting his coming to judgment, as in the time of the Apostles that day was looked for with longing desire, I know my own hope and my negligence, and hereafter I learn to live more above myself. Reading the effects of that charity St. Paul describes, writing to the Corinthians, and of that charity which prevailed amongst the first Christians, I know my own charity and my enmity; and, ashamed of myself, I entreat God to separate me from myself and unite me to himself. Reflecting on the humility and meekness that Christ effectually demonstrated during the whole course of his life, and especially in his passion, I know my own humility and meekness, my presumption and impatience, and strongly set my affection upon meekness and humility. Considering also the modest and simple manner in which the Christian people lived at the first publication of the Gospel, having all things in common, and having no other thought than to know Christ crucified, I know my own modesty and simplicity, my arrogance and vain curiosity; and come to abhor all vanity, embracing simplicity of life. Reading how resolutely the Apostles stood against the world, when, being seized and beaten for preaching Christ, they went forward contented and cheerful, seeing that they had suffered for Christ; reflecting how I should submit if ever I should find myself in like circumstances, I know my own firmness against the world and my regard for it, I come to desire henceforth to be more decided against it. Reading how superior Paul was to himself when he said that he had learned in all states therewith to be satisfied, good or ill, little or much; and reflecting whether I can say the same of myself, I know my denial of self and my self-love, and begin to be willing to suffer, not to deprive myself of this satisfaction and mark of perfection. Finally, comparing my affections and appetites with those I read of in the holy Scriptures, I know well how lively or how dead they are, and I desire to give them not a single day to live.

In this manner holy Scripture serves me as an interpreter or commentary, the better to study my own book and the better to understand it. In this manner I comprehend whether my Christian life and my Christian self-denial correspond well or ill, little or much with my Christian faith and profession. Thus I become gainer of two things: one is, that I do not estimate myself by the opinion men have of me, whether good or ill, but by that which I entertain of myself, always referring myself to the opinion which God has of me, knowing me a member of Christ. The other is: that little by little, I go on forming my mind, reducing it by the imitation of Christ and his saints to what I know to have been in him and in them, anxiously desirous to comprehend and follow out that perfection, in which, incorporated and made a member of Christ, I am comprehended, aspiring, not for my own honour nor my self-interest, but for the glory of God and of Christ, and of the grace of his Gospel, that God may regard me as just, pious, and holy in myself, as he regards me just, pious, and holy in Christ.

You have asked me to tell you what is MY BOOK, and how it should be studied, and what advantage is to be drawn from it. I have replied that MY BOOK IS MY MIND, and in the study of it when I examine what I have in it, the benefit I draw from it is, to know myself, to know God and Christ, and hence to mistrust myself and to confide in God and in Christ. I have told you how the sacred Scriptures serve me as a kind of commentary the better to understand my own book. It remains now for you, taking the course I have described, to apply your mind immediately to this most useful study, setting aside all others. If at the beginning it appear difficult and insipid, do not for this reason give it up, because I assure you that the same belongs to this study which belongs to all others you can pursue; what at the first was dry and forbidding, when advanced to the middle, becomes easy and has some pleasantness in it, and in the end is most sweet and delicious. I assure you besides, that so much greater will be the enjoyment in this than in any other study, as the benefit resulting from it is greater, which you will find if you will make the trial. It is much greater, beyond any comparison, than all that is drawn from all other studies. They, without this, are occasions of death to the religious life, for by them human wisdom makes itself strong and valiant against the Spirit. Thus other studies tend to make man proud, this alone overturns and casts down human wisdom to the ground. It humbles man, giving him the knowledge of himself and what he is of himself, and the knowledge of God and of Christ and what he is by the favour of God when incorporated in Christ; thus it leads him to the recovery of that dignity which the first man lost, making him like to Christ and consequently like God.

To him I ever commend you, supplicating the Divine Being to send you his Holy Spirit for Master of this study; and do you ask the same for myself, and for all them who wait for glory, honour, immortality, and life eternal with Jesus Christ our Lord.

I wish to give you this advice, that if, when reading your own book, you pause for the space of a quarter of an hour in consideration of the being that you have as a son of Adam, reflecting on your mistrust, unbelief, negligence in waiting for Christ, enmity towards God, your ambition, anger, arrogance, vain curiosity, regard for the world and your self-love, that you withdraw for three hours in the consideration of the being you have through Christ as a child of God, reflecting upon that in yourself which you consider to be in him. Thus will you consider your confidence, faith, hope, charity; your humility, tender-heartedness, modesty, singleness of mind; your courage towards the world and towards yourself; attributing all that you find of God's gifts in these Christian virtues in yourself, to your incorporation with Christ. It is proper that you should do this, because you should know that although it appears to you that the consideration of the being you have as a son of Adam humiliates you, it will be more useful to you to consider the being you have as a son of God incorporated in Christ; it is indeed the reverse. Because it is thus that the consideration of your own proper nature, humiliating, makes you mistrustful and weak, consequently without resolution; but the consideration of the life you have by incorporation with Christ, by humbling you much more deeply, increases your confidence and raises you much above yourself, and thus makes you careful and thoughtful. For this reason I recommend you, that passing easily from the consideration of your own human nature, you pause a long time in the consideration of the being that you have through Christ; using the consideration of your own nature to estimate better the being you have in Christ, and to know that as much as you have resigned of your own nature, so much have you recovered of the life you have through Christ. For your purpose is to

change by such manner your conduct, in order that you may appear before the judgment-seat of God with great firmness and assurance, in virtue of the being you have attained unto in Christ. And thus the life that you have of yourself is no cause of shame or confusion to you, because for this is granted and bestowed upon you the Holy Spirit, sent by himself, even by Jesus Christ our Lord.

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