

Doing Theology Between the Times:  
Modernity and Postmodernity in Asia

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In August of 1922 a remarkable theological journal called *Zwischen den Zeiten* (Between the Times) made its appearance upon the European scene. Founded by Karl Barth, Eduard Thurneysen, and Friedrich Gogarten, this journal sought to take a mediating stance between the rigid, conservative theology of the right and the idealistic, natural theology of the liberals on the left. During much of this time, Barth was a professor of dogmatics at two German universities, Gottingen and Munster, where he was beginning to develop his own mediating theological method which later came to be known as Neo-Orthodoxy. Barth rejected both the extremes of conservative orthodoxy and naturalistic liberalism with the result that he was strongly criticized from both sides.

The liberals accused Barth of being a reactionary who was unwilling to accept the natural revelation of God in the social and political movements of the day. Barth was not particularly disturbed by such criticism, however, and subsequent events in Germany in the mid-1930s served to vindicate Barth's position. The rise of Nazism, which among other things led to the cessation of the publication of *Zwischen den Zeiten* in October 1933, clearly showed the weaknesses of liberal theology.

Barth was, however, deeply disturbed by the sometimes harsh criticism of his position on the part of those in the conservative wing of the church. He was frequently accused of denying the authority of Scripture, of not believing in miracles, and of placing human reason above divine revelation.

Doing theology between the times, as Barth and his colleagues learned so well, is never easy. The times in which Barth developed his early theology were the years between World War I and World War II. They were times that were a dividing point in western history. It was Barth's fate to spend his most creative years living and working between the times.

I. Living Between the Times in Asia

Are we living between the times here in Asia today?

The author relates three events that took place in late 1993 and early 1994 to show that we in Asia today are living between the times.

II. Habermas and the Project of Modernity

The condition of modernity is associated with the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and the accompanying emphasis upon autonomous thinking, scientific discovery, colonial and cultural expansion, and the process of

secularization. There can be no denying that modernity has brought with it certain benefits which include economic development, democracy and the concept of human rights, and so on. However, one must also face the negative aspects of modernity. It is somewhat surprising, therefore, to find in the German scholar Jurgen Habermas a defender of modernity. Habermas is convinced that the project of modernity is not yet complete. The ultimate goals of modernity are noble ones and humanity should continue working toward their realization.

### III. Lyotard and the Postmodern Condition

Modernity is criticized on three points: it is ethnocentric, it is rationalistic, and it is reductionist.

Postmodern thinkers recognize the social and historical anchoring of meaning, but doubt that the various meaning-systems (be they scientific paradigms, forms of life, cultures, etc.) can ever be bridged by a universal frame of meaning. The result is absolute pluralism whereby each cultural unit is accepted and understood in terms of its own view of reality.

The effects of this postmodern condition can be seen in the numerous attempts at contextual theology which are found throughout the various cultures of the world.

### IV. Doing Theology Between the Times

The task for theologians in Asia who are living between the times is that of faithfulness—faithfulness to the God in whom we believe and faithfulness to the salvation which we have received through Jesus Christ.

Theologians living between the times must find a way to move between these two pervasive conditions of modernity and postmodernity without becoming modernists or postmodernists.

Doing theology and living between the times in Asia is not, and will not, be easy. The risks are undoubtedly great but the possibilities are most certainly greater.