“Serious joy of the ultimate decision”

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It seems, said Pierre Maury, that we are only able to speak of election either to defend or attack it\(^1\). In many parts of contemporary Christian life it is either ignored or made a touchstone of faith (in one or other of the particular versions in which it manifests). Where it is preached, it is often polemical; where it is taught, it is often analytical or philosophical; and it is rarely visible as a constructive or comforting motif in pastoral texts. We have failed in many places to heed Maury’s wisdom: “To determine the true link between election and faith, we need to, above all, avoid speaking abstractly of either of these terms”\(^2\)

For much of Christian history, election has been at the heart of Christian understanding, has fuelled the missional and pastoral task of the Church, and has informed human self-understanding in the light of the revealed nature of God. As Mark Lindsay has noted (see Lindsay p3 SIMON) the doctrine of election was inextricably linked with the vocation of preacher for Barth as for Calvin, and similarly for Maury. At a merely instrumental level, the preacher wonders why some hearers respond to the call to repentance, the offer of life and the wonder of hope. Preachers also wonder why some do not. Pastorally it is profoundly vexing that many who hear do not come to know the saving gift of God (and perhaps that many who claim to know it seem untransformed by it). Pondering election and its polarities in

\(^1\) Maury, ‘Election et Foi’, PAGE.
\(^2\) Maury, Foi et Vie. 1936, 202.
predestination is a means of making sense of this reality, and a step to encouraging steadfastness in the lives of the faithful.

Barth is credited with taking the classical Calvinist conception of election which he had inherited and giving it new depth, through new insights, by focusing on (the act of God in) Jesus Christ, human and divine, electing God and elected Man.\(^3\) The particularity of this move is critical. Out of a theocentric act, election becomes a christological reality. It becomes part of the life of God. It coheres and resonates with Paul’s regular description of the Christian as “in Christ” (and thus in God). The argument, philosophically or pastorally, need not be the either or regarding whether faith can be lost, but rather the embrace of the reality that God loves and is faithful. God is the one who loves in freedom (CD II/1, 257). God’s love is known by its constancy, since God “remains the one He is” (CD II/1, 491).

This volume attests to the significance of Pierre Maury in the quantum change in reformed understanding of election, most commonly attributed to the influence of Karl Barth. This chapter outlines pastoral perspectives on election and points to some connections between the theological and pastoral aspects of both Barth and Maury. Both these theological pastors link election to the living and enjoyment of (Christian) life.

Volume II of the *Church Dogmatics* was completed in 1942. The first half volume, in which Barth addresses the doctrine of God and builds a foundation for his explication of election in the second half volume, was shaped in the early years of the second world war and published in 1940. “It is a good thing that the properties of God

\(^3\) Barth’s translators have taken his German “Mensch”, a gender neutral term, and have translated it as “man”, and in some cases “Man”, using the term generically as was typical for the use of English at their time. I will use “Man” where the translators have used it, capitalizing to show its inclusive dimension, though “humanity” will be preferred to refer to all humankind in general.
and predestination and all the rest could be put to paper and printed in the middle of all this [thunder of war]. In that half volume Barth builds his doctrine of God in constructive and positive terms. Barth eschews the classical presentation of God (immutable, infinite, not-human) as what God is not (mutable, finite, human) and uses only positive terms, focused around the view that God Is the One who Loves in Freedom (the five capitalized words are key) (CD II/1, 257).

“There is no possibility of knowing the perfect God without knowing his perfections” (CD II/1, 322). Barth explicates these in three pairs of perfections of divine loving: grace and holiness; mercy and righteousness; patience and wisdom, and in three pairs of perfections of divine freedom: unity and omnipresence; constancy and omnipotence; and eternity and glory. This exposition ends the first part of the second volume of the Church Dogmatics. And critically, it leads into the second volume and the exploration of divine election. Using a mixture of metaphors, all linked to show that God’s revelation is of God’s own glory, Barth continues:

God’s face is more than the radiance of light. And God’s glory is the glory of His face, indeed His face itself, God in person, God who bears a name and calls us by name. God is glorious in the fact that He does this, that He reaches us in this way, that He Himself comes to us in this way (CD II/1, 647).

That God’s glory is not remote, but is rather present, and that God’s glory is seen in God’s face, is closely connected with God’s reach to us, and God’s coming to us. There is a richness of glory described as joyful.

God’s glory is the indwelling joy of His divine being which as such shines out from Him, which overflows in its richness, which in its super-abundance

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4 Letter to O. Weber, 20 June 1949, in Busch, Karl Barth, 301.
5 Emphasized in the original.
is not satisfied with itself but communicates itself. All God’s works must be understood also and decisively from this point of view. All together and without exception they take part in the movement of God’s self-glorification and the communication of His joy (CD II/1, 647).

Thus it is the human destiny to “offer a true if inadequate response in the temporal sphere to the jubilation with which the Godhead is filled from eternity to eternity” (CD II/1, 648). This temporal jubilation will give way to joy in eternity.

In the eternity before us the groaning of creation will cease, and Man too will live in his determination to be the reflection and echo of God and therefore the witness to the divine glory that reaches over to him, rejoicing with the Godhead who Himself has eternal joy and Himself is eternal joy (CD II/1, 648–9).

The Ultimate Decision, notes Maury, is problematic in that making a decision that Jesus Christ is the way requires a potential believer to be sure that Jesus Christ really is the way. It is as if to become a believer, one first needs to be a believer. To pray for faith is to have faith to pray. To find if it is true that Jesus is God is to know the truth. Grappling with this conundrum, says Maury, is not a “vain intellectual curiosity” but rather it “represent[s] the mortal torment of suffering souls” (UD p2).

The Ultimate Decision rests on the decisive and ultimate character of Christ’s reality (UD p6). “Marvelous revelation of an unfathomable mystery! When this child is born in a manger, when this man died on the cross and rises again the third day, the eve of the Sabbath, it is our whole life that is swept up in this commitment” (UD p7).
Maury sees the outcome of the ultimate decision not as escape from this world, or the removal of fear, pain or suffering. Rather he sees the outcome as a joy since the mystery of Jesus is not just something that God knows, but also that those who are in Christ, that is to say you and me, will overflow with joy, we need to understand how this unfathomable earthly truth, the life of the Son of man, is a heavenly secret; in other words, how Jesus Christ is decisive (UD p7).

The decisiveness, that is, the nature of the Ultimate Decision, is that it is God in Jesus Christ who is decisive. The error, implicitly, identified by both Maury and Barth, is to impute the decision to the human agent. Affirmation of human decisiveness is to take from God that which is God’s and give to humankind that which they cannot fully bear. “It bears repeating that for Barth, true humanity is only possible by participation in the redemption of Jesus Christ” (Durheim, 2011, 8 n.24). Barth’s language of encounter is the language of participation in the divine (though Barth does not go as far as the eastern view of theosis in his four volumes of the Church Dogmatics, it is surely a possible trajectory for the unwritten fifth).

Humankind are “being in encounter”. It is the encounter that empowers the participation. It might be argued to impute the decisiveness needed for the Ultimate Decision.

Encounter, for Barth, between Church and society requires a “meeting eye to eye” (CD III.2.250). Durheim (2011, 19) notes that this occurs through mutual enrichment, with assistance from church to society characterized by love, with gladness “necessary [only] on the part of the Church”. Referencing Mangina (2001, 184–5), Durheim (2011, 19) notes that “when applied to the Church in relation to society, [this gladness] would likely look more like zeal and patience in suffering”
with this drawn “from the agency of God”. Indeed, a view of evangelical zeal which considers it to be based in self-knowledge, self-assurance or marketing technique lacks the fundamental veracity to claim to be an expression of God at work. It is, at base and in total, an expression of the zeal and suffering of God. This may be known and experienced in the life of the Christian, but its source and its power are in God, and its result is also in God—not simply in God’s providence, as if that could be abstracted from God. The love of God, expressed in human encounter, is the essence of Barth’s anthropology. It reflects a view of divine action and decision for humankind by God in Jesus Christ. Gladness, as the response to divine glory in the life of humanity, said Barth, is the crowning of full and free humanness (CD III.2). This parallels his placement of joy in God6.

Barth’s view of human encounter is summarized as “creaturely being…in encounter-between I and Thou…a likeness of the being of its Creator and a being in hope in Him” (CD III.2.203). “The humanity of human being is this total determination as being in encounter with the being of the Thou, as being with the fellow-man, as fellow-humanity” (CD III.2.247). Being in encounter “looks the other in the eye” (CD III.2.250), involves “mutual speech and hearing” (CD III.2.252), in “rendering mutual assistance” (CD III.2.260), and is “done on both sides with gladness” (CD III.2.262). Being in encounter, the engagement of humans, but particularly of God and humans, is ennobled in election. It is actualized in faith. Eberhard Jüngel describes the joy of faith in being in encounter:

Faith is that human attitude toward God which is called forth by God himself, in which Man, completely without coercion and gladly, relates himself to God. The most original attitude of one ego toward another person, an attitude

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6 Capper, 2000, 105CHECKp SIMON I do not have this text to hand, sorry.
called forth by that other one, completely uncoerced and realized gladly, is joy. For that reason, one can say “joy in God” instead of “faith.”…The self-definition for which Man is determined in faith can thus be only the immediacy of a defined joy. Joy in God would then be the origin, the source, of the true thought of God, to the extent that joy is that “existential” in which God is thinkable for the sake of his own self. For joy is always joy in something for its own sake….To think God without joy in God is a self-contradiction which must lead even the most logical proof of God to absurdity.7

Without the gift of human joy, revelation (which is joyfully given) cannot be grasped. It is not simply faith which is imputed. Joy, grace and truth are also given. Faith in action is joy. Joy in action is faith. To be known and predestined for God is to be conformed to God’s image (Romans 8:29), is to be drawn into the joy of God “according to his pleasure and will, to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves” (Ephesians 1:5–6). These are key scriptural passages on which Maury builds his theology in Election and Faith. In The Ultimate Decision his scriptural focus is more connected to the narrative of the Gospels. These point to Maury’s conclusion to his sermon, where he points to the consummation of human response to God, as 1 John 1:4 puts it “to make joy complete”. Maury notes that Jesus’ hearers began to rejoice. Implicitly, for Maury, Jesus is that joy. Maury notes that Calvin and others have sung about “the joy of election” based in the reality that God is love (UD, p6). The reformers “had understood that in Christ crucified there is only cause for the believer to experience a triumphant joy” (UD, p6).

7 Jüngel, Mystery, 192. (Jüngel’s emphases.)
We can truly say that outside of Christ, there is neither election, nor knowledge of election—and I mean the word in its strongest sense, the sense of a sovereign choice, free and with no strings attached on the part of God, having a “double” aspect which has the character of both rejection and welcome. Outside of Christ, we know neither who the God who chooses (elects) is, nor those he elects, nor how he elects them (Maury, UD, p2-3).

In the light of this theological motif, it is appropriate to consider the homiletical turn by which the motif is communicated. The Ultimate Decision sits between a study affirming revelation in Christ as the only truth and life, and a subsequent study which relates to the human aspect of the choice of life in Christ. Thus it picks up from the question of revelation and the “intellectually scandalous affirmation” which leads to “another rebellious movement…dread joined to a sense of the impossible” (UD, p1). That impossibility is the affirmation of Jesus as the only way, without having explored every other possible way. Without this external reference, the choice of faith in Christ appears to be an enclosed decision in a closed cycle. “This is an eternal vicious circle of faith so rigorously closed that we are confronted with its limits in every thinking moment in our Christian lives” (UD p1). To follow, he notes, is to become a disciple. But only a disciple chooses to follow.

Whether this confronting conundrum carries weight in a postmodern world is a worthy question, as is whether it is his modernist world that brings Maury to pose the conundrum as he does. Through this lens, however, Maury draws insight from the gospel narrative. That this is a mystery may be complex to Maury and his hearers. To contemporary hearers, however, the quandary may be overstated at best, and perhaps irrelevant at worst. Yet the light he sheds on the gospel brings insights, surely, to all followers of Christ. They may not be modernist seekers of certainty, but all followers
of Christ are called to live with the complexity of mystery, and deal, even if diversely, with uncertainty.

Maury identifies two groups for which this uncertainty carries difficulty: “those people who aspire to have faith” and “double minded Christians, not sure either of their questions or their certitude…Christians for whom spiritual dryness is devastating”. For these groups, the question are not “asked out of some vain intellectual curiosity, but represent the mortal torment of suffering souls”. The resolution is to “give up asking these kinds of questions…[and] to accept that these are questions which are addressed to us and which are resolved for us by Another, by the God who reveals Himself”.

“This abandonment, this acceptance, is very precisely the way of Jesus Christ.” It is a daily choice and a daily way. It is a commitment of daily and yet of eternal proportions. This is the objectivity which is the claim of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Thus Maury ends his introduction, and sets out the basis for his second section, wherein he addresses the consequences of the Ultimate Decision.

Maury, in the second section of The Ultimate Decision, paints the backdrop of social movements which demand exclusive choice. In Lent 1937 this may be understood as pointing particularly to the scourge building in Europe as National Socialism demanded absolute allegiance. Today, politics in many places is again benign, but forces emerge demanding absolute commitment—Islamic State, the “Tea Party”, UKIP, religious cults, and possibly some philatelic society somewhere as well. The Christian decision is not of this kind, since Jesus is not of this world (John 8:23). It is not one totalitarian choice amongst many, but a response to The Absolute Unique Son of God, as Maury places his emphasis. We do not know our choice, but “we need
to know (SIMON Check – not to be known?) by Him whom we choose in choosing him”.

This short second session leads to a third, with some exposition of the lives of the faithful, from Pascal to Jesus’ own hearers. The apprehension that they heard the living word of God became the basis for their response. Maury’s own comment, “I know that this affirmation will always appear to be incomprehensible to those who have not heard the voice of God in Christ” will probably be echoed yet more strongly today. Whether this is because “a faithless generation demand a sign” or because “faith comes by hearing” will stretch the minds of mission strategists in every age, and vex those who seek simple formulae. Yet it is in the midst of complex factors that witness finds its voice. It is in the midst of mystery that life choices are made.

The fourth section moves to a discussion of “the decisive and ultimate character of his [Christ’s] reality”. This is the key topic for this talk. Here, the decisive character relates to Jesus Christ as the decision of God. Humankind are the object of the decision. The ultimate character relates to the finality of the decision. These two aspects are reinforced by appeal to a wide range of scriptures, from John 1:1-3 to Colossians 1:6, both appealing to the completeness of creation in Christ, to the Psalms and the gospel narratives where the definitive nature of the acts of God in Christ are on display. In this sweep, in the “prodigious audacity” of Jesus, humankind discover that they are not “ephemeral beings, incidental playthings of circumstances or of blind forces, interchangeable links of the missing link of our race”. Rather, “we existed, we are known in our most personal reality, for [SIMON, is this possibly “for IN God we have a name?] God we have a name!” And in him we are individualized (Maury’s italics). The particularity of Jesus Christ as “a man that we can know because he has been one of us, has lived like us and amongst us, human beings, that it is with him
that we are linked. Such is the sense of our baptism.” In our baptism, the human name
chosen by our parents is “associated very personally with the name of Jesus Christ”.

Maury’s turn of phrase is engaging. I was drawn to “prodigious audacity” (above)
and find it hard to resist “Marvelous revelation of an unfathomable mystery!” In the
“Easter event” to borrow a phrase beloved of Barth, “it is our whole life that is swept up
in this commitment”. In this simplicity and immensity our life begins and ends. Maury
encapsulates this conclusion to the core of his talk in memorable prose:

Yes! Marvelous revelation! But so that it does not remain an unfathomable
divine thought, so that the mystery of Jesus is not just something that God
knows, but also that those who are in Christ, that is to say you and me, will
overflow with joy, we need to understand how this humble earthly truth, the
life of the Son of man, is a heavenly secret; in other words, how Jesus Christ
is decisive.

The theological emphasis emerging is the equating of the act and person of
Jesus Christ in salvation. Maury, as Barth, has no truck with a mere forensic
engagement of saved humanity with the Act of God in the Easter event. Rather, with
Paul (and Barth), he emphasizes the “in Christ-ness” of saved humanity as part of a
saved world. This is love which incorporates but does not subsume. It is incorporation
which affirms rather than extinguishing uniqueness. This is how salvation in Christ
can be ultimate without being totalitarian.

In his fifth section Maury explores the decisiveness of the character of Christ’s
reality. He does this by referring to the testimony of eye witnesses to Christ.
Implicitly, Maury notes, this testimony accords with the many who have entered into
understanding that their existence was fulfilled in him since. He unpacks this reality
in terms of their testimony of Jesus Christ as the one who comes to them, gives
himself to them, and chooses them. In the day of salvation, as for the paralytic by the pool of Bethesda, healing comes when Jesus comes. Christ’s coming reveals intention and direction, and an unwavering will towards others.

In his coming, Christ gives himself. He holds nothing back. For those to whom he offers himself, “it is only ever a matter of receiving, of taking, and of being filled with Him”. His choosing “makes plain” his coming and giving. He calls, enlightens and explains to those who listen. Maury then points to a key moral dimension of election, when he says “We need to understand this election in its most positive sense, that is to say, as a testimony of his love, and not negatively as a sign of partiality.” It is clear from the Church Dogmatics that Barth resonated with this sense of election as the divine “Yes!” The human parallel is touching: “A father loves each of his children with a complete and special tenderness, without at the same time setting aside any of them.” Yet the realism of this calling is not simply to life, but to endurance through “hostility, persecution, even death”. In Christ, saving life is losing it, and losing it because of Christ is truly saving it.

Maury notes that this claim to complete incorporation could be issued by any master in this world. The differentiating mystery is what he does for us. He does this because he comes from above, in obedience. He “gives himself fully, freely, totally” and yet is also given over, and delivered for us—by human agents and even abandoned by God. His choosing of those who must relinquish their will to him is borne of his own relinquishment of his will to God for the sake of others. Jesus Christ asks only for what he has, himself, done. The ultimacy of this decision thus has a “double sense”. It is absolute, as an expression of God’s absolute love. It is absolute in that it gives all things. Again, Maury cites from the end of Romans 8: God, having given up all things for us, gives us all things, that nothing might separate us from God’s love. This is the assurance made possible by the ultimacy of the decisive act of God, the divine ultimate decision,
Jesus Christ. Our whole life, hidden with Christ in God, is thus a divine decision. It is good news, and as we have noted, it is a basis for joy.

Maury, in the light of this assurance, notes the power of judgement against us: *Himself*. We can thrill with joy because we know who will be the judge, and what the judgement will be.

Praise be to God that he has postponed the irrevocable sentence to which we will have to submit, to the ultimate authority. Praise be to God that our judge is the One who has chosen us…and who wanted to be chosen by us!

The decision we make *for* Christ is the decision we make *in* Christ. Since all these affirmations…are so bold, out of all proportion to what our understanding and our heart knows, that they leave us perplexed, if not full of anxieties. If it is necessary, not to repeat them as formulas of a totally intellectual but rather practical belief system, so that concretely in the daily stuff of life we are continuously referred to the life of Jesus of Nazareth, if it is necessary to believe that in him… the supreme will of God is what decides our destiny.

This then is the basis of our ultimate decision. This is required of us “*with no holding back*”. This is not to be based on emotional appeals, rational argument or opinions or doctrines. The choice, the decision, is Jesus Christ. His choice of us becomes our choice of him. “It is a *yes* or *no*, but never ‘perhaps’….The intolerable demanding nature of faith, is the mark of *Grace* which is ours in faith.”

Maury makes an important nuancing, or even a defense, of election when he notes that the ultimacy of the decision “is not the way that Jesus Christ demands our choice”. In the light of this, says Maury, we do well to reread the accounts of the
encounters with the Lord of those whose lives he turned around is that “they all ran toward Jesus of Nazareth, with the same expectancy, with their whole life offered up and reaching out…[not]… like a doctor among so many others”. As he brings his talk to a conclusion, and focuses his appeal, Maury recounts the responses of those whom Jesus encountered: throwing themselves on their knees, climbing a tree, and particularly how Jesus recognized them: He recognized them as his own.

From their stories, embedded in texts and the past, he poses the “great…formidable question [that] remains”: “How would we be able today to know Jesus Christ…and how would we be able today to choose him without reservation and conditions?” We do not have the possibility of being with him but, rather, we have a book, and we have a community: the Scriptures and the Church. Both make Jesus Christ our contemporary; both hear and witness to Jesus Christ; both call us to “decide for or against Him”. Whether slowly or suddenly, the truth presented in the book calls for decision, and the Church bears witness to its truth. The call to the ultimate decision is a call in and from a community of witness to a God who is being in encounter, truth and the ultimate decision. Christ. Life and death. “And the people began to rejoice.”

Mystery evoking joy! Jesus Christ, through lives past, by scripture and in the church, calls to human beings, invites encounter, and asks for choice, that the ultimate decision might be made again as it was made once for all. And joy will reign.

For both Maury and Barth, the language of joy and of election intertwine. There is both resonance and coherence between the two. It is evident in Barth’s early writing and in his later work. It is evident in Maury’s theological writing and in this seminal sermon, The Ultimate Decision. Joy is the gift of election. God elects in joy and for joy—the completion of God’s own joy, and the affirmation of human joy in
God. Joy is the hallmark of election: being in encounter. Election is a doctrine of joy, and a call to the joy of being in encounter. Election can and should be a joyful doctrine, a joyful message, and a reason for joy. There are missional and pastoral dimensions of this. And a reading of Barth’s sermons shows the same resonance of joy and delight in Jesus Christ.
Bibliography (Capper Chapter)


