This is lecture 11 for the course Contemporary Theology 1. In our last lecture, we were talking again about Kierkegaard, and right at the end of that lecture, I was discussing with you his work *Training in Christianity*. What I want to do today is to finish off my thoughts on that work of Kierkegaard and then turn our thinking to the theology of Karl Barth. But before we begin that, let's bow for a word of prayer.

Thank You, again, Lord, for the privilege of study. We pray that as we reflect again on Kierkegaard's “Training in Christianity” that You would challenge us with our own discipleship and our own relationship to You. We just pray, Father, that the things that we learn would be beneficial, not only in our theological understanding, but in our walk with You. We ask all these things in Christ’s precious name. Amen.

Last time, right at the end, as I was talking about *Training in Christianity*, I was giving you a general description of what this particular work is about. And right at the end, I noted that Kierkegaard had said that there are three basic ways that a person might respond to Jesus Christ. One of those ways is that one might be offended. Now when we move to part two of *Training in Christianity*, we find that the basic point of this portion of the work is to reflect on the meaning of the offense. And, really, it's part two which is at the heart of this work, *Training in Christianity*. And yet, in the Bretall *Anthology*, we have a portion from part one and part three. What I would like to do, then, is note some of the key passages in the Bretall *Anthology* and see how they, in fact, do suggest the major themes of this work. All of the page numbers that I will mention will be to the Bretall *Anthology*.

First of all, then, on page 375, the first paragraph of the section entitled “Invocation” sets forth some of the main themes of the whole work. You’ll want to note, if you will, as you look at that section, the contrast between, on the one hand, the historical existence of Christ and the need to become contemporary
instead. In much of what Bretall gives us, we have Kierkegaard’s devotional ruminations about Jesus’s offer when He said, “Come unto Me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” In the portion of this work with the general title, “The Obstacle”—and that appears in the Bretall Anthology on pages 386 and following—in that portion we begin to see some of the main themes of the work played out. Note, for example, page 386 to the top of 387, in regard to Christ as the One who invites us to come. The Christ who invites all people to come to Him, according to Kierkegaard, is not the One about whom we merely have historical knowledge. That wouldn’t be enough.

Then, if you move your eye down a little bit further on the page, you’ll note the section that has the letter “A” in front of it. In that section, Kierkegaard argues that the Inviter invites us in His humiliation, not in His glory. Note the interesting interplay, as well, between what it is that we know about Christ in His humiliation, but only believe, on the other hand, about Him with respect to His glory. You’ll see this interplay on pages 387-388.

Then if you turn to the section that’s labeled “Section B”—this is on pages 388-389—you find that there’s an interesting discussion on whether we can learn anything about Christ from history. And, in this case, Kierkegaard means ordinary history. The answer that Kierkegaard gives is negative. Initially, you might think that his point is that one could know something historical about Jesus of Nazareth, but nothing through history about the Christ, that is the God-man, the paradoxical incarnate Christ. That’s what we might expect from Kierkegaard; but, as you read on in this section and the next section, you find that that’s not quite what Kierkegaard is up to. He doesn’t seem to make this distinction between the Jesus of ordinary history, on the one hand, and the Christ of faith on the other. He may be doing that in “Section B,” but it’s not at all clear that he is. If he is, then he’s saying that, in terms of the historical facts about the person Jesus of Nazareth, there’s really nothing that history can teach us.

In “Section C,” Kierkegaard argues long and hard that it’s impossible to prove from history that a particular human being, Jesus Christ, was also God. You may want to take a look at his arguments to this effect on pages 389-393. Note, in particular, on page 391, at the bottom, his claim that God is really so totally other than man that it’s unthinkable that there is anything in the historical pilgrimage of Jesus Christ that would make us think that He is God.
As we move on to “Section D,” we find that in this section Kierkegaard argues that for a mere man it is quite possible that the consequences of his life might be more significant than his life itself. But Kierkegaard says this is not so in the case of Christ. For the fact that, and I quote Kierkegaard here, “God lived here on earth as an individual man is infinitely noteworthy.” You find this quote on page 393.

In part, then, what we have here is Kierkegaard’s slap at those who have become a Christian, or at least they think they’ve become Christian, by being moved by the 1800 years of the glorious results of the existence of Christ. If the consequences of Christ’s life were more important than His life itself, then one could quite possibly become a Christian by knowing about those consequences and attaching oneself to Christianity because of being impressed by them. But since the life of Christ itself, according to Kierkegaard, is more important than the consequences of his life, since that is so, one must become a contemporary with Christ and deal with Him, not with the historical results of His existence. Of course, this is why, for Kierkegaard, to be a disciple means becoming contemporary with Jesus Christ, in the sense that he has explained contemporaneousness with Christ.

In “Section E,” Kierkegaard considers one possible set of consequences of the life of Christ and how one might view the relation of those consequences to an individual today. He imagines a mere human being who is terribly misunderstood and suffers for it during his life. After he dies, people really do come to understand him; and, as a result of that, he is thought to have great significance. The consequences of his life, in this case, become more important than his life itself was. Kierkegaard makes it very clear that this sort of thing cannot be true in regard to Christ Himself. His life is far more significant than the consequences of His life. You’ll want to see here pages 394-396, where Kierkegaard makes this point. Note, especially, on page 394, paragraph three, his comments on the historical knowledge of Christ, as opposed to faith in Christ.

Then on page 396 we find Kierkegaard's “Section F,” and this section is an interesting section on the misfortune of Christianity, in which Kierkegaard spells out various ways that one might respond to Christ and shows his problems with the way many people in his own day are reacting. Kierkegaard then returns to the idea of Christ as the One who invites those “who labor and are heavy laden” to come unto Him and to find rest. He notes, again,
that Christ invites us while Christ is in His humiliation. We see that on pages 397-399. Though the crowd might follow Christ, not everyone contemporaneous to Christ in His humiliation would do so. In other words, people who were merely historically living at the time when Christ was here on earth would not necessarily become true disciples of Christ.

On pages 400 and following, Kierkegaard imagines the response of various people who might have lived at the time of Christ in the time when He was preaching here on earth; a time, of course, while He was still in His humiliation. He imagines the response, for example, of the wise and the prudent man. This we have recorded on pages 400-401. Then he turns to how a clergyman might respond to Christ if he had been living at that time. We find this on pages 402-403. Then he turns to the response of a philosopher. Here we have this recorded for us on pages 403-404. Then Kierkegaard imagines the response of a statesman, and this we find on pages 404-405; then the response of a solid citizen, pages 405-406; and then, finally, the response of the mocker on pages 406-407. What you find as you look at all of this is that all of these people, according to Kierkegaard, are offended at Christ. They simply did not understand or wouldn’t have understood, Kierkegaard says, who Christ really was and what He was really talking about. On page 407, Kierkegaard then turns to talk about what it really costs to be a disciple of Christ.

The section that we find on pages 408-411 offers Kierkegaard’s answer to what it means to be a Christian. Christianity, he says, came into the world as the absolute. And to be a real Christian one must become contemporaneous with Christ; but, of course, this is contemporaneous in the sense that we’ve already explained when we talked about his *Philosophical Fragment*. It’s not a historical contemporaneity, but it is a contemporaneousness of being a true follower, a spiritual disciple, a spiritual contemporary of Christ.

Then, finally, the section on Christ drawing all men unto Himself, the section that you find here in Bretall, comes from Part 3 of the work *Training in Christianity*. Note pages 415-416, if you will, where Kierkegaard says that for Christ to draw us to Himself while on the cross is in one sense also to repel us. Here, again, you see the Hegelian dialectic at work, that in one and the same act we are both drawn to something and repulsed by it.

That completes my basic description of this work. With this description, also, I want to finish off my thinking on Kierkegaard
and turn now to Karl Barth. When we turn to Karl Barth, we will begin to see some of the influences, both of Hegel and of Kierkegaard. Karl Barth was very much familiar with Kierkegaard. He had read a good bit of him and, as we’ll see, very much influenced by him.

As I begin with Karl Barth, let me, first of all, just give you the dates of his life. Karl Barth lived from 1886 to 1968, so he definitely lives well into the twentieth century. In my discussion of Karl Barth, there are a number of things that I could talk about. He obviously has written voluminously, but I want to center most of my discussion on what is known as his *Doctrine of the Word of God*. This is probably what he is as famous for as anything, and that will take up most of my discussion on Barth. But then, at the very end of my thinking on Karl Barth, I also want to talk somewhat about his concept of God.

First of all, Karl Barth’s *Doctrine of the Word of God*, and there are a number of points in it. We find that a good portion of his thinking on *The Doctrine of the Word of God* takes up Volume 1, and especially Part 1 of Volume 1; but there are also some things that we’ll see in Part 2 of Volume 1.

The first thing that I want to note for you is what Barth says about the content of revelation. According to Karl Barth, God Himself is the content of revelation. Revelation does not consist in propositions about God but rather in the self-disclosure of God Himself. Now what this is going to mean, of course, is that the Bible is not revelation. Anything written, anything objective can’t be revelation at all. Instead, God Himself is the content of revelation. Barth says that God has chosen to reveal Himself to us, specifically, in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, then, is God’s word to man. He is the Word of God who is revealed.

Barth then moves on to talk about the nature of the Word of God. You’d find this in *Church Dogmatics*, Part 1, Section 1, pages 141-212. Incidentally, I’m going to be citing various pages from the *Church Dogmatics*. This is from the edition that was published by Charles Scribner & Sons and ultimately goes back to the edition put out by T&T Clark from Edinburgh, Scotland.

What does he say about the nature of the Word of God? Barth says that when we are describing the revelation that comes, in whatever form it comes, there are several things that we can say about it. In all of its forms, the Word of God is His language to
us. Well, what does that exactly mean? Let me, first of all, give you a general statement of Barth’s understanding of the nature of the Word of God; and then we’ll look more specifically at how he understands the nature of this Word. His general statement is that the Word of God is the content of revelation, as we’ve already said; but Barth goes on to say that God and His Word are not presented to us in the way in which natural and historical entities are presented to us, not in some objective way. We can never, by retrospect, on the one hand, or anticipation, on the other, fix what God or His Word is. God must always repeat that to us afresh and with a new utterance, always, of course, in a new encounter with us.

So what Barth is saying is that you cannot look back to something historical, something objective, and say Ah yes, that’s the Word of God; nor, on the basis of anything historical or objective or even on the basis of any subjective experience of God that you might have had in the past, you can ever anticipate exactly what God is going to say the next time He reveals Himself. There’s always going to be a new utterance in another encounter. But Barth says that, because of the forms in which the Word of God comes to us, we can say what the Word of God is, although we can do so only indirectly. These forms allow us to infer, he says, how it is; but the “how” is the reflected image of the unattainable God. The image is what we are occupied with. We cannot ever entirely get to that of which it is an image, that is, directly to God.

That’s somewhat of a general statement about his understanding of the nature of the Word of God. Let me move to some more specific comments. In particular, Barth wants us to understand the Word of God as God’s language. Barth says, then, that God’s Word means “God speaks.” And here I quote him from page 150 of *The Church Dogmatics*, in Part 1, Section 1. He says the following: “Speech is not a symbol, a designation and description of a totally other content, totally foreign to the meaning of this proposition, but this proposition,”—and the proposition that we’re reflecting on is the proposition “God speaks”—“but this proposition corresponds certainly with human inadequacy, with the brokenness with which alone human propositions can correspond with the nature of the Word of God, with the possibility which God has chosen and realized at all events in His church.”

Then Barth asks what it means to say the Word of God originally means “God speaks.” And he answers with the following items. In fact, he says that to make that claim means three things in
particular; although, as we’re going to see, some of those items have some sub-points.

First of all, “God speaks” means that it signifies the spirituality of the Word of God as distinguished from naturalness, from corporeality, from any physical event. Barth says there is no Word of God without a physical event; for example, preaching or the sacraments or in the Person Jesus Christ. But the Word of God itself and God speaking to us is primarily spiritual. It comes in a physical event, but it is not physical itself. So that means that the Word of God and God speaking is the spiritual or supernatural coming to us in a natural event. The spirituality of the Word of God or, if you will, of the proposition “God speaks,” is also evident in that it possesses the power of truth, which cannot be said of just any word. So it’s spiritual in that sense as well.

The second thing that “God speaks” means is that it has—that is, God’s speech—has a personal character. God’s speech is not a proposition or a thing to be described. It is, instead, the person of God, as a subject or as a person, coming to the human subject or person. Thus, the object of God’s speech is a subject, namely God Himself. We might put this a little bit differently and say: According to Barth, then, what God says is Himself. He discloses Himself. You will find this in *Church Dogmatics*, Part 1, page 155 of the first section of Part 1. Then, also, on page 157, we have the same point made. Let me just read to you from those pages and you’ll see something of what Barth has to say. On page 155 we read:

> God’s Word means God speaks. That signifies, in the second place, its personal character. God’s Word is not a thing to be described, nor is it a concept to be defined. It is neither a content nor an idea. It is not a truth, not even the very highest truth. It is the truth because it is God’s Person speaking. It is not something objective, it is the objective; because it is the subjective, namely God’s subjective. God’s Word means God speaking. Certainly, God’s Word is not the formal possibility of divine speech but its fulfilled reality. It always has a perfectly definite objective content. God always utters a concretissimum, something that is most concrete. But this divine concretissimum, the most concrete, can, as such, neither be anticipated nor repeated. What God utters is never in any way known and true in abstraction from God Himself. It is known and true for no other reason than that He Himself says it, that He in Person
is in and accompanies what is said by Him.

On page 157 we find, toward the bottom of the page, the following, Barth says:

Precisely in His Word God is a Person. The concrete significance of that is that He is the Lord of the verbal character of His Word. He is not bound to it, but it is bound to Him. He thus has free disposal of the verbal character of Holy Scripture. He can use it or not use it, use it in one way or in another. And He can select a new verbal form beyond the verbal form of Holy Scripture; for what Holy Scripture proclaims as His Word can be proclaimed again as His Word in a new verbal form, always in such a way that it is He Himself who speaks in this form.

You can tell that the key for God’s speech is not something objective, like the propositions of Scripture or any other book, but rather God Himself. And God Himself can reveal Himself or speak to us through anything and in any way that He wants.

Let me move on to a third point that Barth makes. We have noted that “God speaks” signifies the spirituality of the Word. It also signifies as personal character. In the third place, it signifies the purposiveness of the Word of God. In other words, “God speaks,” that proposition, never means that He says something that merely exists in and for itself without any purpose in the life of the one to whom it is spoken. God’s Word is always addressed to someone to teach that person something especially for him or her and to accomplish some purpose in that individual. God has no need to address us, but He does so anyway with a purpose in mind and always a purpose for our benefit; obviously, it’s not for His benefit. But when we talk about what God said, or when we reflect upon it, according to Barth, we can never reproduce exactly what He said to us. The Word of God undergoes, if you will, a transition when it goes from God’s mouth to our ear and then to our mouth. What we say is never the Word of God, but only the recollection or the anticipation of it.

Really, you find this idea, not only in Karl Barth, but in a number of contemporary thinkers of the Neo-orthodox persuasion. In
essence, what they’re saying is that if you try to repeat what God has revealed to you in the nonverbal encounter, of necessity, you’re going to distort it. So this is why he says it’s going to be one thing when it comes from the mouth of God and goes to our ear, and then it’s another thing when we try to verbalize what God has said to us.

In view of this feature about the purposiveness, though, of the Word of God, the following must be noted as well, according to Barth. In the first place, the Word of God is directed to us in such a word as we do not and could not speak to ourselves. The encounter with God’s Word is a genuine ineffaceable encounter; that is, it’s not to be dissolved into fellowship. And by this he means that what we say to one another could be repeated, it could be remembered, it could be shared; and there’s some benefit that someone else might get from it. But this is not true with what God says to us. This is not something that you can repeat in a way that will not distort it, in a way that other people can share in it in just the way that you do. The Word of God always tells us something, Barth says, something new which we could never have heard from anyone else.

In regard to this purposiveness of the Word of God, there’s a second point that we should note from Barth as well. He says that the Word of God is the word which aims at us and touches us in our existence. There’s no word of man that could possibly do that. The only word that could touch us in our very existence and interrogate and answer us is death; but even it can’t do this, because death is silent. Only God can touch us in this deep way where it touches our very existence.

A third point that follows from this idea of the Word of God as purposive is that, Barth says, as the word of our Creator, the Word of God is the word which has become, and does become, necessary for the renewal of the original relationship between us and God. This, then, is the word of reconciliation; that is, it’s the word of the reconciler, of God, who by a second creation sets up His covenant anew with us, both in judgment and also in grace.

Then one further point that Barth makes, following upon the idea of the purposiveness of the Word of God; and it also follows on the idea that this word is the word of reconciliation. Barth says that this Word of God as the word of reconciliation is the word by which God announces Himself to human beings; that is, it’s the word by which He promises Himself as the content of our future.
As the one who meets man on man’s way through time, because God is the end of all time, He is the one who is presented to us as the hidden Lord of all time. This, then, is a word that comes to fulfill and to complete the relationship that was founded between us and God at creation.

We have noted, in laying out Barth’s concept of the nature of the Word of God, that the Word of God is to be understood as God’s language. I now want to move to note that Barth also says that God’s language is to be understood as God’s act. Barth says, and I quote him here from page 163 in *Church Dogmatics*, Part 1 of Volume 1: “The Word of God needs no supplementing by the act. The Word of God is itself the act of God. It is an act in proportion, as everything that we are wont to call act, event, praxis, life, etcetera. And everything we usually miss and long for to supplement man’s word must, as a real act, appear extremely questionable alongside that other. The Word of God, in the highest sense, makes history.”

So we oftentimes think of the fact that God has acted in history, and then He has also given us His explanation of what He did. Surely we saw a lot of this in the life of Christ, that Christ went around doing one thing and another; but He also gave us an explanation of what that all meant. What Barth is saying is that you cannot separate the words of God from the acts of God, that God’s Word—what God speaks—He speaks in act. It is His action. Barth says that the person who hears God speak and still can ask for the act corresponding to what God says simply hasn’t heard God speak at all. God’s mere word as act is the divine Person, and, as such, is God’s self-utterance. And that itself is an alteration of our world. In other words, God has acted by revealing Himself to us by speaking in that way.

Barth then claims that the fact that God’s Word is God’s act means the following things: It means, in the first place, that God’s Word as God’s act is contingent contemporaneousness. Now what, in fact, does this mean? We find what he means by this on pages 164-165 in *The Church Dogmatics*, Volume 1, Part 1. Let me read to you a portion of this, and then we’ll give a further explanation after we’ve seen how Barth puts it.

That God’s Word is God’s act means, first, its contingent contemporaneousness. The meaning of this is as follows: One time is the time of the direct original utterance of God Himself in His revelation, the time of Jesus Christ, which, according to John 8:56 was also and already the time of
Abraham; the time of that which prophets and apostles heard in order to attest it. Another time is the time of this testimony, the time of prophecy and the apostolate; the time of Peter, upon whom Christ builds His church; the time when the Canon arose as the concrete counterpart in which the Church receives her norm for all times. And, again, another time is this or that time of the Church herself; the time of derivative proclamation, related to the words of the prophets and apostles and regulated by them. These are different times, distinguished not only by the difference in periods and in contents, not only by the remoteness of centuries and the gap in humanity between centuries and millennia, but distinguished by the very attitude of God to men. Jesus Christ was not less a true man than the prophets and apostles, but in virtue of His unity with God He stood absolutely over against them as a master over against his slave. The biblical witnesses as men, even as religious men, held no fundamentally marked precedence over the later teachers of the church, or even over us, or even over the teachers and leaders of other religions. Yet they stood and stand in their office as witnesses in an utterly unique and peculiar position in the church compared with all the rest of us. Again, however fundamental the essential equality between our existence and that of Christ and that of the apostles, yet in virtue of our relationship to Scripture and through Scripture to revelation, and again through the intervening experience of the Church, in which we have the advantage of the prophets and apostles, and which, at least distinguishes us from them, our situation in the Church is a third and quite special situation. It is that the variety and order of before and after, above and below, which makes the times of the Word of God so varied. Three times it is a matter of an utterance of the Word of God by the mouth of man, but only twice, in the case of the biblical witnesses and of ourselves, is it also primarily a matter of submitting to an utterance. And only once, in our own case, of an indirect submission to it mediated through the Bible.

Well, what does this mean in terms of calling the action of God “contingent contemporaneousness”? The idea here is that God doesn’t have to speak at any set time or times. That’s a sense in which Barth means that it’s contingent. Something which is
contingent is something which is brought into existence, it can go out of existence, it doesn’t have to exist. It is kept in being by something else. So it’s in this sense that God’s act is contingent. That is, God doesn’t have to speak at any set time or on any particular occasion. Instead, He speaks and acts at various points in history; that is, He becomes personally contemporary with us, or contemporaneous with us, at various points in history. Therefore, when we talk about revelation, we don’t have to always look back to some contingent historical event of the past. Instead, we can look at each historical “now,” the very present of our existence, and in each one of those historical “nows,” God can act to reveal Himself and become contemporary with us.

This is the way to bridge the gap between revelation at a time in history past and the current everyday situation. You do it by saying that no longer do we have that distance between ourselves and the revelatory events of God; because revelation occurs, instead, in our present contemporary existence, just as it did back in history when God spoke specifically to individuals at that time. Therefore, we have to see revelation as history, and we can also see history as revelation, instead of pointing to the wide gap that there is between revelation in ancient history and contemporary history. Here you can see the influence, again, of Kierkegaard, the importance of becoming a contemporary of Christ, the fear of historical documents, of things from the past, and the fear of basing anything significant—like one’s eternal destiny—on something that is historical, something that is contingent, doesn’t have to have existed. And we may not be sure that we even know what was going on.

Let me move on to elaborate further what “God's Word as God's act” means. The fact that the Word of God is God’s act means, according to Barth, its power to rule. The speech of God, Barth says, is His action on those to whom He speaks. But as a divine action, as the action of the Lord, His action is His ruling action.

A third point, then, that Barth makes about the Word of God as God’s act is that it also means that it is a decision. God’s act is a decision made freely and undeterminably by God. That means no one forced God to act and to speak at that time. That this is true has the following concrete meaning, according to Barth: It signifies, in the first place, God’s choice to speak in a particular way to a particular person. It depends, in other words, on the grace of God. It doesn’t depend upon us. It also means that the Word of God becomes operative, however, in a decision of the
human being to whom God speaks, to hear the Word and to heed it. So God has to make the choice to speak; but, on the other hand, the person to whom He speaks must respond. On page 182, at the very bottom, we see Barth making this point. Let me just read you a little bit of that. Barth says:

As the divine decision, the Word of God becomes operative on and in a decision of the man to whom it is spoken. What does the revelation attested in Holy Scripture and proclaimed through preaching and sacraments say to me? What is revealed to me in it? “God with us.” In this form, we summed up generally the content of the Word of God; but now, because this “God with us” is spoken to me, because I hear it, it must, without ceasing to be the divine content of the Word or undergoing alteration as such, but rather as the actual, living, unalterable content of the Word, reach its goal in my situation over against it. Created and defined in one way or another in that modification of me accomplished by the Word of God spoken to me, this new modification of me is the decision as to my faith or unbelief, my obedience or disobedience; that is, the divine decision as to whether my act is faith or unbelief, obedience or disobedience, correct or incorrect hearing. This decision exists only over against the Word of God addressed to me, only as the answer to it.

That completes what I wanted to say about God’s language as God’s act. In the next lecture, I’m going to continue with this description of what Barth has to say about the nature of the Word of God. The first thing that we will see is that he says that God’s language is to be understood as God’s mystery, but we’ll pick that up and go further next time.