

In the Beginning(s): The Gifts and Calls of God
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God's Gifts of Beginnings

God is a God of beginnings. The Judeo-Christian tradition tells us that life itself is dependent on God for its own beginning. We often understand this in terms of some kind of creation narrative. There must have been some beginning simply because there is something rather than nothing. A careful reading of the Bible, however, reveals that God's commitment to beginnings shows up in many places beyond the creation of the world. God is a God of beginnings not simply because of the familiar words "in the beginning," but because the narratives in which God is involved are concerned with calling our attention to new beginnings—in history, in the world, and in ourselves. Though it may seem obvious, we must remember that beginnings are, of course, not endings. They initiate, inaugurate, and announce that something new is *unfolding* and *arriving*. They produce new avenues and possibilities for activity. Rather than being mere moments, they are new sources of energy which spur on creative work.

As human beings, beginnings come to us as gifts, not achieved by our own efforts but given to us out of the grace of God. Such gifts come with a call to respond. Every beginning seeks to be worked out, just as God encouraged creation to be fruitful and multiply. Gift/Call is a fundamental relationship between God and creation, perhaps best summarized by the concept of "covenant." With the giving of every gift, there is a call to respond, to make something of the gift and continue its blessings beyond the recipient(s) of the gift.

Working these beginnings out, responding to the call emitting from the gift, is a creative task which moves into uncharted territory, taking what has been gifted and appropriating it in new ways. As biblical scholar and theologian Nicholas Ansell notes, it is wisdom which guides

activity that is faithful to its gifted beginning.¹ Important for this point is the recognition that the gift of the beginning precedes its responsive work. “Life is thus first of all a gift, promise, and calling... ‘before’ it is received and worked out in human existence,” writes Ansell.²

Problematically, however, recognition of this gift can be covered over, ignored, or perverted. When this occurs, the gifts of life are wrongly construed as the privileges of life, or the work done with the power of the gift loses its fidelity to the gift itself, for example, when the gift becomes a means of control rather than a means of blessing.³ Work with the gift creates a momentum, either in the direction of wisdom, blessing, and love, or in the direction of folly, control, and fear. Taken in the latter direction, such momentum creates the conditions for more and more infidelity, ultimately closing down the horizons of possibility for life.

Proceeding in fear, human beings often prefer a God who closes things down, judges swiftly, and gives us sharp divisions on who is “in” and “out.” Making this move delivers us from the burdens of the work of wisdom, for one does not need to be wise or discerning when there is an automatic response. Instead of receiving the gifts of new life, we prefer to preserve the artifacts of what we assume are fixed truths, tried and true methods of control. When we cling to the safety of what was familiar, safe, and given, the gifts of God are transformed into tempting vices and prisons. It is precisely for this reason that God is a God of beginnings, beginnings which liberate us from our entrenched patterns. The capacity for humans to pervert such beginnings is so great that the very methods God employs to bring these beginnings about can appear to be closures, yet it is rather the creation of something new, something other than what closes, that stops the progression of the old.

¹ See Nicholas Ansell, “The Call of Wisdom/The Voice of the Serpent: A Canonical Approach to the Tree of Knowledge”, *Christian Scholars Review* 31, no. 1 (2001): 31-57.

² Ansell. “The Call of Wisdom/The Voice of the Serpent.” 47.

³ Ansell notes idolatry as a primary perversion of the gift. See “The Call of Wisdom/The Voice of the Serpent.” 46-54.

In this paper, I invite us to consider what it might mean to read the Judeo-Christian narrative in light of God's beginnings. I wish to call attention to the creative, ever-opening activities of God in creation. Attuning ourselves to God's commitment to make all things new not only gives us existential release, it also significantly changes our paradigms for problematic theological concepts. Though many could be given this treatment, we will consider two such concepts—election and judgment—in order to see how God's gifts of beginnings operate in the biblical story. We will take particular biblical cases along the way in relation to these concepts. Finally, I will argue that these gifts of God's beginnings contain radical calls to imitate God's activity in the world, seeing ourselves not merely as the recipients of these gifts but as co-agents, co-gifters, who are invited to produce creative, peaceful beginnings in a world bent toward the closure of sin.

Election-unto-Service

Let us begin, then, with a discussion of election. Election is a knot of complex problems, dealing most especially with particularity and universality. How can God, the perplexed believer often thinks, elect *one* particular people, or *one* particular person, for God's purposes if salvation and God's love are meant for all people? God's universal love appears to be zoomed in, too-focused, to the exclusion of those that remain outside of this microscopic gaze. Attention to God's creative action of beginnings and re-newal, however, will help us sort through this thorny terrain. Rather than seeing election as a static moment which closes in on a particular, limited zone, around which the elect build borders and walls to keep others out, we might consider election as a dynamic moment meant to be unfolded, pushing borders and knocking down walls in the interest of true universality. To make this clear, we will begin by considering the general meaning of "election" in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and then follow how this meaning plays

out in the narrative of the Bible, revealing that the purpose of election is for universal, not particular, blessing.

Election has been a particularly weighty problem in the history of God's people, and a misunderstanding of its purposes can lead to political abuses, fractures in religious communities, and perplexing paralyses in the daily lives of believers. To begin, then, we will need to get clear on what election properly is in biblical terms. Biblical scholar N. T. Wright identifies two misleading definitions of the term "election." The first misunderstanding construes election as something akin to a democratic vote. While election is indeed a choice, it is not like the choice of a president by a people. "What mattered was not Israel's choice of the one God, but God's choice of Israel."⁴ The second misleading notion is its technical use in theological discussions around the time of the Reformation. During this time, "election" was conflated with "predestination," and "came to signify God's eternal choice of some people to salvation, sometimes with and sometimes without the explicit corollary that God has 'chosen' all the others for the purpose, which they cannot escape, of damnation."⁵ Election is not to be construed as either the consensus of a group of individuals or as the irresistible predetermination of salvation in terms of an afterlife.

Instead of these possibilities, Wright suggests "election," at least in the context of the election of Israel, must refer to God's specific choice of Abraham and his descendants, and that this election also comes with a responsibility:

"The word 'election,' as applied to Israel, usually carries a further connotation: not simply the divine choice *of* this people, but more specifically the divine choice of this people *for a particular purpose*... Israel is called to be *different*; but, in and through that

⁴ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God: Parts III and IV*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 4:774.

⁵ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. 774. Wright goes on to note that he understands how this notion came about, and what it was reacting against, but that it is important to distance this interpretation from the way in which it is understood in ancient Judeo-Christian usage.

difference, to *make a difference*. Israel is called to a task...of ‘repairing the world in God’s name.’”⁶

Though Abraham is specifically chosen, he and his descendents are chosen with a universal significance, that is, to bless all nations (Gen 18:18). We can conceive of this in terms of the gift/call schema by saying election is a gift which comes with a call to act. As a gift, election is not something Abraham can obtain on his own, nor is it to be guarded or kept to his descendents—rather, this gift comes with a call to proliferate it as a blessing for all nations. Indeed, it is when the gifted/elected party fails to understand its election as a gift/call that the prophets begin their mission to call the community back to its gifted responsibility.⁷

The gift/call of election is by no means limited to Abraham. Noah is elected to build an ark which will serve to repopulate the earth, Moses to lead his people so they can truly bless the nations, the prophets to remind their people of the call associated with the gift, Mary to bear and raise the Savior, and more. Such elections are always made with the intention of a broadening salvific effect. They do not single an individual or group out for simple preservation but for the renewal of God’s redeeming work—in other words, they are points of beginnings. The elected individual or people is called in election to get moving. The history of the Hebrew Bible is a

⁶ Wright. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. 775. His emphasis.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann attempts to understand Israel’s relationship to the Promised Land using the concept of gift in *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Books, 2002). This formulation is useful in our context here, as it highlights cascading levels of gifts—the gift of election and the gift of Land given to the gifted/elected people of Israel. Brueggemann also explores what happens when Israel forgets its gifted relationship to the Land, opting instead to take it for granted rather than gifted. Problematically, however, Brueggemann suggests the gift of Land is structurally tempting, that is, a temptation is present in the gift itself. This notion is rightly corrected in Nicholas Ansell by suggesting the Land is not inherently tempting but “caught up in idolatry.” See Nicholas Ansell. *The Annihilation of Hell: Universal Salvation and the Redemption of Time in the Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 268-72. See also Nicholas Ansell, “The Call of Wisdom/The Voice of the Serpent: A Canonical Approach to the Tree of Knowledge”, *Christian Scholars Review* 31, no. 1 (2001): 31-57.

complex story of the interplay between successful and failed attempts to respond faithfully to such a call, to either open wide the gates of God’s loving Law or close them down.⁸

More radically, however, these elections, these beginnings, do not occur exclusively within the community of Israel. There are several elections prior to Abraham’s birth, and there are hints of elections outside the walls of Israel after its inception. Consider the words of Isaiah, for example, who writes:

In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance.” (Isa 19:23-25)

As biblical scholar Terrance Fretheim notes, “[I]t is theologically significant that Israelites are not the only people who are considered to be the children of God...God will even so act on behalf of the Egyptians, who are, ironically, called ‘my people’...”⁹

Even further, theologian Clark Pinnock identifies the biblical and historical tradition of certain pagan individuals belonging to and serving God beyond the communities of Israel and the

⁸ Consider the words of Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig: “As the beloved of God, as Israel, [the Jewish man] knows that God has elected him and may well forget that he is not alone with God, that God knows others whom he himself may or may not know, that to Egypt and Assyria too, God says: ‘my people.’ He knows he is loved—so why concern himself with the world! In his blissful togetherness-alone with God, he may consider himself man, and man alone, and look up in surprise when the world tries to remind him that not every man harbors the same certainty of being God’s child as he himself. Yet no one knows better than he that being dear to God is only a beginning, and that man remains unredeemed so long as nothing but this beginning has been realized.” Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 307. Rosenzweig goes on to note the importance of the Messiah in Jewish thought, which functions as a fulfilled end to such redemptive beginnings.

⁹ Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: a Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 168. Fretheim notes Isa 19:20-25 may be compared with Jer 46:26 and Ezek 29:13-14. Consider also the surprising words of Amos 9:7: “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,/O people of Israel? says the LORD./Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,/and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?”

early Christians.¹⁰ One particularly poignant moment is the encounter between Abraham and Melchizedek, King of Salem, who, we learn, is also a priest of God Most High. “It is as though the moment God called Abraham to become the father of a chosen nation,” writes Pinnock, “he let him meet a king and priest from Salem in order to teach him the lesson that his election did not mean the exclusive possession of God.”¹¹ While we might hesitate to suggest that “election” is a proper term for those outside of the particular covenants God has made with Abraham and his descendants, at the very least we can conclude that those particular covenants and elections in no way close off the possibility of God’s work among those outside of that particular community. Compounded with this is the reminder that Israel is elected to the service of these very people, attempting to bring to them the blessing of God’s covenant.

As we have seen, then, election is a point of entry, a beginning performed by God in particular instances for the purposes of blessing those beyond the elected party. There is yet another level of this election, however, beyond blessing the nations. In God’s plan of salvation, election moves beyond even the human community to a cosmic scale. Election might yet be understood as a kind of election-to-salvation, if by “salvation” we mean the continued redeeming work of God on earth.¹² As Fretheim writes, “[T]his divine electing activity is not an end in itself; God elects for the purpose of preserving the creation alive in a reasonably stable world

¹⁰ Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: the Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992). It is important to note the *servicing* function of these individuals, as it is likely not a very surprising point that Pinnock would suggest all people and nations belong to God, something the Bible seems opaquely clear about. That some exist beyond the elected communities and are discovered to be *servicing God outside those boundaries* is an important observation. Some “holy pagans” Pinnock notes include “Abel, Enoch, Noah, Job, Daniel, Melchizedek, Lot, Abimelech, Jethro, Rahab, Ruth, Naaman, the Queen of Sheba, the Roman soldier, Cornelius, and others. These were believing men and women who enjoyed a right relationship with God and lived saintly lives, under the terms of the wider covenant God made with Noah” (92).

¹¹ Pinnock. 94.

¹² Wright notes this very usage as well, suggesting election has to do with “the rescue of the world, of creation, of humankind, in short, with *salvation*.” Ibid. 776. His emphasis.

environment.”¹³ The gift of election brings its call to encourage a right relationship between all members of God’s creation. It does not in any way suggest the gift should be guarded or hoarded. Again with Fretheim: “Divine election does not entail having a corner on participation in the goodness of God’s creation.”¹⁴

All of this reveals God’s commitment to beginnings. While the Hebrew Scriptures bear witness to the history of God’s beginning with Abraham and his descendents, even here we find evidence that God has begun elsewhere (as in the case of Melchizedek), and intends to keep beginning elsewhere; it is wholly conceivable that God begins in several places all at once. Election is not God’s way of building borders around particular communities to determine who is allowed in and who is to be kept out, a move which is in step with the idolatrous attempt to control creation in fear. Though porous borders are perceivable in election, they are not final, nor are they the goal of election.¹⁵ God elects because God is a God of beginnings—God has to start somewhere. This beginning is precisely that—a beginning, and not an end. Understood in the context of beginnings, election, far from being a point of closure on a particular group or particular individuals, is a point of departure that aims to unfold into a universally inclusive community of redemption. The theme of beginnings helps us to uncover how God is making all things new, and how God’s love for the whole world is made manifest through the Scriptures.

Judgment-unto-Salvation

Election is a powerful testament to God’s universal concern for healthy relationships between all of his creatures. Over time, however, we find that this open view of election can

¹³ Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: a Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 102-103.

¹⁴ Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament*. 103.

¹⁵ To this end, we might also consider the “holy pagan” tradition found in the Bible and explored by Clark Pinnock in *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*. Though it is important for certain groups to identify as the chosen ones of God, the fact that they are chosen does not exclude God’s choosing of those outside of this elected community. This often comes as a surprise to those in the community who would prefer to guard the gates against all those outside—God, we learn, is not contained by his own temples.

become slowly covered over and distorted into a closed view, one which understands the elected party not as gifted with a position of service but privileged with a position of superiority. What was meant to be a gift that multiplies becomes a dangerous and debilitating closure. Understood in this perverse way, election becomes a weapon used by individuals or groups to keep others out, thereby stopping the gift from spreading its healing effects to the world. Once this inverted view has taken hold, individuals and communities often find themselves on a path that resembles a snowball, picking up more and more momentum as it hurdles down from the summit of its original blessing.

It is here where God's judgment enters. As we will see, God's judgment has suffered the same fate as election; it has often been regarded as an end and serves to build up more walls against those who allegedly deserve judgment. Against this paradigm, we will consider judgment in the context of God's beginnings. When sinful attitudes of control¹⁶ overtake the open concerns of God's redemptive horizon, it is necessary that God enact a judgment which radically overturns an order that tends toward closure. As unfaithful responses to the gifts of election and life gain momentum, they gather tendencies and trajectories alien to God's redeeming plans. Judgment is God's way of pulling the judged party out of its murky path and setting it back on track. It, too, is a gift of a new beginning, rescuing us from paths which, left to their own devices, would end in utter doom. In short, judgment is always a judgment-unto-salvation.¹⁷ Rather than seeing judgment as a decisive end and nothing more, in this section we explore judgment as an end to paths which can only lead to death which clears the way for new paths that lead to life.

¹⁶ I do not, here, mean to suggest that all attitudes of control are sinful, but only to suggest that specifically sinful attitudes of control are particularly problematic in formulating the problem of judgment. Healthy control is necessary to all human flourishing.

¹⁷ I owe this phrase to Nicholas Ansell. See *The Annihilation of Hell*. 416. Judgment is also considered an educating tool, and therefore a tool for the purposes of salvation, in other areas of Western Christian thought. It is held in Anglo-Christianity by voices such as Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, a lay theologian who attempted a revised version of Calvinism, and George MacDonald.

Fundamentally, I will argue that judgment comes when inappropriate forms of attachment to methods of control totally close off the possibility of true flourishing.

“Judgment” often carries a terrifying aura, a presence which makes us uncomfortable, feeling as though we must brace ourselves for potential suffering and punishment. This connotation is not without cause. Indeed, one need only skim through the prophets to find these very feelings invoked in a real and visceral way as the prophets warn their communities of impending punishments. But what is the reason for such harsh activity on God’s part? Curiously, both those who object to and those who support the Judeo-Christian tradition often suggest God has simply lost patience, throws a divine fit, or pours out wrath which simply cannot be stored up any longer. Others suggest God’s judgment upholds an objective moral standard, and that it is the job of God’s people to do likewise—for better or worse. Such interpretations, however, appear as the result of a truncated view of God’s activities throughout the entire biblical narrative. While God’s activities make us pause, and they are surely hard words to bear, we must remember that God’s ultimate commitments are not to judgment in itself, but judgment in the service of love. All judgments must be accounted for in the context of God’s love. Such a statement may seem initially confusing; God’s judgments can seem like anything but loving in the biblical narrative. Given the long view of God’s love, however, we might begin to see why judgments appear to be so painful.

We must first get clear on what provokes God’s judging activities. Instead of showing a lack of restraint, reaching a breaking point, or confirming an ordered Law, I suggest that judgment comes as a result of problems associated with inappropriate attachment. We might summarize this problem by using the word “idolatry,” that is, idolatry is precisely the process whereby human beings cover over God as the ultimate source of meaning and purpose, instead

imbuing these functions in things which are not God, things which can be controlled and manipulated or which offer a sense of control and stability. Idolatry is the process of *detaching* from God, who is unpredictable and therefore loving,¹⁸ and *attaching* to that which promises material safety.¹⁹ One powerful example of such an attachment found in 1 Samuel 8, wherein Israel demands a king in order to be like other nations. In this story, God gives in to their demands, but not without a firm rebuke of this desire which seeks to trust the powers of a centralized state and monarchy instead of trusting the powers of the unpredictable but liberating God who led the nation of Israel out of Egypt.²⁰ This general criticism is repeated throughout the history of the Hebrew Bible, wherein kings and/or the people of Israel routinely place their trust in the material security afforded by having a standing army, amassing material wealth, and turning to regional deities who can be manipulated in order to afford better circumstances in the natural world.²¹ All of these attitudes are repeatedly denounced in the biblical narrative and the prophets alike.

¹⁸ My first articulation of this sentence read: "...God, who is unpredictable yet loving..." I have changed it to a more positive and powerful formulation at the advice of Nicholas Ansell. Initially, I meant to suggest that God's unpredictability is reigned in, so to speak, by God's love. Ansell rightly notes, however, that this unpredictability is precisely the pattern of love—they are not dialectical opposites.

¹⁹ I tend to agree with Nicholas Ansell's understanding of "idolatry" in his article "The Call of Wisdom/The Voice of the Serpent." There, Ansell states "Idolatry consists in treating creation as the ultimate *source* and *referent* of revelation rather than as that which may reveal *God* to those who fear him ([Prov.] 9:10). The *fearful* attempt to gain power over life via idolatry thus stands in contrast to the wisdom that comes to those who *fear* the Lord" (48, his emphasis). He goes on to say that giving creation this role ends up putting human beings in slavery to creation rather than realizing their potential as the creatures meant to guide the rest of creation. Though Ansell does not speak specifically of attachment in this context, the connection seems natural here and gets at the spirit of Ansell's diagnosis without rehearsing all of its specifics. Ansell's view of sin in general will be worked out in more detail below.

²⁰ Some anarcho-primitivist readings of Israel's story see this as the fundamental fall of God's people from the grace of nomadic living. Such readings rightly recognize the problem of centralizing control rooted in the interests of the Israelites, though it is unclear how far such critiques go in rejecting all forms of civilization. The most responsible and sustained writings along these lines are found in the works of Ched Meyers and, to a lesser extent, Jacques Ellul.

²¹ Space does not permit what would be a worthwhile rehearsal of judgments that come prior to the founding of Israel as a state. Nicholas Ansell's "The Call of Wisdom/The Voice of the Serpent" works these issues out in greater detail with regard to the very first judgment in the Bible, that of Adam and Eve. Considering judgment as a means to a great salvation also fits with several pre-Israel judgments such as the event of the flood (see Terence E. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters*, Theological Explorations for the Church Catholic (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 39-64) or the Tower of Babel (see Nicholas Ansell and Matthew Johnson, "Trading Hell for Hope: An Interview with Nicholas Ansell," *Ground Motive* (blog), February 7, 2014, accessed

As these attitudes begin to gain steam, certain individuals and events attempt to break the sinful pattern of attachment to methods of material control which threatens to close down Israel's openness to the loving horizons of Yahweh. Indeed, even after the fitful and power-hungry reign of Saul we find David struggling to balance power and worship, control and openness. For the rest of Israel's history, the community will list back and forth between control and openness. God appears to give Israel many chances to correct itself in a variety of ways, allowing for great reforming kings like Josiah or the radical command of king Jehoshaphat to send worshippers out into battle before his soldiers (2 Chron. 20), evidence that the Israelite community may still be open to trusting Yahweh, even in the face of all worldly reason.²² Likewise, God sends several prophets to call Israel back to its elected purposes of expanding blessing to all nations rather than attempting to police its blessings by keeping them bound inside of the borders of Israel. Ultimately, however, Israel's attachments to control are too great; it will take, literally, an act of God to put an end to this path, a path which seeks to withhold and manage its blessings rather than multiply them unpredictably into the world.²³

In God's judgment, communities and individuals are torn away from the very things they have chosen to give them stability and comfort—it is no wonder that judgment is so painful! As

February 23, 2014, <http://www.groundmotive.net/2014/02/trading-hell-for-hope-interview-with.html>). We might also consider God's raising up of "judges" in the book of judges, who clearly do not function as arbitrators of particular laws but instead as liberators who rescue Israel from the burdens of captivity which stifle its elected mission.

²² These actions are not a denial of reason as such but rather evidence a different kind of reason, a way of thinking based on different axioms than that of the world. Josiah's attempt to reintroduce the Law is an example of a project which appears as folly to the world—who would think that the key to a nation's success is to revive ancient commitments and destroying the methods of control Israel had adopted in the form of pagan deities? Jehoshaphat's actions are even more radical—sending out a bunch of singers to meet the armed and angry enemy is probably the worst military plan in human history. Yet both of these kings are wise in the way of the Lord, recognizing that trusting in God, while unpredictable, is the only lasting and true source of creative stability. Regrettably, the history of Israel reveals that temptations to control prove to be more enticing to Israel than the radical covenant-relationship God offers as a gift.

²³ For more on the management tendency of Israel, see Brueggemann's *The Land*.

Terrance Fretheim notes, however, judgment can mean either good news or bad news.²⁴

Determining which kind of news depends on one's perspective and position. If one is deeply attached to the methods of control at work in the world, for example to military might, a particular political or economic organization, or stable material wealth, God's judgment comes as an utter catastrophe. All that one has worked so hard to achieve, or an order which preserves one's position and stature, comes to naught, for God the Judge is coming to put an end to such control-measures. However, if one has the perspective of God's redeeming work, such judgment comes as a fresh reminder that God will not be mocked. Further, the news that God is about to undo many measures of control comes as liberating news for those who have been systematically oppressed by such controls (indeed, this is a primary reason for God's judgment, as we see expressed in the prophets repeatedly—God hears the cries of God's people, and, indeed, it is often these very cries which move God to judge). That which bound the community to a trail of oppression, destruction, refusal toward its elected purpose will be ended, opening the community up to new vistas of justice, creation, and the outpouring of blessing.

Considered in this way, judgment is not the final end of an individual. Rather, it is a judgment-unto-salvation, it closes off the path of closure, forcing us back on the path of renewal and beginning. It is an eruptive Event which yanks us out of the mire of a particular trajectory and grants a new start. Judgment is, in fact, a gift—and as a gift, judgment comes with a call to respond. Those who regard the judgment as something other than a gift, responding in bitterness or nostalgia for the old order, fail to participate in the salvation of God. The old is cleared away, the new lies before us. Judgment is painful, to be sure, for it forces open hands which have closed with white-knuckle grips around the future—but it is done for our own good. Judgment

²⁴ Fretheim. *God and World in the Old Testament*. 158.

puts an End to the end,²⁵ it is an end which forces a beginning. The Final Judgment is precisely this, as we learn from Isaiah that the end of this age reveals the beginning of new heavens and a new earth wherein all relationships will be rightly restored for mutual blessing and flourishing. Indeed, even the end of the Bible itself, the Apocalypse of John, is the revelation of an end to one order and the absolute beginning of a new order. It is no surprise that the end of the book contains these words of Christ: “‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true’” (Rev 21:5, NRSV).²⁶

Call/Response

Thus far, we have discussed the actions of God which reveal that God is a God of beginnings. We have considered God’s gift of beginning in relation to the theological doctrines of election and judgment, both of which recognize God’s gifting as a radical break with the way the world is operating. In election and judgment, the beginning comes to the world from God alone, with no creational work to deserve or predict such a gift.²⁷ However, as we have noted, the gift comes with an open call, as a beginning which reveals a path that must be traveled. While God’s gift is an act of pure grace, it invites a graced response which is not determined or evident. In this way, humans, too, are able to give gifts to God, for God does not determine the nature of these responses. These responses come in the form of wise, creative activity, moving with fidelity to the gift. Since the response must be wise and creative, one must not understand fidelity to mean there is only one faithful response; rather, the response will be necessarily plural, each

²⁵ Indeed, even death will be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14)!

²⁶ For a very detailed and astute reading of the theme of “judgment-unto-salvation” in relation to the book of Revelation in particular, see Nicholas Ansell. *The Annihilation of Hell*. 416-422.

²⁷ Consider, here, Karl Barth’s emphatic reply simply entitled “No!” to Emil Brunner in their nature-grace debate. In this reply, Barth sees grace as a pure gift for which there is no natural preparation or rational analogy. It comes purely from the side of God. This debate is navigated in the context of gift by Ansell in *The Annihilation of Hell*. 272-281.

activity demanding a new appropriation of wisdom and creativity with God's gift in mind.²⁸ To this, I add the idea that Christians, inheriting the liberating mission of Christ, are to be actively in search areas in the world which tend toward closure, looking to burst them open in a radical imitation of God's gift of beginnings. In this way, human beings imitate God by seeking to respond to God's gift of beginnings by attempting to produce similar beginnings in the world. Human beings become co-gifters with God, both expanding God's gifts into the world via the gift of beginnings and, in so doing, giving a gift of faithful response to God. This concluding section, then, will consider the ways in which Christians are to respond to God's gifts of beginnings, particularly as evidenced in election and judgment, ultimately suggesting that Christians are to carry out their elected purpose as inheritors of Christ's legacy of salvation while waiting for the eschatological promise of judgment. We will begin by a brief detour through the biblical fall and the presence of sin, and then pick up our themes once again against a new backdrop.

Though I have attempted to note the importance of the call and response necessary to an appropriate relationship to the gift of God's beginnings, the gift side, or God's side, of this equation has been the primary focus. We may now shift our focus specifically to the response side of this relationship, understanding more deeply the human relationship to the gift.²⁹ We must begin by bringing to the fore an issue that has remained largely a background concern until

²⁸ Such is the view taken in Jeffrey S. Hocking, *Freedom Unlimited: Liberty, Autonomy, and Response-Ability in the Open Theism of Clark Pinnock* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2010). This text, which influences the views in this paper, rightly criticizes Barth's own response to Brunner as implying a single response to God's grace as the most appropriate response. Instead, Hocking advocates a variety and plurality of legitimate, faithful responses, a view I share.

²⁹ Though I have focused primarily on the human dynamics of God's gifts, it must be noted that creation, too, is gifted and it, too, must respond in its own unique ways to God's gift. The work of Terrance Fretheim has attempted to bring this to the fore. One might also consider the works of eco-theologians such as Thomas Berry or quantum physicists such as John Polkinghorne who advocate for creation's legitimate sphere of response. Creation is also given its own unique space in the work of Franz Rosenzweig, who famously notes God, the world, and human beings as mutually transcending domains in his religious ontology.

now, that is, the dynamics of the gift/call as they occur prior to the biblical fall and as they occur after. I agree with Nicholas Ansell that the fall is radically anthropocentric, that is, the biblical narrative shows that sin is structurally alien to God's creation.³⁰ When evil enters the world, it does so not because God has created the conditions for sin or for the possibility of sin. Rather, sin comes on the scene, in Genesis 3, as a surprise to everyone involved: Adam, Eve, the serpent, creation, and even God.³¹ Prior to the fall, human beings receive the gift of their existence which comes with a call to be fruitful and multiply and to have dominion over creation. Dominion, in this sense, is not the closing down of creation's possibilities for life but precisely its conditions for freedom. Our tendency as citizens of Western capitalist, liberal democratic society is to assume that freedom is only negative—one is most truly free when one is free *from* particular constraints. As a result, we may hear "dominion" as the limitation of creation's freedom by human beings. The biblical view of freedom, however, assumes that one is most truly free when one operates in deep continuity with God's loving disposition and relationships. In the original picture of creation, human beings were to be God's agents in creation who wisely guided creation in the ways of God's loving, covenantal relationships; in other words, the exercise of human dominion was to be done so that creation was capable of true freedom, living in accordance with God's love—a dominion *for* not *over*. On Ansell's reading, the fall occurs when human beings refuse their responsibility to have dominion for the serpent, instead capitulating to the serpent and eschewing their exercise of wisdom. In other words, the original sin of humanity is, paradoxically, to choose *against* freedom. Adam and Eve reject the right relationships to which God has called them, thereby closing off the possibility of life and freedom. Sin is, on this account, precisely that which closes down life. Prior to the fall, all life existed in mutually

³⁰ This is the primary thrust of Ansell. "The Call of Wisdom/The Voice of the Serpent."

³¹ Ansell notes God's surprise, but the nature of the possibility of God being surprised is thoroughly explored in Hocking, *Freedom Unlimited*.

beneficial harmony among its various parts, developing in freedom, creativity, and love. After the fall, however, the harmony of life is upset, and the vistas of positive, creative freedom are closed off by the sinful attempt to turn dominion into domination.³²

It is here where election and judgment become most evident.³³ Election and judgment are evidence of God's commitment to the redemption of the world, a repetition of the original gift of beginning and creation. Before the fall, creation is free to express itself in a variety of loving responses to the original gift and blessing of its very existence. Following the fall, this gift is covered over and sin threatens to continue to close down the possibilities for life. Election and judgment enter as God's attempts to combat sin, re-opening areas of creation that would otherwise remain closed down. We might consider, again, the example of Israel: "The point of Israel's election," writes N. T. Wright, "was not 'for the creator God to have a favourite people' but *for the sin of Adam to be dealt with*."³⁴ The story of Christ, the beginning of Christianity, emphasizes this point. The Church, too, is elected not so that God can pick favorites, but so that God might create a new beginning for dealing with the ramifications of sin.³⁵ Christians, repeating the story of Christ who inaugurates many new beginnings in his contemporary context, are to become themselves agents of new beginnings, actively offering liberating pathways into otherwise closed aspects of reality. Election, for the Christian, is an election to begin. The gift of

³² It must be noted that "dominion" does not mean "domination." For a detailed account of this, see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 278-97.

³³ One could feasibly consider "election" a pre-lapsarian concept, if we merely note that humans, for example, are elected to the service of dominion for creation. For our purposes, however, we will consider election in the context of a post-fall reality. I am unsure if the same could be said of "judgment."

³⁴ Wright. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. 1015. His emphasis. Wright makes a compelling case regarding the mission of Israel as the overcoming of the effects of sin, further situating Paul and the early Christian movement as a continued response to such a problem.

³⁵ It is intriguing to note Franz Rosenzweig's comments on the relation between Judaism and Christianity. Judaism, on his view, exists as the eternally elected people who, by their very existence, convict the world. Christians, on the other hand, actively propagate the redemption of the world through missional activity. Rosenzweig considers both religions to be valid yet distinct. Curiously, the Christian, notes Rosenzweig, is the "eternal beginner": "The Christian is the eternal beginner; completion is not for him: all's well that's well begun. That is the eternal youth of the Christian; every Christian lives his Christianity every day as though it were the first." Rosenzweig. *The Star of Redemption*. 359

election comes with a call to begin, and the Christian responds in creative, active attempts to proliferate such a gift out into the world.

Judgment, too, operates on this gift/call schema, as we have noted above. But what is the proper response to the gift of judgment? Contrary to some Christian systems, the proper response to judgment is not fear and cowering deference, attitudes which hold on to the old way of doing things. Instead, the proper response to judgment is confident hope that a new beginning has truly been created in the world. Thus this response must manifest in hopeful, positive movement in the world, detached from old idolatries and fear and newly attached to the radical confidence housed in the gift of beginnings. Indeed, one might consider “conversion” in Christian life to be such a judgment which comes with an energizing call to live new life.³⁶ Further, the Christian perspective on judgment recognizes that there is, in fact, a future judgment which is coming.³⁷ Thus, Christians have a twofold response to judgment: the first is a response to past judgments, both in historical and personal life, and the second is a response to the coming judgment, that is, the eschatological judgment. Both of these judgments, from the past and the future, come as gifts with calls.³⁸ This insight is at the heart of the theology of Christoph Blumhardt, who writes in the context of eschatological judgment:

³⁶ This also reflects a double-meaning of “crisis,” that is, something which overturns a settled way of thinking or being and yet opens up new horizons for thinking and being otherwise. Conversion might be considered a kind of crisis in our lives, and crises may be considered conversions, for better or worse. The nature of crisis often appears to us as a paralyzing trauma from which there is no escape—we find ourselves mastered by it. Yet, if we see crisis as a gift rather than an enemy, a symbol of life rather than loss, we may be able to receive the crisis as something liberating, even if the losses must be accounted for. Something of this dynamic is expressed by Simone Weil when she writes “The extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural cure for suffering, but a supernatural use of it” (*Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 28.).

³⁷ Jürgen Moltmann combines this eschatological reading of judgment with the experience of conversion in his book *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 22. While this is a useful comparison, and Moltmann’s understanding of conversion as a sense of continuity rather than mere interruption is welcome in relation to my paper, I wonder if this connection is totally apt. See the above footnote.

³⁸ This is one of the central theses of Ansell’s *The Annihilation of Hell*.

Now the servant's task does not consist in merely waiting and doing nothing. Rather it is a matter of practicing good stewardship. Good stewardship means looking after the servants, that is, those who are in our care. And if only our hearts and minds were big enough, I would say that all the people on earth are entrusted to our care (Gal. 16:9-10).³⁹

Blumhardt goes on to say, in beautiful superlatives, that God's coming judgment requires that we, as faithful receivers of the gift of judgment, must respond by creatively taking care of, rather than judging, those who we encounter.⁴⁰ Where some Christians utilize God's judgment as a way to judge other individuals and thereby close them off from the liberating gifts of God, Blumhardt offers us a radical response to God's judgment as a way to care for and remain open to others, just as God cared for and remained open to us. Blumhardt's vision pairs well with Ansell's reading of the fall, as Blumhardt recovers a proper understanding of human dominion, one which views all creation as something in need of tender care and loving action. Conceived in this way, the gifts of election and judgment come together to reveal a powerful, energizing response.

The response of human beings must manifest in a graced sense of purpose and mission. Proceeding with the gifts of election and judgment (which are but two of many), Christians press forward not in fear, nor bound to the paralyzing and murky effects of sin, but in the love and redemption which casts out all such closures to life. In the covenant, gift/call relationship between God and human beings, it is not the case that God retains all power and humans lack any agency whatsoever. Rather, God liberates human beings in order that they, too, might

³⁹ Christoph Blumhardt, *Action in Waiting* (Farmington, PA: Plough Pub. House, 1998), 28-29. Available for free download at "Action in Waiting, a free ebook download by Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt," Plough Publishing, February 24, 2014, accessed February 24, 2014, <http://www.plough.com/en/ebooks/a/action-in-waiting>.

⁴⁰ There may yet be room for understanding a more symmetrical version of human judgment in relation to God's judgment. Christians are called to judge, discern, and battle spiritual enemies, systems that, built on sin, systematically oppress and close down possibilities for life. They are not, however, called to judge persons, nor peoples, in the way God does. This may be a way of getting at what is expressed in 1 Corinthians 6:3, where we read "Do you not know that we are to judge angels—to say nothing of ordinary matters?" Thus even God's judgment is a participatory opportunity for human beings, but, as with election, it comes with particular fidelity to the possibilities of opening, rather than pure closing.

become beginners, creators, co-agents, co-gifters with God in the mission of saving the world from sin and putting things right. In this way, power and freedom are expressed through the mutual, loving activities enjoyed by God and his creation. As Jeffrey Hocking writes, "...we can imagine an economy of freedom which continually grows as it is shared. This freedom is progressive: it continues to create greater freedom as long as its participants live their lives in service toward life and toward each other."⁴¹ The freedom to which God liberates human beings is a freedom to become partners, now released from the debilitating and disabling effects of sin, freed to create and proliferate gifts in loving response to that which has been gifted.

Attention to God's beginnings offers a radical turnaround for much Christian theology. As we have noted, it provides a lens which shifts our readings of particular concepts and texts which have tended to close down the possibilities of life and opens them up to allow new possibilities for creative flourishing. Further, God's beginnings reveal to us a God who is *for* us, not against us, and likewise reveals the unique human purpose of redemption and creativity, liberating the world from its bondage to sin. God begins in order that we might be set free to take hold of our creative potentials, working in faithful response to the work God has done and the work God will do. Gone are the theological hang-ups which serve only to protect in-groups against out-groups, which name others as Samaritans or ban individuals from entering the holy places. Eliminated are the theological systems which oppress their adherents, closing them off from their very selves and the others around them, insulating them away from their true human purpose. In their place is now a clearing, a clearing which is a gift, which is a beginning, calling for response. "It was for freedom," Paul tells us, "that Christ set us free" (Gal. 5:1, NASB). Let us proceed, then, in the freedom to which we have been freed, responding with creative acts of

⁴¹ Hocking. *Freedom Unlimited*. 68.

liberation, remembering Christ's liberating word to us: "'SEE, I AM MAKING ALL THINGS NEW....
WRITE THIS, FOR THESE WORDS ARE TRUSTWORTHY AND TRUE.'"

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