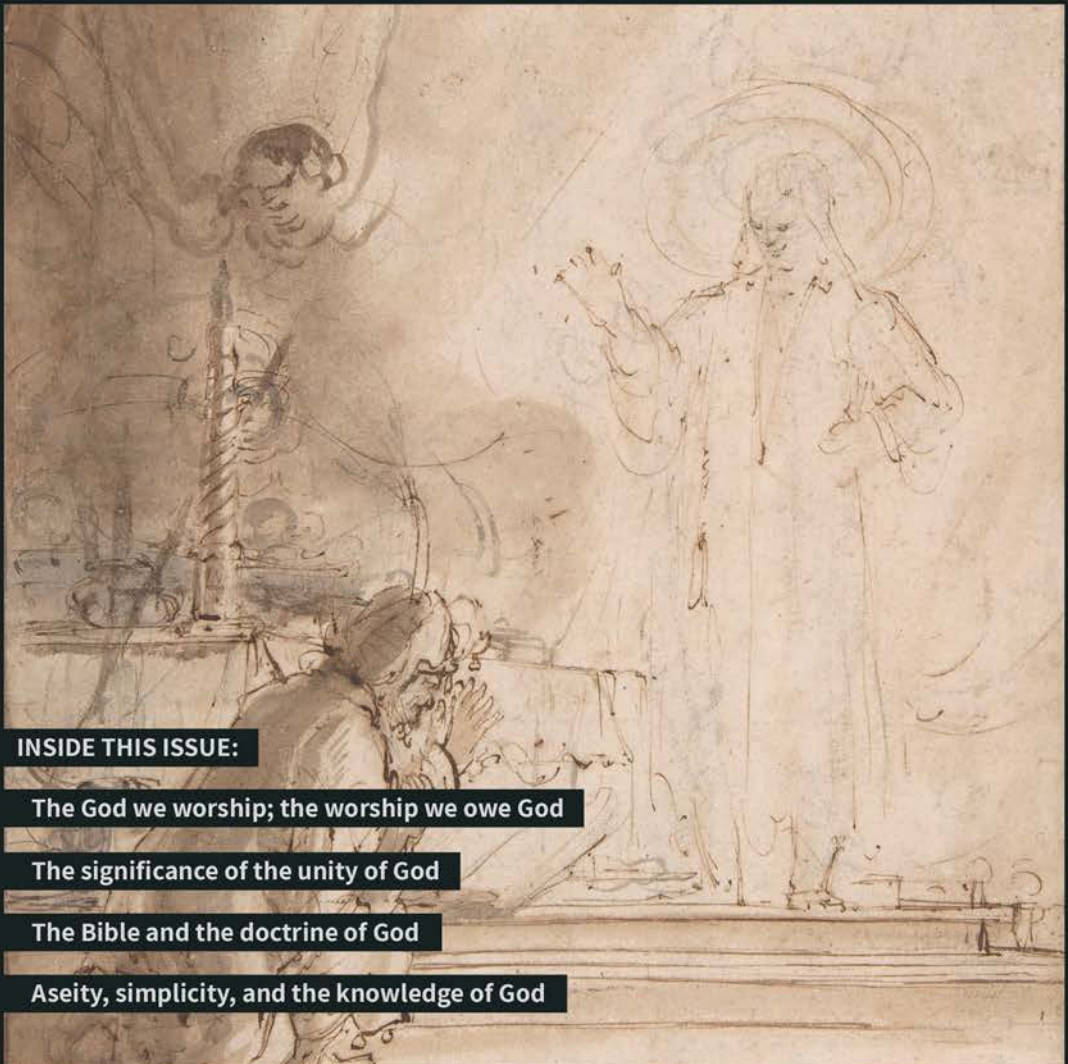




The God we worship: conversations with Katherine Sonderegger



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Editorial

The God we worship: conversations with Katherine Sonderegger

“Nothing is so beautiful as the thought of God.” So says North American theologian the Reverend Professor Katherine Sonderegger in an interview after the release of the first volume of her projected three-volume *Systematic Theology*.¹ Since 2002 Sonderegger has held the William Meade Chair in Systematic Theology at Virginia Theological Seminary. Her earlier works include the monograph *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew: Karl Barth’s “Doctrine of Israel”* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1992). More recent contributions include the chapter on election in the *Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Her careful, attentive command of the theological tradition and her bright, confident voice have established her reputation as a major figure in modern theology.²

The first volume of Sonderegger’s *Systematic Theology* examines the doctrine of “the One God,” looking first at God’s Oneness, and then at the One God’s “Perfections” of omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience.³ The second volume, which is scheduled for release next year, examines the doctrine of the Trinity. Sonderegger has said that the third volume will focus on the work of Christ, taking in other doctrines such as creation and providence in the process.⁴

Sonderegger has spoken of her approach like this:

I believe theology must simply begin: it speaks of and before Almighty God. This conviction may give the reader the sense she has stepped back behind the modern or the Enlightenment to a naive, perhaps misguided, universality

and unvarnished realism. But I don't think the options are really reduced to these! My conviction rather is that the Spirit gives us utterance in systematic work for theology that is genuinely anchored in this day, yet speaks confidently of a Reality that is Universal, Eternal, One. I hope that this will strike some readers as the pattern of the biblical scribe, bringing out from the treasure house things old and things new.⁵

The lecture presented in essay form in this issue of *St Mark's Review* is in many ways a good introduction to some of the distinctive and exciting aspects of Sonderegger's approach. In essence, what Sonderegger does in this essay is to consider the implications for the doctrine of God of Gabriel's testimony, in Luke 1:19, that he "stands in the presence of God." Because Sonderegger's approach will be unfamiliar to many readers, it may help to summarise the shape of the essay.

Sonderegger very deliberately does not set out from what she calls "the sceptical problem," namely the problem of how God can meet the creature. What Sonderegger wants to resist under this heading of scepticism is the belief that "we can only say what God is not, in a very strong sense," that although God's actions towards us may be known, we must maintain a "rigorous scepticism about the Divine Essence and Nature." Sonderegger's objection to such "dogmatic scepticism" is that it in fact knows too much! It "has already decided on the creature's place before the Creator."

Instead, Sonderegger begins from the reality attested by Scripture that God does meet with the creature. Gabriel, an angel, a creature, can "stand in the presence of God." Gabriel, Sonderegger will say, "stands surety for creation as a whole." Such a meeting, Sonderegger is persuaded, tells us much of great importance about the doctrine of God, if we will "receive with thanksgiving the questions and very great puzzles" that it raises.

The main part of Sonderegger's argument therefore begins with an evocative exegesis of the scene in Luke 1:19. Then follows a theological reflection upon it, beginning from the observation that "We are to learn from this ... that the Lord God Himself can be present within the world of the creature . . . And perhaps more wonderful still, we creatures can stand in the presence of Almighty God."

Sonderegger then goes on to clarify the meaning of this recognition. First, she resists deploying the category of *myth* to avoid the need of conceptual clarification and evade the metaphysical challenges of the text. Here we would do better, Sonderegger argues, to follow the early church fathers, for whom such moments in Scripture provoked conceptual exploration, rather than being disallowed by pre-established conceptual certainties.

Sonderegger's example for this is the use of the *via negativa* by early fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa. Rather than a mere expression of dogmatic scepticism, for the fathers the *via negativa* reflected a "large scale pattern" found in the Bible of honouring God by refusing to *liken* God to anything in creation. It is, Sonderegger believes, a form of obedience to the second commandment.

And yet, Sonderegger stresses, "Gabriel can stand in the Lord's Presence"! This must make us ask "about the very Nature and Being of God, His Aseity." In particular, it leads us to ask about the place of language of "incommensurability." Thinking especially of the influence of Karl Barth, Sonderegger observes that the conviction that God is incommensurate with the world is "widespread in modern theology." This view maintains, against the threat of pantheism and a "collapse between the One God and His cosmos," that God is *utterly* other, fundamentally unthinkable.

Sonderegger does not think this view can be straightforwardly dismissed. But she does want to ask whether or not it can take seriously enough "the very great wonder of God's *Presence* in our land," attested in Scripture but also echoed in religion and philosophy.

Taking this wonder seriously in Christian theology finally requires speaking of God the Trinity. Sonderegger adds that this does not entail the mistake of limiting the Trinity to the economy, the history of salvation. There is an alternative path, which lies in speaking of "the relation between Procession and Mission in the One God," and being able to say that God, in himself, is always already "eternally ready ... for a reality not His." Such a path discovers the limitations of strict incommensurability in discovering how God is not ultimately "competitive" with his world, but a "Ceaseless, Fruitful Generativity" that "can be, in His very own Life, here amidst His creatures."

In the same interview noted above, Sonderegger described her hopes for her *Systematic Theology* in these terms:

I have hoped for several things in this project: that Holy Scripture could be seen as teaching and undergirding a full-throated metaphysical Doctrine of God; that systematic work could be edifying and conceptually exacting; that I might embolden others to do “far greater works than these;” and that the glorious Beauty of Almighty God might be relished and praised within it.

That these hopes are well-founded is already clear from the reception of Sonderegger's work. The six articles presented here are further demonstration of the fruitfulness of Sonderegger's thought. They range from more direct responses to Sonderegger's essay and work to more wide-ranging reflections stimulated by it. All are written by Australian scholars, working in theological institutions around the country.

The first two articles seek to highlight the fruitfulness of Sonderegger's starting point in the unity of God. Neil Ormerod's essay suggests that when this starting point is taken seriously, it should lead us to think more carefully about the distinction between natural and revealed theology. My own essay aims to highlight the significance of Sonderegger's thought at this point, and to explore further its connections to the doctrine of the Trinity.

The next two articles delve into some of the methodological aspects of Sonderegger's thought. David Höhne's compact essay follows Sonderegger's attention to God's temple appearance to reflect on the implications for the doctrine of God of Christ's *confrontation* with the religious authorities of his day. Bruce Pass considers Sonderegger's *Systematic Theology*, calling attention to the place of Scripture in it, and raising questions about her claim that God is the relation between himself and his creatures.

The two final articles seek to explore, in different ways, what exactly Sonderegger's arguments mean for our understanding of God. Jacqueline Service's essay robustly affirms Sonderegger's claim that divine aseity does not set God definitively apart from his creatures, suggesting that Sonderegger's argument can be made stronger by greater clarity about the concept of incommensurability. Prompted partly by Sonderegger's attention to the theme of divine invisibility, Peter Walker concludes this issue with a graceful exploration of the theme of “learned ignorance,” in conversation with the fifteenth-century German theologian, Nicholas of Cusa.

To these testaments to the value of Sonderegger’s work, let me add a very modest word of personal testimony. I have only met Katherine Sonderegger twice, but on both occasions I was struck most of all by her humility, shown especially in the way she was willing to enter into patient and earnest dialogue with graduate students—including myself—whose command of the subject of their conversation was entirely dwarfed by her own, even if they were not sufficiently aware of it at the time. *St Mark’s Review* is very glad to be able to publish this essay and to offer these Australian engagements with her work.

Andrew Errington
Guest editor

Endnotes

- 1 Interview with Michael Gibson, available online at: <https://fortresspress.com/product/systematic-theology-volume-1-doctrine-god>.
- 2 See, for example, the book symposia on Sonderegger’s *Systematic Theology* vol. 1 in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19, no. 2 (2017), and *Pro Ecclesia* 27, no. 1 (2018).
- 3 Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).
- 4 Interview with Michael Gibson.
- 5 Interview with Michael Gibson.