In our last lecture we were looking at Karl Barth’s *Doctrine of the Word of God*. I want to continue with that in this lecture. But before we get back to that, why don’t we pause for a moment of prayer. *Father, we thank You so much again for the privilege of knowing You and studying about You. We pray that as we study this hour that You would guide our thoughts, help us to understand the concepts that are presented, help us to understand why these people were saying what they did. May we get what is beneficial from them, but may we also be careful not to fall into any of the errors that they make. So help us in this time. For it’s in Christ’s name we pray it. Amen.*

Well, last time we began to talk about Karl Barth’s *Doctrine of the Word of God*. And toward the end of our lecture, I was giving you what Karl Barth has to say about the nature of the Word of God. And he has three broad points that he makes. And I had discussed with you the first two. Barth says that we, first of all, need to understand the Word of God as God’s language. In the second place, we need to understand God’s Word or God’s language as God’s act. His third broad point is that we must understand God’s Word or God’s language as God’s mystery. We didn’t get to that last point last time, so I want to pick it up right there, right now.

Well, the third thing then that Karl Barth says about the nature of God’s Word is that it must be understood as God’s mystery. Barth says that God’s speech is different from all other kinds of speech and His action is different from all other kinds of action. By *mystery* Barth means not merely the hiddenness of God but rather His becoming manifest in something that is hidden, that is, in a non-apparent way. It’s a way which gives information indirectly rather than directly. God’s mystery, then, is His veiling of Himself in which He unveils Himself and His unveiling of Himself in which He veils Himself. That, of course, sounds very Hegelian, and indeed it is. The neo-orthodox thinkers like to speak in that way although they are surely not adopting everything that Hegel himself would hold.
Let me read to you from page 188 in *The Church Dogmatics* Volume 1, Part 1 where Barth makes this point about God’s language as God’s mystery. He says,

The language of God is and remains God’s mystery above all in its worldliness in the sense of belonging to the world and so here passing that is, here and there. When God speaks to man, this happening is never so marked off from the rest of what happens that it might not promptly be also interpreted as part of this other happening. The church in fact is also a sociological entity with definite historical and structural features. Preaching in fact is also an address. Sacrament in fact is also a symbol in compromising proximity to all other possible symbols. The Bible in fact is also the document for the history of the religion of a tribe in nearer Asia and of its Hellenistic offshoot. Jesus Christ in fact is also the rabbi of Nazareth. Historically so difficult to get information about, and when it is got, one whose activity is so easily a little commonplace alongside more than one other founder of a religion and even alongside many later representatives of His own religion. And let us not forget the theology, in fact so surely as it avails itself of human speech, is also a philosophy or a conglomerate of all sorts of philosophy. Even the biblical miracles do not burst these walls of worldliness. From the moment they took place, they were interpreted otherwise then as proofs of the Word of God. And admittedly, they may ever and on be interpreted in a very different sense. The veil is thick. We do not possess the Word of God otherwise than in the mystery of its worldliness. In other words, we always have it in a form which as such is not the Word of God and as such moreover does not betray that it is the form precisely of the Word of God. Otherwise expressed, the self-presentation of God in His Word is not a direct one; yet not an indirect one either in the way in which a man’s face which we perceive in a mirror may be called an indirect self-presentation of this man.

So very clearly, Barth is saying that God’s Word, in one sense, reveals Him, but in another sense it comes in a “this-worldly garb,” and because of that, it also hides Him. Now the mystery of God’s language, according to Barth, involves the following items that we should take note of. The first thing is that the language of
God is and remains God’s mystery above all in its worldliness, as we’ve just been reading about. That is, in the sense of belonging to the world. When God speaks to man, this happening is never so marked off from the rest of what happens that it might not also be interpreted as part of this other happening. Now this means that the self-presentation of God in His Word is not a direct one. Yet it is not an indirect one either. This we see is His unveiling *inveiledness* and *veiledness* in unveiling. The example par excellence of this sort of thing is of course the incarnation.

Well, another thing that we want to note here about this language of God as His mystery is that His language, that is God’s language, is mystery in its one-sidedness. On page 198 of Volume 1, Part 1 of *The Church Dogmatics*, we see Barth making this point. Let me just read this to you, if I may:

That God’s Word is one-sided (Barth said) means that in being addressed to us and grasped by us, it meets us not partly veiled, partly unveiled, but either veiled or unveiled without it, therefore, in itself being a different word without its being one way or the other lest really addressed to us or grasped by us. Its very veiling may absolutely change for us into its unveiling. And its very unveiling change absolutely into its veiling absolutely. That is, it is for the time being without alteration in itself always for us the one or the other. Only for the time being can we conceive the other in the one. That is for the time being, we can only grasp the other by grasping the one. We can only grasp it in faith. With regard to the one, we are transposed into the greatest clarity. Such clarity that we make ourselves very definite thoughts, clear in themselves, about what is told us that we can react to it with our whole inner and outer attitude in life with joy, thankfulness, confidence, zeal, seriousness, terror, confusion, anxiety, remorse. But this reaction is really reaction to the Word of God only when our clarity, our thought, our attitude in life however determined, has its very determinate limit in the other, the limit set by the very word spoken to us which does not admit of us arriving at a whole, a synthesis, a system whether in our theory or in our practice. The limit beyond which the word remains a mystery to us in the entire clarity in which it is addressed to us and grasped by us or rather for the first time becomes a real mystery.
Well, that’s something of what he means when he says that the Word of God is one-sided. He says it doesn’t come to us partly veiled and partly unveiled, but it comes either veiled or unveiled. One or the other, it’s one side or the other.

Now the other point that I should make here in regard to God’s language as God’s mystery is that Barth says that God’s language is mystery in its spirituality. He’s speaking here of the fact that the Word of God is so uttered to a man that it means that he must listen to it and that he must be ready and open to hear it. So far as it belongs to the nature of the Word of God to be apprehended and apprehendable by man, we must say of the Word of God that it is spiritual. That is, that where it is real and where it is believed by man, it is finally and ultimately itself the ground of this event of apprehension and belief. So it’s spiritual in the sense that it may be responded to. It may be apprehended by man.

Well, this completes a good bit of what Barth has to say about the nature of the Word of God. But after he has given this description of the nature of the Word of God, he goes on to say that there are three different forms in which the Word of God comes. And I want to turn to those in just a few moments. But before I do that, I just want to explain something that may be troubling you at this point. You may be asking yourself, now why in the world would Barth hold this view of the Word of God? Why would he think, for example, that the content of revelation is God Himself rather than say something objective like the propositions of the Bible? What is behind that rejection, or at least apparent rejection, of Scripture as God’s Word? And indeed, it’s more than apparent. Barth does reject the Bible as God’s Word.

Well, I think we can say that there were several things that led not only Barth but the other neo-orthodox thinkers to reject the idea that the Bible is in fact the Word of God. One of the things that’s in the background of this is the belief that we can’t be sure about history. All of this goes back to the German philosopher Lessing. Perhaps you’ve heard of Lessing’s Ditch. This was a particular idea of Lessing in regard to historical events. He made the point that there is a tremendous ditch of time between say for example our day and 2,000 years ago—the time of Christ. And there is absolutely no way that we can bridge that tremendous ditch of time. We can’t go back. We can’t get into those times to check things out and see if they actually happen the way that the historians recorded their occurrence. Now if that’s true about things that are historical, then Lessing said we ought to be very,
very careful in terms of how certain we think we can be about what happened in the past. And we ought to be very careful in regard to resting anything very significant on our understanding of history. Now Kierkegaard picked up this notion of Lessing’s Ditch and we see it in his writings. And Karl Barth, relying heavily on Kierkegaard and this idea of Lessing’s Ditch, also picks it up. And as this is applied to something like the Bible, we’re seeing that the Bible is to be viewed as a historical document. By that I mean that it not only talks about certain historical events, but it also was written at various times in history. And we are simply not in a position to go back to those times of history and see whether the biblical writers got things correct or whether they made mistakes. Because of this fear about being able to know for certain what happened historically, there was indeed, within biblical studies, a great fear of resting something as important as your eternal destiny on a historical contingent book or any other objective historical item. We saw that, indeed, in Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments* the desire to become contemporary spiritually with Christ rather than to try to find out about Him through historical events and historical books. We also see this played out in the neo-orthodox thinkers like Karl Barth. So this concern over history and the historical is one thing that’s in the background of this view. But there are some other ideas as well.

We have to remember that Karl Barth was living at a time when the results of German higher criticism had really made an impact on biblical scholarship. And Karl Barth, like many others, took that scholarship very, very seriously. Having already a fear of that which is historical, there then became an even greater fear in terms of this historical book, the Bible because so many scholars had presented information that seemed to show that the Bible had errors in it. Well, Barth and other thinkers came to the following line of reasoning: They said if God says something, God is perfect. God is totally authoritative. God is truth. So if God says something, whatever He says is going to have to be true. They looked at the Bible. Higher criticism had taught them that there were errors in the Bible. But if the Bible was what God said, if the Bible was what He revealed, then that meant that either God had lied or God just didn’t know enough to get things straight. And the neo-orthodox thinkers didn’t like either of those conclusions.

Well, so what did they do? They essentially saw a way around this problem by saying that God Himself was revelation rather than anything objective like a historical book, namely the Bible, or anything else. And you see if God Himself is perfect and if He is...
the content of revelation, and that revelation is given in a personal encounter, there’s never going to be the possibility of showing that anything that God has done or said is false. So the veracity, the authority, the perfection of God is safeguarded. But it’s done at a very high price. It’s done at the price of saying that the Bible is not itself revelation from God. Well, that gives you some of the background. That’s not to say that that’s everything that drove people to neo-orthodoxy and its concept of revelation. But it does give you some of the background behind this view of revelation’s content as God Himself, given in a non-verbal encounter.

Well, let me come back to what Barth has to say about the threefold form of the Word of God. In this section of his discussion on the Word of God, he’s telling us how it is that the Word of God comes to us. And he says it comes to us, in the first place, as the preached Word. Now when Barth talks about the threefold forms of the Word of God, he’s not saying that it comes in all three forms at exactly the same time. But he is saying that it can come in any of the three forms that he’s going to mention. The first form then is the form of preaching or proclamation of the Word of God. Barth says that proclamation of the Word of God is only real proclamation when the Word of God Himself speaks through the human words of the human speaker to those who hear it. In other words, the Word of God must be encountered, or perhaps we should say, they can be encountered through the words that are preached by the human preacher. In fact, if that doesn’t happen, Barth would say that it wasn’t true proclamation of the Word of God. It was just the mere words of the preacher. It may be proclamation about the Word of God if God doesn’t use the preacher’s sermon to encounter us. But it is not proclamation of the Word of God unless God speaks through that message to us individually. So one of the ways in which the Word of God, remembering that the Word of God is Jesus Christ Himself coming to us in nonverbal encounter, one of the ways that the Word of God can come to us is through the words of the human sermon. God can use the pastor’s sermon as a vehicle to reveal Himself to us. When the pastor speaks and no one encounters God, then it’s simply the proclamation of the preacher about God. But it isn’t the Word of God. If God uses that preaching as a vehicle to encounter us, then it actually becomes the Word of God. Now Barth says that the Word of God is the object which, as such, must be given to proclamation in order for it to be real proclamation. In other words, if Jesus Christ doesn’t come along with the pastor’s sermon and encounter us, then it’s not real proclamation of the Word of God. It’s only about the Word of God. Barth also says that
real proclamation, in his sense of real proclamation, is a miracle. It doesn’t consist in the volition and the execution of the person who preaches. On the other hand, the volition and the execution of the preacher is not omitted by real proclamation. It’s just not identical with it. In other words, what Barth is saying here is that real encounter with God through preaching never comes just because the preacher wants it to happen, and he goes out and he preaches. On the other hand, when it does come, that doesn’t mean that the preacher didn’t desire it to come or that he didn’t try to preach in such a way that it would trigger the encounter. What’s being said here then is that the real proclamation of the Word of God occurs in the midst of a human event which involves a preacher and his wishes and his execution; that is, he actually has to give the sermon in a forceful way and in a way which could trigger this encounter. But this real proclamation is also, and it is primarily a divine decision, a divine choice, an execution, that makes this miracle of real proclamation occur.

Well, Barth also says that the Word of God preached now means man’s language about God in which and through which God Himself speaks about Himself. The first form, then, of the Word of God is that it comes as the preached Word. Secondly though, the Word of God comes as the written Word. Barth says that the Bible is, first of all, a record which helps us to recollect the times when God revealed Himself. And the Bible helps us to do that because it records those times. It tells us about them. As such, the Bible is a witness to revelation although it is not revelation itself. In some places Barth will say that it’s a signpost. It’s a pointer toward that which is revelation, God Himself being the revelation. Now Barth also says that the Bible becomes the Word of God in the same way in which the proclamation of the preacher becomes the Word of God. In the event of the preaching and in the event of someone reading the Word of God, God at that moment uses the human words and the human act of preaching in the one case or reading in the other case, to speak to human beings and encounter them. And at the moment when God does that through the Bible, the Bible becomes the Word of God. And God reveals Himself through it. That is, at that point the Bible becomes revelation. Barth says then that the Bible becomes God’s Word on this occasion when we read it and we encounter God through it. But in and of itself, it isn’t God’s Word. It isn’t revelation. Now you’ll find these ideas presented in Volume 1, Part 1 of *The Church Dogmatics* long about pages 120-125.

Now, Barth also says that when this event happens and where it
happens is up to God, it’s not up to you and me. That is the occasions on which we read the Bible and this triggers the encounter with God, those occasions of encountering God don’t depend on us. We can never predict them. We can never anticipate them. This is something that depends on God. On page 123 in Volume 1, Part 1 of *The Church Dogmatics* Barth says, and I quote him, “The Bible is God’s Word so far as God lets it be His Word, so far as God speaks through it.” So it’s up to God, it’s not up to us. Well, Barth explains why the Bible is the particular written medium to become the Word of God as opposed to some other sacred book. And you can see what Barth is after here. Barth knows that someone might respond to all of this by saying, look, if the Bible isn’t actually the Word of God, then why should it hold any special place of significance? Why not think of the Koran or some other holy book as the key book for Christians or for anyone else? What Barth has to say on that is that the Bible has a special place because it is a better signpost. It is a better witness to revelation than any other book. But that in itself does not make the Bible the Word of God. It just makes it a better vehicle for God to use to encounter us and reveal Himself to us.

Well, the third form of the Word of God, according to Barth is the revealed Word of God. We’ve had, then, the preached Word of God. Revelation also comes in the form of the written Word of God, and then thirdly the Word of God comes as the revealed Word of God. Now what does Barth mean when he refers to this? Well, he says the very act of the utterance of God is what he has in mind, the unveiling of that which is veiled. This, of course, is primary to proclamation, and it’s primary to Scripture becoming the Word of God. Those two forms of revelation presuppose this form. This form of the Word of God presupposed nothing else.

Well, what is it that we’re talking about? Well in particular, we are talking about the time when God revealed Himself when the Word became flesh. So this form of the Word of God is none other than Jesus Christ Himself in the incarnation. And here we’re not speaking only about a specific historical event when Christ became incarnate, but the fact that Christ is the incarnate Word of God. Barth says on page 134 of *The Church Dogmatics* Volume 1, Part 1, “Revelation in fact does not differ from Jesus Christ.” Well, that means that He’s the content of revelation and He is one of the major forms. In fact, He is the form in which the Word of God comes which all the other forms presuppose. This form of revelation, according to Barth, arises solely from God’s gracious desire to reveal Himself. It doesn’t come from our initiative.
or from our desires or our wishes. Whenever God has revealed Himself in the past, in the present, or in the future it is always the case of God revealing Himself to us through Christ either in His person or through proclamation or through the Scriptures. Well, Barth also says something further about this three-fold form of the Word of God. There are these three different forms in which it comes, but Barth wants to stress the fact that there is unity of these three forms. And I think you can see why he would hold that. He says that because of the association with Christ who is the Word of God, when God speaks through Scripture or through the preaching of the pastor, it is clear that these other things—that is the preaching of the pastor or Scripture become the Word of God itself—the Word of God revealed. But then that means that the three forms are really unified. The revealed Word of God who is Jesus Christ is that which God says to us at the moment that He encounters us in the proclamation of the pastor’s sermon and in the reading of the Word. It’s at that point that the words of the sermon and the words of the Scripture become God’s Word. That is, they become Jesus Christ encountering us in nonverbal encounter. And that just shows that all three forms are really unified. Well, we’ve seen then in our discussion of the doctrine of the Word of God so far what Barth has to say about the content of the Word of God. We’ve seen what he has to say about the nature of the Word of God. We’ve just finished seeing what he has to say about the threefold form of the Word of God. Let me turn now to what Barth has to say about the experience of the Word of God.

Now previously we have spoken about how the Word of God comes to man. But we’ve not yet talked very much about how man experiences the Word of God when the Word of God comes. In other words, so far we’ve looked at revelation from God’s side, not from man’s. Now in this section, Barth turns to look at this whole matter of revelation from man’s experience of the Word of God. Barth asks in what experience of the Word of God consists. What does it consist in? And his answer is that it involves the concept of acknowledgment, of recognition if you will or acknowledging that this is God speaking. Now according to Barth, acknowledgment of the Word of God involves the following. It involves, in the first place, the concept of knowledge. This has to be so according to Barth, because the Word of God is primarily language. It’s communication from one person to another, and that, of course, involves the intellect. But in the second place, acknowledgment, Barth says, involves the fact of being concerned with a relationship between man as a person and another person, namely the person of God. So acknowledgment means, in the
second place, that we are aware that we are concerned with a relationship between persons. Acknowledgment in the third place relates to the presence of a definite power in regard to the acknowledging person. In other words, man must adapt himself to the power and purpose of the one he is acknowledging. You cannot remain neutral or unaffected by what is happening. In the fourth place, acknowledgment involves awareness of the nature of the fact that takes place in the Word of God. This is how Barth puts it. This means that man must acknowledge God’s presence since experiencing the Word of God does not rest on a historical act of recollection of something from the past but it instead involves God’s presentation of Himself in the life of an individual. So acknowledgment then, involves awareness of the nature of the fact that takes place in the Word of God that we are in our own contemporary, individual existence right at this point of revelation encountering God.

In the fifth place, acknowledgment, Barth says, means approval of the Word of God by man but not in the sense of being persuaded by someone who’s an equal to us who’s making a case and we find that it’s fairly convincing. But it means being persuaded and we are approving of someone who is totally unequal to us. We make a decision to be obedient and to submit to someone who is totally unequal to us. In the sixth place, Barth says acknowledgment means a decision. God freely comes to us for grace and for judgment. Man has to make a decision as to whether to respond in obedience or disobedience. Even disobedience is acknowledgment of the Lord because it shows that we agree with the Lord as to the kind of person we are in His presence. In the seventh place, acknowledgment means ceasing to question an enigma or a puzzle or a riddle, if you will. It means getting satisfaction about a situation which is not open, but from the acknowledger’s point of view, unexplained. We can’t totally understand what’s going on, but acknowledgment means we’re gonna stop our questioning. The Word of God comes in one of the forms that we’ve mentioned. But each one of those forms, while it unveils God, it in a sense also veils Him. Acknowledgment means bowing before this enigma and being satisfied with it and being willing to say *I won’t try to figure it out any further than what God has revealed it to me.*

Well, two more things that Barth says about acknowledgment. In the eighth place, acknowledgment means an act of man whereby he recognizes the mystery of God. That is, he recognizes the fact that God is unveiled in His veiling and veiled in His unveiling. And he recognizes that when God speaks it is one-sided. It’s
either a veiling or an unveiling. It’s not both. Acknowledgment means recognition that whatever side speaks to us, the veiled side or the unveiled, there is another side. And one must move toward experience of that side as well. This recognition of the mystery of God and the movement to both sides of the mystery is involved in acknowledging the revelation that comes. Well, and then finally Barth says our acknowledgment of revelation means giving way before the person or the thing acknowledged. It means a yielding of authority to someone else. This doesn’t mean that a human being no longer has self-determination, that he no longer can make choices and exercise his will. But rather it means that he has it in the context of another’s authority, namely in the context of God’s authority. Well that’s what Barth has to say about experiencing the Word of God. It means to acknowledge it, and then we’ve elaborated what he means by acknowledging that God is encountering me.

Let me move on to another topic in Barth’s doctrine of the Word of God. In fact, it’s the final one that I want to consider in Barth’s concept of the Word of God. It’s what he has to say about the place of Scripture. Now we’ve already noted that Scripture, the written Word of God is one of the three-fold forms in which the Word of God comes. But let me say something even further about Barth’s understanding of Scripture because he does. He says an awful lot more. Well, for one thing Barth says, and we’ve already noted this but it’s worthy of repeating, he notes that the Bible is not revelation. But instead it is a witness to revelation. It is a sign or a signpost which points toward revelation. That is, it points us toward Jesus Christ. It points toward the real authority Jesus Christ. It’s not authoritative in and of itself, but rather it points to that which is authoritative. It is a witness, if you will, to times when Christ broke through to human beings and revealed Himself to us. We find this in Church Dogmatics, Volume 1, Part 2 page 463.

In the second place, Barth is very, very clear that the Bible is a fallible human book that is filled with errors and contradictions. You can tell he has bought the results of German higher criticism and the scholarship of his day. He says that these errors are often cause of much offense. We are offended by the fact that this seems to be the Word of God, that is the Bible, but it has errors in it. And, of course, when we realize that God can’t make errors that should cause us to recognize that the Bible is actually not revelation. It’s not God’s Word. Let me read from Church Dogmatics, Volume 1, Part 2 on page 507. And we’ll see what Barth says here about this. He says, “It (speaking of Scripture) is there and always there as a
sign, as a human and temporal word and therefore, also a word which is conditioned and limited. It witnesses to God’s revelation, but that does not mean that God’s revelation is now before us in any kind of divine revealedness.” So in other words, when you just pick up the Bible it can serve as a witness to point us to the content of revelation which is God Himself; but don’t think that the Bible itself is revelation.

The Bible (Barth says) is not a book of oracles. It is not an instrument of divine impartation. It is a genuine witness. And how can it be witness of divine revelation if the actual purpose, act and decision of God in His only-begotten Son, as seen and heard by the prophets and apostles in that Son, is dissolved in the Bible into a sum total of truths abstracted from that decision? And those truths are then propounded to us as truths of faith, salvation, revelation? If it tries to be more than witness, to be direct impartation, will it not keep from us the best, the one real thing, which God intends to tell and give us and which we ourselves need? But if it does not try to do this, if it is really witness, we must understand clearly what it means and involves that in itself it is only witness. It means the existence of those barriers which can be broken down only by miracle. The men whom we hear as witnesses speak as fallible, erring men like ourselves. What they say, and what we read as their word, can of itself lay claim to be the Word of God, but never sustain that claim.

And of course one of the reasons it can’t sustain that claim is that it has errors in it.

We can read and try to assess their word as a purely human word. It can be subjected to all kinds of immanent criticism, not only in respect of its philosophical, historical, and ethical content, but even of its religious and theological. We can establish lacunae (that is whole) problems and inconsistencies and over-emphases. We may be alienated by a figure like that of Moses. We may quarrel with James or with Paul. We may have to admit that we can make little or nothing of large tracts of the Bible, as is often the case with the records of other men. We can take offense at the Bible. And in the light of the claim or the assertion that the Bible is the Word of God, granting that the miracle of
faith and the Word does not intervene, we are bound to take offense at it. But this is a miracle which we cannot presuppose. We can remember it. We can wait for it, but we cannot set it up like one chessman with others which we can “move” at the right moment. Therefore, we are bound to take offense at the Bible in the light of that claim. If we do not, we have not yet realized the importance of that claim. Only the miracle of faith and the Word can genuinely and seriously prevent us from taking offense at the Bible. Why? Because it has these mistakes, it has these holes in its reasoning. We might not like what we hear from Paul or from Moses or from James. It’s only by faith that we can put that offense aside.

Well, is Scripture then really all that worthwhile? Well Barth thinks that it is. We just have to understand its proper function. In terms of what he has to say about that, I’m going to pick that up in our next lecture, talk about what Barth means by the inspiration of Scripture, and what he has to say about the authority of Scripture as well. And then once we’re done with that, we will have finished our study of Barth’s doctrine of the Word of God. And then I’m going to turn with you to look at Barth’s concept of God, but all of these things for next time.