

The Illusion of Autonomy

Prompts for Reflection

SCRIPTURAL PROMPTS

Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”
“I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s guardian?”

—Genesis 4:9

How delightfully good it is
when brothers live together in harmony!

—Psalm 133:1

Don’t you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have
from God? You are not your own.

—1 Corinthians 6:19

“I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in me through their word. May they all
be one, as you Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so the world may
believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you have given me, so that they may be one as
we are one. I am in them and you are in me, so that they may be made completely one, that the
world may know you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me.”

—John 17:20–23

Instead, God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the less honorable, so that there
would be no division in the body, but that the members would have the same concern for each
other. So if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the
members rejoice with it.

—1 Corinthians 12:24–26

The one who says he is in the light but hates his brother or sister is in the darkness until now. The
one who loves his brother or sister remains in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in
him. But the one who hates his brother or sister is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and
doesn’t know where he’s going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

—1 John 2:9–11

Therefore I, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope at your calling—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

... speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ. From him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building itself up in love by the proper working of each individual part.

—Ephesians 4:1–6, 15–16

So it is sin to know the good and yet not do it.

—James 4:17

ADDITIONAL PROMPTS

As for the persistent inquiry itself—how a loving God would either cause or allow the continued suffering of the innocent—it remains a pretty useful question, if only because it is so quick to reveal an illusory premise that I am no longer willing to buy—the premise of individual autonomy.

For one thing, a question like this indicates a pervasive ignorance regarding how intimately we are connected to one another, both now and, as I now suspect, *ever*:

....

I daresay that if the innocent suffer, they do so because one of us—you or me or some other thug—now or in the past, has set their pain in motion.

And if the innocent continue to suffer, they do so because we have yet to take responsibility for their pain; we have yet to take sufficient responsibility for their relief.

—Scott Cairnes, *The End of Suffering* (58–59).

The general consensus ... would have it that your sin is not only about you, either. Every choice in our lives that separates us from communion with God, and every decision that clouds our awareness of His presence or erodes our relationships with one another has a profound and expanding effect—as the proverbial ripples in a pool. And that effect is to give us precisely, by so choosing, what we prefer over communion with God, what we prefer over our cultivating an awareness of His presence, and over our having healthy relationships with one another: namely, ourselves alone.

Ourselves alone, it turns out, is an outcome and a circumstance that must finally be appreciated as the complete and utter antithesis of our becoming healthy human persons.

—Scott Cairnes, *The End of Suffering* (62).

The church is Catholic, universal, so are all her actions; all that she does belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that body whereof I am a member. And when she buries a man, that action concerns me: all mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another.

—John Donne, *Devotions on Emergent Occasions*, Meditation 17 (102).

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

—John Donne, *Devotions on Emergent Occasions*, Meditation 17 (103).

Every baby comes into the world looking for someone who is looking for him or her. To have a conscious, embodied awareness of being known by God is a necessary feature of the life of loving God, and our awareness of being known by God is measured by the degree to which we are known by each other.

....

We are formed by being known by others, which enables us to know.

—Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Desire* (21).

Non nobis solum nati sumus ortusque nostri partem patria vindicat, partem amici
(Not for us alone are we born; our country, our friends, have a share in us.)

—Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1:22.