

Telling the Old Story in Gendered Keys: The Theological Revivals of Katherine Sonderegger, Kathryn Tanner, and Sarah Coakley

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Sarah Coakley has noted that systematic theology is in a “notable period of revival,”¹ an observation she shares with others. John Thiel, for example, notes currently something of a resurgence, with the late Robert Jenson’s two-volume systematics, and now with Katherine Sonderegger’s work.² And Sonderegger herself observes, “I see signs everywhere of theologians raising their eyes from particular and local discussions to broader fields, longer views.”³

What makes this revival all the more interesting is the way it has taken shape with Coakley, Sonderegger, and Kathryn Tanner, Anglican women all, and all having some interest in gender questions. Feminist theologians in the late twentieth-century tended to address specific doctrinal issues in chapter or essay form, by raising specific questions about gender as appropriate to those doctrines. Some of the works of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Catherine Mowry LaCugna might be seen in this vein. LaCugna’s often-read edited volume *Freeing Theology* examines systematic doctrines in each chapter, with a focus on how that doctrine affects specific gender concerns; for example, the chapter on the Trinity describes models of the Trinity in Eastern and Western contexts, and ends with an appreciation for the perceived relational trinitarian model of the East as being best for women.⁴

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¹ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay “On the Trinity”* (New York: Cambridge University Press: 2013), 42.

² John Thiel, “Sonderegger’s Systematics: The Divine Attributes as the Divine Being,” *The International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19, no. 2 (April 2017): 188.

³ Katherine Sonderegger, interviewed by Michael Gibson, http://www.augsburgfortress.org/media/downloads/9781451482843_interview.pdf, 3.

⁴ See Catherine Mowry LaCugna, ed., *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (New York: Harper One, 1993). LaCugna’s own chapter 4 discusses trinitarian relations.

Ruether's *Sexism and God-Talk* takes doctrinal questions like theological anthropology and the incarnation in turn, and then renarrates those doctrines by using early Christian history and non-Christian sources to discuss a feminist recovery of God from patriarchal traditions.⁵

The theologians represented in this essay, however, aim at multivolume works, and have far broader projects with respect to both gender and systematics. Kathryn Tanner (*Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*), wrote her "brief systematic theology" in 2001, and followed up in 2010 with *Christ the Key*, a volume that develops doctrines of Trinity, grace, and theological anthropology in more detail. Sarah Coakley (*God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"*), published her first volume in 2013, and the second (*Sin, Racism, and the Contemplative Life: An Essay "On Human Darkness"*) is promised for 2019, with two more to come. Katherine Sonderegger's work *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Doctrine of God* is the latest comer to the field, and she promises to follow with two more volumes.

The systematic revival exists, I think, because we live in a time and place where big stories of God, as depicted in these systematic theologies, are crucial, especially against the stories of fragmentation and division that get emphasized to our detriment. The revival exists among women, I think, because it has become clear, of late, that proper attention to gender concerns will require not piecemeal essays, but rather telling the whole wonderful story of salvation—the "old, old story"—yet again, with new tones.

In this essay, I compare Sonderegger, Coakley, and Tanner in terms of four overarching questions for our "old story": What is systematic theology? How is God not merely a thing in our universe? How might we name God's relationship with humans? What might be a proper human response to God? Each of the authors deals with these questions in some way and each question connects directly to feminist concerns. In the final section, I also discuss how important it is, especially in our age of secularity and nonreligiosity, to have systematic theologies like these—and how taking these systematic theologies seriously will positively impact the life of the church.

What Is Systematic Theology?

All three authors write, in some fashion, about what it means to do systematic theology. As I mentioned above, earlier feminist accounts

⁵ See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1993).

might have seen writing systematic theology as a direct way to right wrongs and to redress oppression and patriarchy. Yet with these three authors, more is afoot. Kathryn Tanner's vision is broad: a "making sense of Christianity,"⁶ which she sees as a personal responsibility for *each* Christian person. For Sarah Coakley, systematic theology offers a "complete vision of Christian doctrine."⁷ Sonderegger, for her part, emphasizes listening "to Holy Scripture, to feed on it, and from its riches, to bring forth the Divine Perfections of the One God. We seek to confess who and what God is in biblical idiom, guidance, and subject matter."⁸

Coakley describes some of the reasons why the mid-twentieth-century multivolume systematic theologies have been suspect. The reasons have much to do with feminist critiques. Problems include an overemphasis on the use of mere human words for God that portray God as one of us, and the replication of systems of oppression against women and other marginalized groups by systematic theology. "It is rare indeed—although not completely unknown—for systematic theologians of any stature to take the category of gender as even a significant locus for discussion; and when they do, they tend to import a gender theory from the secular realm without a sufficiently critical theological assessment of it."⁹ Yet it is precisely because of these problems that Coakley aims to do a project that is not myopic to gender concerns—or rather, that shows how gender is part and parcel of everything else; this is also, I think, a reason why Tanner's and Sonderegger's systematic theologies are important for anyone concerned about gender—regardless of whether readers agree with their precise arguments.

To say that one will write a "complete vision," a full-on "making sense" account, or a feeding on scripture, however, leads to another question: How will the theologian approach such a massive topic? In these three theologians, we find quite distinctive approaches.

Kathryn Tanner's focus is christological: she self-consciously sees herself writing in relation to Karl Barth,¹⁰ but also making strong use of patristic authors like Athanasius and others that earlier feminists

⁶ Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2001), xvi.

⁷ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 40.

⁸ Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2015), xvi.

⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 34.

¹⁰ See *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 6n7.

might have eschewed. Tanner thinks a major difficulty is that we see Jesus as too much one of us (for example, the historical Jesus seminar, or seeing Jesus as a great moral example that we should all follow). Feminist theologies have rightly exposed the fact that focusing too much on Jesus as that human example leads to problems in seeing the cross of our salvation. The cross becomes about “vicarious punishment” or a “perfectly obedient act.” For feminists, an emphasis on perfect obedience can reinforce oppressions. Women are asked to pattern their lives on Christ’s obedience on the cross, yet in abusive or oppressive situations such obedience becomes cruel and evil.

Coakley takes a trinitarian focus, with particular attention to the ways we ignore the Holy Spirit, and how that connects to problems in gender and sexuality. In Coakley’s view, our ignorance of the Spirit reiterates patriarchal church forms, enables a hierarchical church that ignores or abuses women, and most importantly, does a grave injustice to who God is. Most intriguing, Coakley offers us a new method for doing theology, what she names a *théologie totale*. *Théologie totale* enables theologians to examine *all* of life in their efforts to tease out who God is. Like Tanner, Coakley’s own offerings include discussions of traditional voices (Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa), but also an excavation of trinitarian iconography in medieval, Renaissance, and some contemporary art, and a sociological study of charismatic Anglicans’ prayer in relation to their thoughts on maleness and femaleness.

Sonderregger begins with God’s Oneness. While Sonderregger is respectful of twentieth-century theologians’ emphases on Christ and the Trinity, and appreciates the work of theologians like Tanner and Coakley, she wonders what is lost when we skip unicity.¹¹ Thus Sonderregger’s first volume approaches some of the questions that the thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas asked, about God’s unicity and God’s perfections—that is, God’s all-knowingness, all-goodness, all-powerfulness, and all-presentness. In choosing unicity and perfections, Sonderregger treads on dicey terrain, since concepts like all-powerfulness have been concerns for feminists who see relationships between abusive power used to oppress women, and the potential abusive power of God. I will discuss this point further, below.

¹¹ Indeed, Sonderregger is enthusiastically supportive of Coakley’s trinitarian systematics, and her *théologie totale*, as we see in Katherine Sonderregger, “God, Sexuality, and the Self,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18, no. 1 (January 2016): 94–98.

Readers will likely be struck by Sonderegger's consistent use of capitalizations and male pronouns (and occasional female pronouns) to refer to God. Many feminist theologians have suggested that to call God "He" is to perpetuate idolatrous language and assumptions. Sonderegger's response to potential feminist concerns is this: "Feminist analyses and aims can best be prosecuted, I say, by retaining personal language for God (both He and She . . .), and by confidently asserting and assuming that the broad tradition of the church and its creeds, confessions, and scriptural idiom, is ours, male and female, by baptism, by call, and by gracious gift of the One, Holy Lord of the whole earth."¹² The point seems to be that women should see the whole tradition as ours, including male pronouns. Perhaps Sonderegger is suggesting a similar point to Coakley, who argues that the use of Father is only appropriate when it is spoken in relation to the Trinity. That is, "the true meaning of 'Father' is to be found in the Trinity, not dredged up from the scummy realm of human patriarchal fatherhood."¹³ I agree that the personal language is important, as is the use of traditional language especially in relation to the Trinity, though I might wish for a few more uses of She, or perhaps a bit more discussion of gender play (the Father, She[?]). I think it is an open but very important question to consider whether women proclaiming male language may more properly redescribe gendered pronouns in ways that turn human uses of the term on their heads.

How God Is Not Merely a Thing in Our Universe

Despite their varying approaches, all three theologians make a point to begin with some version of the following phrase of Tanner's: "God is not a kind of thing among other kinds of things."¹⁴ Coakley's version is quite similar: "For God, by definition, cannot be an extra item in the universe (a very big one) to be known, and so controlled, by human intellect, will, or imagination. God is, rather, that without which there would be nothing at all."¹⁵ Sonderegger expresses it this way: "This theology joins its modern compatriots in their vigorous

¹² Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, xxii.

¹³ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 324.

¹⁴ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 4.

¹⁵ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 44.

rejection of God as ‘another object in the cosmos,’ as Karl Rahner often expressed this point.”¹⁶

Such a view is important for considering feminist concerns. A god who is too much identified as one of us is a god in danger of being made an idol. This has been precisely the move—overidentification with a male god—that has disturbed previous generations of feminist theologians, among others. (Consider, for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether’s famous question: Can a male savior save women?²) More than that, this feminist concern, it turns out, is also precisely a problem in our contemporary age.

So Coakley notes where the Trinity is both a mystery and in plain sight in the stuff of our lives. For example, she examines the iconography of the Trinity, noting sometimes quite small places of “creative new expression, animus and efficacy.”¹⁷ So often down through the centuries, iconography has depicted male figures, such that even if one wanted to focus on the ungendered nature of God, the art causes us to think in unhelpful, gendered, and idolatrous, ways. Coakley argues that early church considerations about the place of the Holy Spirit in worship (and especially the apparent subordination of the Holy Spirit) are linked to questions about contemplative prayer, desire, and sexuality. “Were women of spiritual gifts to be accorded roles of leadership alongside men, or could this only be allowed in an era of increasing institutionalization, if in some way their sexual attractiveness to men was neutralized?”¹⁸ Iconographic depictions are just one way, on Coakley’s view, that the church reinforced gendered oppression. By contrast, Coakley notes some alternative and surprising depictions, such as Hildegard of Bingen’s circular depictions of the Father and Spirit, with the Son in a more humble posture, that show the Spirit moving mysteriously among us.

Tanner’s concern is that we have made Jesus too much one of us. Imagining God as not an object in our universe, and as noncompetitive with us, enables us also to imagine the radical nature of God’s incarnation. It also means that the focus, for us, is not primarily on what *we* can do, but rather what God does for us. “God is not going anywhere when God becomes human; we are being brought to God.”¹⁹ Her mode of

¹⁶ Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, xiii.

¹⁷ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 191.

¹⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 102.

¹⁹ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 29.

distinguishing God is to note a difference between God's *being*, and God's constant invitation for human *participation* in God's being.

Sonderegger wants her readers to be careful about how we imagine that God is not an object in our world. The kind of reasoning that Westerners typically do (inherited from Immanuel Kant) is to presume that God is so beyond our imagining that we simply assent to the idea that ultimately God will always remain a mystery, because our words and intellect are incapable of apprehending the ideal one God.²⁰ Coakley, too, worries that we are too wrapped up in a Kantian vision of what is real, which distorts our images of God—that for us, God is too often “radically unavailable, cut off behind a veil of Kantian nescience.”²¹ This Enlightenment-era Kantian temptation is that God simply has no meaning for us at all—an amorphous mysterious blob of nothingness that can't relate to us, nor we to it.

So Sonderegger exhorts,

We must resist this comfortable [Kantian] conclusion. The problem is God does not stem from our being unable to conceive or know or receive Him properly under the conditions of human experience. . . . Even less does it stem from His seeming “distance” from or ideality toward the world. The problem, rather, is that the One True God is very *near* to us, *present* in His surpassing Uniqueness.²²

For Sonderegger, God's presence is also God's hiddenness. In one example, she describes it this way: “So striking is the Invisible Presence of God in His house that the Romans considered the Jewish temple ‘empty,’ an observation of scorn.”²³ The very invisibility of God means that we *can not* ever say God is in *this* place but not *that* place, which affirms that God is very near and present to us, even as God is hidden.

Can these starting points address feminist concerns for idolatry? For that, we must consider how these three authors think through God's presence.

²⁰ Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 38–39.

²¹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 77.

²² Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 40.

²³ Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 66.

How Do We Name God's Presence?

God's hiddenness must be juxtaposed with the incarnation: this strange God who is not-us is also *for us* in a radical way. Being "for us" has been a hallmark of many feminist theologians, who have wanted to show God's care and concern for the oppressed and the marginalized. In addition, a common method among feminist theologians has been discussing women's experiences of God, which means some sense of God's incarnate reality in women's lived experiences.

Kathryn Tanner's vision of the presence of God is the flip side of her understanding that God in Christ is noncompetitive and not one of us. We participate in God's own glory in Christ because that is who Christ is: "All persons, of whatever gender, are to be associated with the very same person of the trinity—the second one, the Son—for the same reason and in the same way—by virtue of what the Spirit of Christ does for them."²⁴ Just as those who are called into Christ's life make up a diverse and disparate community, so we should enable, but also question, diversity and ensure that all communities generate "policies ensuring the comprehensive well-being of all their members, especially the disempowered, following Jesus' own concern for the physical and spiritual well-being of the poor and suffering."²⁵

Tanner's vision of Christ, gender, and community appears far more controlled than the kind of proposal that Coakley offers. Coakley reads early Christian sources to show that the theological discussion of the Holy Spirit granted "experiential effects" as well as "relative power to some women" but at the same time, contributed to the development of a hierarchical church. She worries that the Holy Spirit's depictions were too controlled, too tamed, in many times and places. Yet, because God is present in our world, there are points where the Spirit works mysteriously, and where Christians enabled that mystery. So she suggests that Christian mystical tradition has been open to the "rhetoric of divine desire proceeding from the Father by means of the Holy Spirit, and so 'inflaming' us with love."²⁶ Moreover, we discover, via Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, a "hint at a certain symbolic or analogical alignment of sexual desire and desire for God."²⁷

²⁴ Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 243.

²⁵ Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 243.

²⁶ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 143.

²⁷ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 294.

That is, “sex is really about God”; God’s presence becomes known to us in desire.²⁸ Opening to the Spirit, embracing the mystery and blankness of contemplation, might enable new understandings of gender and hierarchies that are not oppressive.²⁹

Sonderegger draws out God’s presence by considering the divine perfections: omnipotence and omniscience. To discuss these perfections, she first names the idea of “theological compatibilism,” that is, “the conviction that God’s Aseity is present and disclosed and known within our earthly words and world and signs.” But rather than examining analogies of community, or considering human desire for sex and God, Sonderegger meditates on Moses and the burning bush: “The Lord God burns in that bush; His Nature as Fire is disclosed in the wilderness near the holy mountain of God. And the bush is not consumed. This is what Augustine means when in the *Confessions* he says that God is ‘more intimate to me than I to myself.’”³⁰ Compatibilism helps us think about God as power and knowledge—that somehow God can be perfect knowledge and power and good without the stuff of this earth being consumed by God’s perfections.

Sonderegger develops two important arguments informed by feminist thought. The first is how God’s knowledge is related to human representation of God in terms of bodies and language. Human beings are not grounded in God; Sonderegger suggests that such grounding would make God an archetype and can privilege male bodies. But God cannot be an archetype. “Even as male and female are made by God and glorified in His Image, yet are not, each of them or both of them, grounded and represented as such in Him, so our knowledge of Knowledge itself as its eternal Source in Almighty God; yet our earthly minds, and their contents, are not found in God as such, finite items in an infinite Storehouse.”³¹ Sonderegger critiques theologies that overly pattern our humanness, our bodies, our relationships, or anything else in our universe onto God. I suspect Tanner’s discussion of human relationships aims toward what Sonderegger and Coakley envision, but may overstep Sonderegger’s concerns, as Tanner’s vision is focused through human analogies that perhaps stray into the overly

²⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 316.

²⁹ For Coakley, hierarchies are part of human life, and not by nature oppressive. It is when patriarchal structures make too much of men and too little of women that problems arise.

³⁰ Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 213.

³¹ Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 388.

familiar thinking about God that worries Sonderegger. At the same time, I think Sonderegger does similar work as Coakley, aiming for a heightened contemplation of God that transforms the very ways we see gender and all relationships, yet with God as the proper beginning (and ending) point.

The second point is Sonderegger's discussion of abuses of human power against the backdrop of God's omnipotence. Feminists suggest God's omnipotence gets co-opted by encouraging especially the marginalized and oppressed to submit to other peoples' power, analogously to God's power. As Sonderegger notes, even scripture itself can look like a "cycle of abuse": "The powerless punished for what they cannot carry out, then brought back to the abuser through tenderness and promise of better days."³² Sonderegger's response is, "This biblical pattern is not divine abuse. . . . The Lord is good; His steadfast Love endures forever. We must not yield one step from this Truth."³³ For Sonderegger, by definition abuse entails *no* relationship with the other, because the abuser's power is absolute. What Christians proclaim, on the other hand, is a relationship with Almighty God, who is power but who yet does not consume us. That means, too, that "this Power, radiating out into being, is moral; it is Divine Humility. Creatures pour forth from the Divine Generosity, each given their day, their life span, their place and room to flourish."³⁴

In all three theologians, the mystery of God's presence among us directly affects how we encounter each other and live with each other, yet still our human relationships cannot exhaust God's presence among us. The fact of God's presence in our lives leads each of the three theologians to consider what our response should be.

Our Prayerful Response to God

For all three theologians, theology's purpose is prayer and more deeply living Christian life. That includes addressing gender concerns, certainly, but these broad systematic theologies also seek a wholesale rethinking of Christian life in contemporary context.

Coakley is the most direct of the three in her encompassing discussion of gender. She states that the "task of theology is always, if

³² Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 240.

³³ Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 241.

³⁴ Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 308.

implicitly, a recommendation for life,³⁵ which explicitly means we should become more contemplative in our prayer and life. We might consider becoming more patient, for example, but that patience should not entail a passivity that enables us to overlook wrongs committed by others. Coakley concludes her first volume with six theses about bringing contemplation to the fore in Christian life. Crucially, these include that “the contemplative is one who is forced to acknowledge the ‘messy entanglement’ of sexual desire and the desire for God,”³⁶ and that contemplative prayer has true ability “to undermine gender stereotypes”³⁷ and show us “power in vulnerability.”³⁸ Mindfulness may be a contemporary fad but an individualistic one; however, Coakley’s contemplation is embedded in the whole of Christian tradition and has teeth enough (for we have seen them, in Benedict and in Teresa of Avila) to engender new communal ways of life.

Tanner’s theological “making sense of Christianity” means that “we glorify God in a pattern of action together that corresponds to God’s decision to be with and for us in Christ.”³⁹ Our “being brought to God” means that God will give all of the goodness of God to the world, but that humans can never be God.⁴⁰ We seek God’s goodness through God’s grace, and thereby recognize that our own goodness will never be *real* goodness for the world. Tanner’s response is thus one of always searching out even those places where we think we are good, realizing we fail to measure up to God, and so cling to God’s goodness all the more. I think that recognizing this fact is salvation for our world, where we tend to have very particular notions of what it means to do good in the world, but we are less able to forgive each others’ faults or critique our own sense of goodness.

Finally, Sonderegger emphasizes both discipleship and prayer, intertwined with each other: “A doctrine of God that does not call a reader to love, does not remind one of the taste and tang of love, human and divine, cannot serve the Lord well, but is a servant without profit.”⁴¹ Moreover, she hopes that her work “will stand as an open invitation: to test whether elements of the scholastic tradition can be

³⁵ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 18.

³⁶ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 340.

³⁷ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 342.

³⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 343.

³⁹ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 79.

⁴⁰ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*, 43.

⁴¹ Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 471.

generated from Holy Scripture; whether systematic theology can be best pursued as a form of intellectual prayer; whether the One God can be known, worshipped, and loved truly—as He is!—in the finite, fallen words we offer up to Him.”⁴²

Her focus on unicity and, hence, the radicality and uniqueness of God, is critical in an age when not only the New Atheists, but our children, our media, and our friends, describe coming to a point of disbelief in part because the god they have seen identified for them is some version of a big man in the sky, or some kind of big mover and shaker *in* the universe. The big man in the sky is quite capable of becoming one among many similar kinds of gods that we make for ourselves, but the unique God that Sonderegger describes can never be one among many. Sonderegger thus quite deliberately faces this atheistic source of Western anxiety. “The public structure of thought in our era in the West is decidedly secular. That is methodological atheism.” We live in a church that is anxious about its status, its relevance, and its numbers; one would think we Christians had not really understood Jesus’ parable about the lilies of the field—or more bluntly, that we think that God’s existence depends on Christians’ own beliefs!

Yet Sonderegger proclaims a contrary word: “And just that [methodological atheism] is a Mode of God’s Presence in the modern world.”⁴³ God does not depend on our belief structures, but God really is, as the Psalmist notes, behind us and before us, wherever it is that we are (Ps. 139). “He is content to be the Truth, the Wisdom, the Reality of all things, yet be unrecognized in the manifold truths and discoveries and insights of an age. He is content to be unseen.”⁴⁴ That hidden humility of God, the fact of God’s presence in these ways—this is good news for an anxious world. Prayer is a way that calls us back to the One True God and away from all the other possible gods we might encounter.

To sum up, these systematic theologies are fruitful for thinking not only about gender, but for meditating on God, and for reflecting on being God’s church in this age. While I have noted questions or points of contention throughout, I also think it is crucial to hear our “old story” in these voices, and to yet again be called into prayer, renewal, and life in God.

⁴² Katherine Sonderegger, interviewed by Michael Gibson, http://www.augsburgfortress.org/media/downloads/9781451482843_interview.pdf, 6.

⁴³ Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 56.

⁴⁴ Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 143.