ABSTRACT

Barth’s early claim that “Christianity which is not wholly eschatology and nothing but eschatology has nothing to do with Christ” reflects his understanding of theology as basically an eschatological concept. Though Barth does not explicitly identify himself with any of the three dominant millennial traditions, namely, amillennialism, premillennialism, and postmillennialism, this study seeks to demonstrate that the key to understanding Barth’s eschatology is to see him as an amillennial thinker by arguing that his concept of the three-stage parousia along with his doctrine of “nothingness” reflects the key notions of amillennial eschatology. Not only does the amillennial tradition provide a vehicle for clarifying Barth’s eschatology but placing him broadly into the amillennial school of thought resolves the debate among Barthian scholars over the tension between transcendence and history (immanence), eternity and time, the divine and the human, not only in Barth’s eschatology but also in his theology in general.

Through his doctrine of three-stage parousia Barth brings to light the architectonic structure of amillenial eschatology. The first stage relates to God’s transcendence as it deals with Christ’s first coming and the revelation of his lordship and kingship through his death on the cross and his resurrection, a revelation which runs through the whole period of the parousia or the millennium. The second stage concerns God’s immanence, that is, God’s direct involvement in the history of this world. On this level, Christ’s coming and presence is represented by the outpouring and indwelling of the Holy Spirit, whose task consists in carrying into effect Christ’s work of reconciliation of God with the world. The third stage is characterized by Christ’s final appearing, which will bring history to an end and usher in the final kingdom in which reconciliation will be revealed as redemption.

That Barth is an amillennial theologian is made evident by his identification of the period between Christ’s first coming and his final return with Christ’s parousia, which he understands as Christ’s “coming” and “presence” as Lord and King. This period coincides with what Barth calls Christ’s “kingdom of reconciliation,” the church era, the climax of salvation history, the fulfillment of the covenant, and the binding of Satan, which Barth terms “the limitation of nothingness.”

The merit of Barth’s doctrine of parousia and “nothingness” is that it constitutes a positive contribution to the establishment of the amillennial principle by presenting it as a unified system. At the same time, it is also an adequate response to the dispensationalists’ charge of “spiritualizing” as it seeks to do justice to history and to God’s immanence, although it also holds to God’s transcendence.