

January 25, 2010

Dear Stephen:

It has taken me awhile to get you located at Marquette. I think the last time we communicated by email was while I was visiting professor at Yale Divinity School, 2005/06, and you were kind enough to make an appreciative remark about my book, *On Being the Church of Jesus Christ in Tumultuous Times* [Cascade Books, 2005], that was coming out in the fall of 2005. As I have reconstructed your life, you left Garrett somewhat unhappily and are now happily at Marquette—our mutual friend, Ron Anderson, filled me in a bit.

These images about you stand out in my memory: 1) you used my *Grammar* book in teaching systematic at Garrett, which led me to believe that you really had time to probe **what** I was saying and **how** I was saying it; 2) We actually met and briefly talked at Oklahoma State U in 2004 or 05 at the conference your former student Jacob Goodson convened for his OBU mentor—by the way, Jacob and I have remained in touch and I greatly admire his mind and passions; 3) after that conference I read some of your works and realized how much of an impression Milbank and his crew had made on you, but that did not seduce me into getting further into Milbank, in spite of your and Stanley's urgings—the modest Wittgenstein in me simply could make no sense of Milbank and largely thought he was just off his rocker, gassing and guessing; 4) after OSU we did exchange some emails about your work on Denys Turner, about whom you were more impressed than I; 5) you might be amazed, after you have read the rest of this letter, that I highly recommended you to Yale while I was there as someone to consider in their faculty appointments in theology.

As for my own work, since the *Grammar* finally got published in 2002, I have been wondering what deep hole into which it must have fallen. To be sure, a few folk have read it carefully, and George Lindbeck told me over lunch one day while I was teaching at Yale in 2005/06, that when the *Grammar* appeared David Kelsey said to him that the Yale-type systematic had been written—my own discussions with Kelsey during that year hardly lived up to that highfalutin praise, well maybe not so highfalutin after all. But the point is, so-called 'heavyweights' in theology seemed to have refused/disdained/never-entertained-the-thought of challenging or commending any of my proposals; basic ignorance or condemnation prevailed in deafening silence.

And now you at least spend a couple of pages mentioning and critiquing my work in your recent book, *Speaking of God: Theology, Language, and Truth* [Eerdmans, 2009], especially in the sub-section *Metaphysics versus Metaphysical Use* [pp. 217-228] wherein you discuss Wittgenstein and examine something called the 'Yale School,' referring to Frei, Lindbeck and Holmer and even me. But Steve, your remarks actually astonish me—like, who is Steve talking about? Hence, grateful that I was mentioned and you intended to seriously deal with what I was doing, I am just aghast at how to respond. Actually, I am discombobulated.☺

But here are a few rambling notes or perhaps vain gestures in the air.

1. From Wittgenstein I learned to try to keep clear about the difference between a) using language to talk about or perform other matters amidst the givenness of language in everyday contexts where it is doing some work—some purposive work, and 2) using language to talk about the uses of language. Yet it would be absurd to suppose that even everyday language is always clear, and hence it is appropriate much of the time to ask folk what they mean or what they are talking about or what they have to go on. That is, language works always in a social setting and conversation is inevitable, indeed essential. To forget about these simple givens is to become confused rather rapidly and confusion often begets confusion. Beyond these remarks I make no pretence to have rightly ‘interpreted’ Wittgenstein.

2. Hence, my *Grammar* simply presupposes the church and its language, and I call that language ‘theological’—it is about God or talking to God, and yet essential to its talk over the centuries is the continuing questioning/interrogation of whether the talk is true and faithful—that is, talking about the church’s talking about God, *what* to say and *how* to say it and how to perform the life of faithfulness.

3. So, I adopted some terms—‘semantics’, ‘syntax’, and ‘pragmatics’ [again, I was not supposing everyone agrees on these concepts; just look at how messy such talk/theories are]—as helping the church understand the various ways in which it does use its language in the hope that the church might learn to speak of God more faithfully, truthfully, and honestly. Here you and I agree, I think, that the contemporary church, wherever, has seriously strayed and lost the knack for speaking faithfully and witnessing to the reality of God.

4. But, alas, how does one do the work of reconstructing the language and witness of the church? Having repeatedly lectured in systematic theology as a yearlong course, I realized that I would never get some basic considerations and distinctions stated and developed if I pause at every step and engage the whole of the churches’ traditions. So, I try to follow the topical outlines of the traditions and make some notes along the way. And one basic note is warning folk to be mindful of the distinction between using the word ‘God’ and talking about the word and thereby or therewith learning there are some terrible uses of the word. It seems to me that your neglect of the distinction between speaking of God and speaking of the various uses of the word ‘God’ often confuses your earnest pursuit of trying to clear up some issues in a select range of contemporary theologies/philosophies.

5. While I felt run-over and kicked by your use of the word ‘metaphysics’—and I will not here pause to sort out the differences—you are just wrong to say that I was ‘against metaphysics’ and to suggest that I thought the church’s theology did not make assertions about the reality of God. Note, however, for me: there is absolutely no big issue at stake for Xn theology as to whether we define ‘metaphysics’ this way or that way, as is the same with ‘philosophy.’ When someone argues ‘metaphysics is the only way truth claims about divinity can be assessed’, we need to regard that remark as a ‘stipulation’, to which they are certainly free to stipulate. But you and I may or may not accept the stipulation as

normative or guiding for us. Also from the way you talk, it would seem as though you have never encountered other metaphysics than what I call 'classical theism'. Do you suppose Turner has ever read Whitehead? Would that count as a 'rational' defense of the reality of God?

6. As for your presumed 'Hellenization thesis', you never heard me argue that way. But we do have to look how the pre-Augustinian church argued and talked. When you try to defend immutability, impassibility, and simplicity, you seem really oblivious to how the fathers were arguing and why they were arguing. Everyone agreed that God is unchanging in some sense, etc. and not a creature, primarily because Scripture talked about God being dependable, not fickle, not changeable in attitude and action and then we see how easy it was to formulate this linguistic rule: God is perfect; God cannot be better nor worse, hence God is unchangeable. Change, unchanging, perfection get conceptually tied together. If you are just oblivious to this rule, you will utterly miss the reasoning of Arius and why Arius was indeed attractive and, within limits, logical. But when you lock in the rule that God is immutable, impassible, simple, even though you say the Son and the Father are of one reality, you are heading for massive confusion when the Son you are talking about is Jesus of Nazareth, him crucified, dead, and raised from the dead. You, Steve, herald the *hypostatic union*, but it seems plain silly to talk as some of our contemporaries talk of the 'passibility of the impassible God'. Without further discussion, perhaps adopting my distinction between God's essence and God's actuality, that sort of talk just seems self-cancelling. I grant that historically the church made the right decisions at Nicaea and Chalcedon, given their repertoire of concepts. Hence, I do not affirm Harnack, for his agenda in actuality was to prioritize the moral character of Jesus and obedience to the Father and to eliminate doctrinal disputes over the presumed reality of Jesus and the Father.

And I think you are just historically off the mark when you argue that Von Rad [and Childs?] are just buying into the 'modern world' in their interpretation of 'Yahweh' [Ex 3.12-14]. But I will admit, that given the range of grammatical options available in the post-apostolic church, impassibility was virtually unavoidable. It is important to realize that many of the early fathers were more concerned about avoiding polytheism in their understanding of Jesus as in some sense divine. But when one reads their texts, it is actually amazing that Nicaea and Chalcedon happened, and I celebrate their happening under the grace of God, better than the available alternatives but still saddling the church with infelicities of grammar. And those infelicities have just stoked the fires of our contemporaries who think Trinity and high Christology are huge mistakes. Would you find it credible for me to claim that it was precisely in order to keep the creeds that I have proposed different ways of elaborating their meaning for the faith?

Further, as far as I was concerned, James Barr effectively undermined the supposition that Greek and Hebrew are utterly different in grammar. But even so, hypothesizing that the Septuagint had never been written and Jews never learned to understand 'Yahweh' in Greek in a Hellenizing world, it would seem odd to suppose that Jews would have on their own in Hebrew interpreted the Tetragrammaton in the way Aquinas did. But, of

course, most Jews had difficulty with a crucified messiah. I assume you are aware that I interpreted the Tetragrammaton differently from Thomas: *I will be who I will be*.

7. I was, however, most alarmed that you associated me with those theologians preoccupied with the suffering of God. While I do talk about such suffering, you miss my more basic point, namely, that it is like swallowing watermelons to narrate the story of Jesus and affirming that his life is also the life of God and, by the way, God is impassible and cannot be acted upon. The issue is not suffering as though we **must** have a suffering God; the issue is that the incarnate God existed in time, was crucified and died, and no matter how you try to tell that story, you cannot avoid or cancel the elemental point ‘Jesus was acted upon.’ Do you and Preller realize [or might he have realized] what you have bought when you want to claim that the incarnation gives us our clue to how to talk further about the impassible God? I include Burrell in this as well. Do you think Burrell ever considered christological issues in his grammar?—certainly not, his grammar sits on its own bottom! There is no philosophical problem to solve here, except to say the language of impassibility is confusing and finally self-defeating.

As for Moltmann, I have appreciated much of his work, but I think he could have argued differently about the death of Jesus; but he is kerygmatically bold. I would have thought that someone such as you who wants to emphasize the *hypostatic union* would recognize that it fritters away into abstractions if it does not at least imply that ‘the eternal Son died a human death on a cross of shame.’ It simply escapes me why anyone who can say that would have any hankering for going on to say ‘and, by the way, the eternal Son is impassible’. And, even more by the way, you do not really think Aquinas’ ‘God’ is any other than simply one and not essentially triune? You really do have to come to grips with my claim that Incarnation talk must radically affect how we talk about God; not, good theology already exists and we must try real hard to fit Jesus into it.

8. I trust you are aware that I do not fall in the category of those you claim make the world ‘necessary’ to God—as though God *must have a world in order to be God*. Can I be any clearer about that and why strong Trinitarian and high Christological concepts demand the distinction between God’s essence and God’s actuality and the priority of freedom and love in the divine life? And yet I am puzzled as to why my distinguishing among the attributes—how and why we characterize the reality of God—simply gets ignored.

9. After my having performed these metaphysical/theological grammatics, might it become apparent to you that Paul Holmer is even now turning over in his grave at the thought that anyone might think I was his student! I revered the man, was indeed his Teaching Assistant for a couple of years, and we argued incessantly. But he and Kierkegaard did teach me about the passions of faithfulness and about the intellectual conceit of supposing that anyone ever comes to faith because of superior metaphysical theories. Yet, Holmer never really dealt with the Kierkegaard of the *Postscript*. Holmer’s very early essay—the essay that brought him to the attention of Yale—demystifying classical Christology as too metaphysical is quite akin to Harnack and surprisingly to Bultmann. Evenso, Holmer had a wonderful knack for saying ‘why are you preoccupied

with those ways of talking?—what work are they doing for you?’ and then he would demonstrably gag at the confusion he thought you were creating—the extent you were just putting more flies in the bottle! While I am not sure who might be helped by your book—it left my head spinning—perhaps it was your own desperate attempt to grab the flies and extract them from the bottleneck of something called contemporary theology.

10. It should be noted that I have abstained from any comment about the extraordinarily obfuscating way you have talked about ‘reason’, ‘faith’, ‘fideism’, ‘private language’. But, there I did it—I just did make a comment!

11. But alas, Stephen, you did mention my work in your work and you thereby joined a minute cadre of folk who dared to think my work might even be mentionable or discussible or engaged forthwith. I have wrestled with whether my disgruntlement at this neglect is simply a matter of pride, and perhaps it is—can any of us really defend ourselves against accusations of being prideful? But the odd persisting conviction I have is that I think the *Grammar* book might have helped the church come out from under its enthrallment both to liberalism/evangelicalism/American Christianity and to the resurgence of the Roman tradition the popes have tethered to the philosophy of Aquinas and papal infallibility—and, in dissolving those enthrallments, reinstall orthodox Trinity and Christology as the ground of the existence of the church. O.K., I admit that is ambitious, hyperbolic, and I beg you to forget it quickly. The truth is I wrote the *Grammar* book in the very modest desire that it might help some earnest souls who, by whatever happenstance, might trouble to read and ponder it, in the way it had helped me just to teach it and write it. Alas my modesty has been confirmed by the virtual silence! Yet, you did break the silence and it has been sobering!

This has been arduous for me and you surely do not have to respond in any detail. But it would be a gift to have a gesture somehow that you have received this email and have not completely condemned me to the fires of hell.☺Well, you do not really have to give up condemning me to hell; just leave me to my own devices.

Final note, you have so stimulated me that I keep going back over this little diatribe and extending and rephrasing it. Thanks for being the occasion of so much stimulation, but I must just stop and get on with other concerns.

In Friendship,
Joe

On Feb 9, 2010, at 10:52 AM, Stephen Long wrote:

Dear Joe,

Finally I have had time to take a closer look at your comments on my book. I did use your book at Garrett for several years and would continue to do so. In fact, I still use my lectures from it to explain ‘language’ to undergrads. I have been influenced by John

Milbank and think highly of his work. There is a great deal of animosity directed toward him today, some of it I am sure is deserved, but much of it may also be directed against him because he so thoroughly exposes the “liberal protestant metanarrative.” I know you do not oppose his work for that reason, but I’m not sure exactly which aspect of it you find troubling. Nonetheless I tried to make it evident in my book that I was not asking anyone to sign up for RO or post-liberalism or nouvelle théologie or any group or school of theology. I am interested in what such persons write about, not the persons themselves. I was less impressed with Turner’s critiques than perhaps his constructive position. His shots at RO, Barthianism and the nouvelle théologie lacked depth, but the constructive piece certainly requires serious engagement. I am worried about the resurgence of neoscholasticism among contemporary Catholics, just as I’m worried about the return to Schleiermacher and the appeal to modernity among contemporary barthians. They seem to feed off each other. Turner is more mild than Steven A Long and Thomas Joseph White. I’ve learned a great deal from all of them, but they seem to identify something akin to ‘postliberalism’ as the problem; the problem is ‘historicism’ and the linguistic turn. Nor do they find compelling Milbank et. al.’s more ‘expressivist’ Thomism. They want to defend the manual tradition of Thomism via Cajetan, and return to a doctrine of pure nature. I actually tried to find a way to bring their legitimate concerns about metaphysics and truth into conversation with the valid shifts that occurred in the modern era concerning history, language and culture. I thought I was being charitable and generous to diverse positions! Obviously you did not find my book to be such when it came to your own work and to what was once called the “Yale School.” It seems to have fairly well disappeared from the theological scene today. Theology seems to be taking a turn I find surprising, even baffling—a hardening of confessional lines. I worry about the ‘deep hole’ not only your book but the ‘Yale’ school in general fell into. I am unhappy with the recent resurgence of correlation theology in folks like Paul Dehart and the dismissal of Frei, Linbeck, Holmer, etc. Believe it or not, part of what I was trying to do was to show why the ‘Yale’ school still matters— why it was unnecessary to turn to metaphysics against history, culture and language, but the latter could be had without abandoning the former. Many contemporary theologians are blaming the ‘linguistic turn’ for a loss of a robust account of truth. I think there is something to that, but they overstate their case. I was trying to give a cautious defense of the linguistic turn that acknowledged we must also have a more robust affirmation of truth. I certainly did not intend to frustrate you or misread you in my all too brief analysis of your work. So let me try to respond to each concern in turn.

1. From Wittgenstein I learned to try to keep clear about the difference between a) using language to talk about or perform other matters amidst the givenness of language in everyday contexts where it is doing some work---some purposive work, and 2) using language to talk about the uses of language. Yet it would be absurd to suppose that even everyday language is always clear, and hence it is appropriate much of the time to ask folk what they mean or what they are talking about or what they have to go on. That is, language works always in a social setting and conversation is inevitable, indeed essential. To forget about these simple givens is to become confused rather rapidly and confusion often begets confusion. Beyond these remarks I make no pretence to have rightly ‘interpreted’ Wittgenstein.

I’m not sure where we disagree on this first point. I never suggested you failed to interpret Wittgenstein well. I was actually using your book as a kind of self-confession. I once used the language of being post-metaphysical myself since I had such a truncated view of Plato – perhaps due to Rorty’s “Mirror of Nature” and such works. I had allowed

a so-called post-liberalism to make me think I could eschew metaphysics, and I now see that as mistaken. But I did not think this required jettisoning Wittgenstein. In fact, I am grateful for how you draw on him in “The Grammar of Faith.” One of the concerns I did express in this work was not with you but with Lindbeck in his distinction between primary and secondary uses of language. I think Wittgenstein challenges that sort of distinction and I tried to do so as well. I find problematic the way both Frei and Dehart typologize theology in terms of internal/external and first order/second order. I don’t think you would disagree with me on this?

2. Hence, my *Grammar* simply presupposes the church and its language and I call that language ‘theological’—it is about God or talking to God, and yet essential to its talk over the centuries is the continuing questioning/interrogation of whether the talk is true and faithful—that is, talking about the church’s talking about God, what to say and how to say it and how to perform the life of faithfulness. Again I’m not sure if we yet have a disagreement. The above seems to restate what I was trying to do in my discussion of Holmer. Moreover it is how I started the entire work – with what we proclaim in Church: “The Word of the Lord” to which people say “Thanks be to God.” The fact that no one ever says, “you cannot say that; it violates the known epistemological limitations of our post-metaphysical world” is for me quite revealing. I began with the fact that we do successfully speak of God from the practices of everyday Church life and proceeded from there.

3. So, I adopted some terms—‘semantics’, ‘syntax’ and ‘pragmatics’ [again, I was not supposing everyone agrees on these concepts; just look at how messy such talk/theories are]—as helping the church understand the various ways in which it does use its language in the hope that the church might learn to speak of God more faithfully, truthfully, and honestly. Here you and I agree, I think, that the contemporary church wherever has seriously strayed and lost the knack for speaking faithfully and witnessing to the reality of God.

Yes we do. As I stated above that I begin the book with the Church’s language.

4. But, alas, how does one do the work of reconstructing the language and witness of the church? Having repeatedly lectured in systematic theology as a yearlong course, I realized that I would never get some basic considerations and distinctions stated and developed if I pause at every step and engage the whole of the churches’ traditions. So, I try to follow the topical outlines of the traditions and make some notes along the way. And one basic note is warning folk to be mindful of the distinction between using the word ‘God’ and talking about the word and thereby or therewith learning there are some terrible uses of the word. It seems to me that your neglect of the distinction between speaking of God and speaking of the various uses of the word ‘God’ often confuses your earnest pursuit of trying to clear up some issues in a select range of contemporary theologies/philosophies.

I’m not sure I understand the distinction here? This would seem to imply a kind of first order and second order distinction that, using Wittgenstein, I did want to challenge. I tried to do this on p. 219. How would I know when someone is “speaking of God” and when they are “using the word God” since it would seem to me they would be doing the same thing? I may be making theology and doctrine more of a central practice of the church than you? Is that correct? Or perhaps we agree more here than my comment suggests? I learned from Holmer the difference between “speaking of God” and “speaking about God.” There is a reason the book is named as it is.

5. While I felt run-over and kicked by your use of the word ‘metaphysics’—and I will not here pause to sort out the differences—you are just wrong to say that I was ‘against metaphysics’ and to suggest that I thought the church’s theology did not make assertions about the reality of God. Note, however, for me:

there is absolutely no big issue at stake for Xn theology as to whether we define 'metaphysics' this way or that way, as is the same with 'philosophy.' When someone argues 'metaphysics is the only way truth claims about divinity can be assessed', we need to regard that remark as a 'stipulation', to which they are certainly free to stipulate. But you and I may or may not accept the stipulation as normative or guiding for us. Also from the way you talk, it would seem as though you have never encountered other metaphysics than what I call 'classical theism'. Do you suppose Turner has ever read Whitehead? Would that count as a 'rational' defense of the reality of God?

If I suggested you were against metaphysics, then I overstated my point. I tried to be more careful. The key quote is, "Jones jettisons the tradition of the divine names by wrongly understanding them as metaphysical attributes that somehow lose the biblical grammar" (224). That is the statement I would stand by. I am more committed to the *de deo uno* of Aquinas than I think you are. I still find those "names" as the best way to speak well of God and I think we lost something significant if we lose those names. I also think they are consistent with the Name given to us in Exodus 3:14. If some philosophers came close to recognizing them and applying them to God as the one who measures without being measured I am not surprised. I think I overstated when I first said, "Jones, like Holmer, turns this Wittgensteinian critique of a metaphysical use of language into a critique of metaphysics itself". That fits Holmer since he makes some explicit statements against metaphysics, which was in the air in much of the 20th century when we were supposedly at the 'end of metaphysics' via Ayer et. al. I also think the claim that there is such a thing as 'classical theism' is mistaken and here would side with Burrell's critique of that language. Aquinas never used as a term deriding what those who use it oppose. I don't think you would do so. I suppose it might be helpful to know I was responding against the process theologians who dominated Garrett while I was there. I was the first non-process theologian they hired in 25 years. Moltmann was acceptable to them, but to be a Thomist was to be a knuckle dragging throwback to some age we had overcome through our enlightenment. Perhaps this is why I do think Christianity has more of a stake in "metaphysics" are really speaking nonsense.

6. As for your presumed 'Hellenization thesis', you never heard me argue that way. But we do have to look how the pre-Augustinian church argued and talked. When you try to defend immutability, impassibility, and simplicity, you seem really oblivious to how the fathers were arguing and why they were arguing. Everyone agreed that God is unchanging in some sense, etc. and not a creature, primarily because Scripture talked about God being dependable, not fickle, not changeable in attitude and action and then we see how easy it was to formulate this linguistic rule: God is perfect; God cannot be better nor worse, hence God is unchangeable. Change, unchanging, perfection get tied together. If you are just oblivious to this rule, you will utterly miss the reasoning of Arius and why Arius was indeed attractive and, within limits, logical. But when you lock in the rule that God is immutable, impassible, simple, even though you say the Son and the Father are of one reality, you are heading for massive confusion when the Son you are talking about is Jesus of Nazareth, him crucified, dead, and raised from the dead. You, Steve, herald the *hypostatic union*, but it seems plain silly to talk as some of our contemporaries talk of the 'passibility of the impassible God'. Here we do disagree. I don't think it is silly to speak, as Cyril did, of the 'passibility' of the impassible God. I think it is necessary if we are to use the Chalcedonian grammar properly. The single acting agent, Jesus, who is one '*kata physin*' as Cyril would say, is a single subject in two natures. Natures do not act, persons do. This was Cyril's point. When I act people do not say: "look human nature is acting." They say — Steve is acting. But they understand I act in the nature of a human being. They don't confuse me with a hippopotamus. With Jesus we have a single acting agent who has two natures — divine and human - -which are united in the Person but remain distinct in the natures. Is this logically contradictory? I don't much care. I don't think it is an analytic proposition. Nor

is it a puzzle to be solved. It is the mystery of the faith that requires us to use language in a particular way to express that God and creatures remain distinct and yet in Jesus they have an intimate union with is "*kata physin*." But what matters for me is that God assumes human nature and takes its suffering into God's own being and redeems it by overcoming it. I find a suffering God to be sentimental drivel. If God suffers, and we mean by that what we mean when we say humans suffer, then God is dead. I think Zizek's atheism is a much more serious engagement with a passible God than all the contemporary theological talk of God suffering in the divine nature. If that is true, then it seems to me we are in deep trouble and there can be no redemption. Do we disagree?

Without further discussion, perhaps adopting my distinction between God's essence and God's actuality, that sort of talk just seems self-cancelling.

Here too we disagree. I don't think this distinction works. God's essence is God's existence, just like who God is is what God does. I don't think we need to make this distinction.

I grant that historically the church made the right decisions at Nicaea and Chalcedon, given their repertoire of concepts. Hence, I do not affirm Harnack, for his agenda in actuality was to prioritize the moral character of Jesus and obedience to the Father and to eliminate doctrinal disputes over the presumed reality of Jesus and the Father.

And I think you are just historically off the mark when you argue that Von Rad [and Childs?] are just buying into the 'modern world' in their interpretation of 'Yahweh' [Ex 3.12-14]. But I will admit, that given the range of grammatical options available in the post-apostolic church, impassibility was virtually unavoidable. It is important to realize that many of the early fathers were more concerned about avoiding polytheism in their understanding of Jesus as in some sense divine. But when one reads their texts, it is actually amazing that Nicaea and Chalcedon happened and I celebrate their happening under the grace of God, better than the available alternatives but still saddling the church with infelicities of grammar. And those infelicities have just stoked the fires of our contemporaries who think trinity and high Christology are huge mistakes. Would you find it credible for me to claim that it was precisely in order to keep the creeds that I have proposed different ways of elaborating their meaning for the faith?

Further, as far as I was concerned, James Barr effectively undermined the supposition that Greek and Hebrew are utterly different in grammar. But even so, hypothesizing that the Septuagint had never been written and Jews never learned to understand 'Yahweh' in Greek in a Hellenizing world, it would seem odd to suppose that Jews would have on their own in Hebrew interpreted the Tetragrammaton in the way Aquinas did. But, of course, most Jews had difficulty with a crucified messiah. I assume you are aware that I interpreted the Tetragrammaton differently from Thomas: *I will be who I will be*.

Here again we might have a difference. As you know it was not only Thomas who identified the 'divine name' with being: the *ego eimi o on* of the LXX. It was virtually unanimous in the Christian tradition until the adoption of historical critical methods of reading Scripture. The question for me is if those methods brought with them certain ways of seeing that could no longer recognize the 'metaphysics of Exodus' (to quote Gilson.)

7. I was, however, most alarmed that you associated me with those theologians preoccupied with the suffering of God. While I do talk about such suffering, you miss my more basic point, namely, that it is like swallowing watermelons to narrate the story of Jesus and affirming that his life is also the life of God and, by the way, God is impassible and cannot be acted upon. The issue is not suffering as though we must have a suffering God; the issue is that the incarnate God existed in time, was crucified and died, and no matter how you try to tell that story, you cannot avoid or cancel the elemental point 'Jesus was acted upon'. Do you and Preller realize [or might he have realized] what you have bought when you want to claim that the incarnation gives us our clue to how to talk further about the impassible God? I include Burrell in this as

well. Do you think Burrell ever consider christological issues in his grammar?—certainly not, his grammar sits on its own bottom! There is no philosophical problem to solve here, except to say the language of impassibility is confusing and finally self-defeating. As for Moltmann, I have appreciated much of his work, but I think he could have argued differently about the death of Jesus; but he is kerygmatically bold. I would have thought that someone such as you who wanted to emphasize the *hypostatic union* would recognize that it fritters away into abstractions if it does not at least imply that ‘the eternal Son died a human death on a cross of shame.’ It simply escapes me why anyone who can say that would have any hankering for going on to say ‘and, by the way, the eternal Son is impassible’. And, even more by the way, you do not really think Aquinas’ ‘God’ is any other than simply one and not essentially triune? You really do have to come to grips with my claim that Incarnation talk must radically affect how we talk about God; not, good theology already exists and we must try real hard to fit Jesus into it.

Jesus was acted upon. He died. But because he was also divine he lives. Death is overcome. I don’t think I agree with you that Burrell’s grammar loses christology. I’m less sanguine about Moltmann than you are, and I’m confused here. Your first sentence suggests that I should not have associated you with theologians who are preoccupied with the suffering of God but toward the end you seem to find it unimaginable that we should speak of the “eternal Son” as impassible. But if God is simple — no essence/existence, form/matter, body/soul distinction, if God is the perfection of being — goodness, truth, etc, then creation cannot add anything to God and thus God must be impassible. There is nothing ‘outside’ God that could add something to him. I think we know this from the revelation to Moses and it fits with what Plato and Aristotle saw inchoately. God is always the measure, never the measured. The early Jewish Christians must have seen this God in Jesus to be able to worship him.

8. I trust you are aware that I do not fall in the category of those you claim make the world ‘necessary’ to God—as though *God must have a world in order to be God*. Can I be any clearer about that and why strong Trinitarian and high Christology demand the distinction between God’s essence and God’s actuality and the priority of freedom and love in the divine life? And yet I am puzzled as to why my distinguishing among the attributes—how and why we characterize the reality of God—simply gets ignored.

I do not think you would want to make creation necessary for God, but you do say God can be in “real relation to that which is not God” and I found that problematic. A “real relation” is, for Aquinas and much of the tradition, a defining mark of the Triune persons. They constitute ‘real relations’—they are of the same ‘substance’ and thus they are ‘subsistent relations.’ To say that God could have a ‘real relation’ with creation implies, it seems to me, that it could function as a person of the Trinity. Perhaps we are equivocating on the term ‘real relation’ here?

9. After my having performed these metaphysical/theological grammatics, might it become apparent to you that Paul Holmer is even now turning over in his grave at the thought that anyone might think I was his student! I revered the man, was indeed his TA for a couple of years, and we argued incessantly, but he and SK did teach me about the passions of faithfulness and about the intellectual conceit of supposing that anyone ever comes to faith because of superior metaphysical theories. Yet, Holmer never really dealt with the K of the *Postscript*. Holmer’s very early essay—the essay that brought him to the attention of Yale—demystifying classical Christology as too metaphysical is quite akin to Harnack and surprisingly to Bultmann. Evenso, Holmer had a wonderful knack for saying ‘why are you preoccupied with those ways of talking?—what work are they doing for you?’ and then he would demonstrably gag at the confusion he thought you were creating—the extent you were just putting more flies in the bottle! I am not sure who might be helped by your book; it left my head spinning; perhaps it was your own desperate attempt to grab the flies and extract them from the bottleneck of something called contemporary theology.

I’m more than willing to confess (even lament) that my book most likely will not help anyone. I think it is already stillborn. I was trying to show how the various theologians I

noted on pp. 89 and 90 could benefit from an engagement with each other and offer an alternative to the ever multiplying' contextual theologues I saw at Garrett, which I think end with solipsism. If I had not seen what I saw there, I would not have begun to question the turn to language and its use for a 'historicism' and 'culture' that I think in the end can do nothing but evacuate the church of content and make it nothing other than the 'secular' Christianity acceptable in so much of the academy today. I deeply appreciate Holmer, which I hope came across on pp. 218-225. I was trying to defend him against Dehart. I don't think he is a fideist. But I also think he didn't see the problems that the so-called 'end of metaphysics' created in someone like Rorty who might nonetheless read Wittgenstein like Holmer, but do so in order to show theology is meaningless. It is Rorty's use of Wittgenstein's quote on 218 that I find problematic.

10. It should be noted that I have abstained from any comment about the extraordinarily obfuscating way you have talked about 'reason', 'faith', 'fideism', 'private language'. But, there I did it—I just did make a comment!

I reckon you are correct about this. I rewrote those pages so many times trying to accomplish two things. First I get tired of Catholics accusing Protestants of fideism and so I wanted to problematize the category. Second, I wanted to recognize that there is really no such thing as fideism. In the end, I may have accomplished nothing but make things more confusing. That might not be all bad — but it is not what I intended. But in my defense – if the distinction and overlapping between reason and faith is as complex as someone like von Balthasar recognized against the tidy definitions of the manualist tradition, then maybe there is something to be said for a little bit of “obfuscating”?

11. But alas, Stephen, you did mention my work in your work and you thereby joined a minute cadre of folk who dared to think my work might even be mentionable or discussible or engaged forthwith. I have wrestled with whether my disgruntlement at this neglect is simply a matter of pride, and perhaps it is—can any of us really defend ourselves against accusations of being prideful?—but the odd persisting conviction I have is that I think the *Grammar* book might have helped the church come out from under its enthrallment both to liberalism/evangelicalism/American Christianity and to the resurgence of the Roman tradition the popes have tethered to the philosophy of Aquinas and papal infallibility—and, in dissolving those enthrallments, reinstall orthodox Trinity and Christology as the ground of the existence of the church. O.K., I admit that is ambitious, hyperbolic, and I beg you to forget it quickly. The truth is I wrote the *Grammar* book in the very modest desire that it might help some earnest souls who, by whatever happenstance, might trouble to read and ponder it, in the way it had helped me just to teach it and write it. Alas my modesty has been confirmed by the virtual silence! Yet, you did break the silence and it has been sobering!

This has been arduous for me and you surely do not have to respond in any detail. But it would be a gift to have a gesture somehow that you have received this email and have not completely condemned me to the fires of hell. ☺ Well, you do not really have to give up condemning me to hell; just leave me to my own devices.

I certainly do not condemn you to hell! I learned a great deal from your book — indeed much of what is in my *Speaking* book remains indebted to it. I pointed out one source of disagreement on the 'divine names.' I would like to be wrong about that. That and the distinction between God's essence and actuality were the two parts of your book I did find problematic. Alas I should have said much more about all that I found compelling.

Thanks for taking the time to write. It is an honor and you made me think about these things. I'm sure these responses are much too brief and careless. If I had more time — perhaps we can discuss this in the glorious rest of Christ with the saints. I do hope we still

get to engage in theological argument for God's sake.

Your friend,
Steve

Feb 19, 2010, Jones replied:

Dear Stephen:

Your remarks in response to my hectoring remarks are much appreciated and have helped me gain some perspective on your interests and mine. If I had just read your book without awareness of your having used the *Grammar* in teaching theology and without awareness of your slight but serious critique of what you thought was misguided in Yale, in Holmer, and in me, then I would have quietly put your book on the shelf and reiterated Bartleby the Scrivener's words "I prefer not to" engage Long in his quest for intelligibility in Xn discourse. That is, I would have done what I have done often in my professorial career—just leave others to their own devices. But, you might have surmised that my dialectical/disputatious inclinations are in fact so irreverently strong that responding to you the way I did was a moderating way in which I could hold those inclinations in check temporarily.

Hence, given my disputatious inclinations, when it finally became my project to teach and write systematic theology, I had to hold to a schedule of topics and not allow myself to grind all the axes there might be to grind in the history of the church and philosophy. In fact a few have thought my *Grammar* was rather irenic.[Julian Hartt] But some axe-grinding I do and you have touched on some of them. I will try now to speak more clearly on some of your concerns and my concerns, while acknowledging that **we professorial types all have ghosts and demons that haunt us and with whom we struggle mightily to subdue or just bring under a manageable peace.**

1. As for language matters, I make no use of the primary and secondary discourse distinction and its other variations, mainly because our capacity to talk *about* language and its uses runs across the varieties of ways in which 'semantics' is an issue—the virtual unlimited ways in which uses of language can be 'about' something; in which 'syntactics' is an issue—the way words get tied together in utterances of all sorts, in paragraphs, etc.; in which 'pragmatics' is an issue—the way language is always rooted into human social practices, speech-acts, actions, intentions, agreements/disagreements. In order to be able to deploy the various diagnostic insights/recommendations I have in mind relative to Xn discourses, I reasoned that I really needed to get folks' attention about the distinction between a 'token' and a 'sign' and alert them to the obvious fact, often ignored, that the same token can and often does have a variety of uses semantically, syntactically, and pragmatically as differing signs—not necessarily or always contradictory, just different. Or, put another way, the same word as *token* may often in another context and for another purpose be doing different work as a different *sign*.

You obviously should not find these distinctions confusing on the surface, though you may well find my construal of a particular set of issues disagreeable/objectionable. If this appears to

confirm your suspicion that I am wedded to primary/secondary understanding of language, then so be it for you, but not for me.

2. Of course these comments prepare the way, I hope, to talk about your, my, Thomas, and Whitehead—and many others—uses of the word ‘God’ or rough equivalents in other natural languages. The differences in uses must impress upon us that the really important questions pivot around the presumably normative ways in which the use of ‘God’ is governed. When you object about the use of the phrase ‘classical theism’ I can sympathize with your complaint that process folk use it like a whiplash of accusation. But for me the label simply and only denotes that understanding of deity as Pure Act of Being, immutable, impassible, and simple, the source of finite beings but utterly unaffected by such beings. That Aquinas never uses the phrase ‘classical theism’ seems to me quite beside the point, and Burrell has to come to grips with the fact that his Aquinas and he Burrell found great compatibility with some Islamic philosophers. That this basic ‘grammar’, in my sense, also appears repeatedly in all sorts of places among Xn theologians is virtually beyond challenged. As I said in the *Grammar*, the Calvinist philosophical theists are pursuing classical theism with the same enthusiasm as Thomists, the big exception being Wolterstorff.

Now, let us pause: how do we get started in this endeavor? Become philosophers beholden to ‘reason alone’ and ignoring any practices of a particular community of folk? I personally cannot simply suspend conversations with philosophers who pursue understanding in these ways, but it has always been more important to me to place the discussion in the context of the church. I find it helpful—note, I use the words ‘helpful’ and ‘useful’ much more often than I use ‘true/false’—as a Christian thinker to remember that the languages of Scriptural and ecclesial witnesses invariably have their location in relation to some given ‘world/culture’ and we dare not neglect that givenness. That applies to Aquinas, as well as to the process folk as well as to Barth...

As a working generalization for myself, it is fundamental to the church that its language arises out of the OT/Hebrew witness AND the normative witnessing in the NT to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth as Lord and Savior of the world. I think herein Barth is largely right: the church has used whatever metaphysical language seemed available at the time as the rules for interpreting the theological character of Jesus. The language that was more or less at hand in the post-apostolic church was platonic in character and the steadfastness of the God of Israel got tethered to ‘immutability, impassibility, and simplicity’ in ways quite predictable but in the long run obfuscating.

Trinitarian thinking emerges because the church believed that Jesus is of the very reality of God. [I have found in teaching in seminary and church that most folk are so untutored in Trinitarian thinking that it had never dawned on them that such thinking arises only and necessarily when the church has to come to grips with whether Jesus is or is not divine.] Of course, anyone who thinks about these issues today understands that ‘immutability, impassibility, and simplicity’ are negative attributes explicitly designed to rule out any trait as divine that might suggest change, finitude, and movement in time. But, lo and behold, Jesus is clearly a human being living in a particular time, acted upon by a host of other humans, and finally crucified dead. So, what do we do with the mutability, passibility, and complexity in time of Jesus of Nazareth? Well, maybe we

can invoke something like the ‘passibility of the impassible God’. Yes, yes? —what does it mean, what is its syntax, semantics, and can we pray it in worship without confusion?

Now here is where we differ: you want to use something like this to ‘save’ the ‘Divine Name’ [?], while I want to say much more radically we should allow the language of incarnation, of crucifixion, etc., to help us rethink who God is, or how we use the word ‘God’. Notice, if you do not strap the God of Israel to such impassibility, you have an understanding of God as acting, speaking to persons, giving commands, interacting, relating to the world of creatures and to Israel; certainly God is supreme and sovereign creator but in what sense? That is something Israel in fact wrestled with and there is no evidence in their Scriptures that it was best to think of God as impassible and unmoved and engaged only in a transcendent act of pure actuality.

Well, maybe the *hypostatic union* will save the utter impassibility of God and still have a triune life of God? Not the way you seem to interpret it, for your interest in preserving the divine impassibility seems to open up that vexatious controversy all over again of whether only the human reality suffered on the cross. When you say the ‘divine nature’ did not suffer or was not acted upon you seem to mean that in the same way you could say the ‘human nature’ did not suffer since it is just what it is immutably. But if you understand the *hypostatic union* as settling the question of **who is the subject Jesus** and mean that Jesus is the eternal Son of God—of one *ousia* with the Father/Creator—incarnate as a human being, then surely **this subject gets acted upon**. Really, Steve, I simply do not understand what you intend to affirm without granting my distinction between essence and actuality. It appears to me that the only consideration that prevents you from accepting my distinction is your linchpin belief that the “I am” of Exodus logically means ‘God’s essence is to exist as pure act’. That belief/rule is more decisive for you than anything that might be said about the reality of Jesus. When you say further that all the patristic theologians believed that is what “I am” means, I do not disagree with you, but I want further to say that many were they—inside and outside church—who did believe that about God but could not grant any divinity to Jesus! It seems to me you have not digested the significance of that historical fact. I wonder, as well, what you make of my laborious, many-pages-discussion of these issues on God [pp. 204-215] and how God can be understood as being-acted-upon and how the Immanent Trinity might really be an insightful doctrine about the inner-triune life of God in relation to the world as well as ‘before any world’.

Hence, it appears that the ‘metaphysics’ you yearn for as the theological linchpin is that interpretation of “I am”, and that metaphysical belief is why you think my language-talk hangs in thin air, without a firm basis in reality. That my talk is about language and not sufficiently about the reality of God? So, I talk about the language about God but never *assert* anything about God? My, my, I must have really been gassing and guessing on my own? On issues of ‘truth’ I refer you again to my discussion on pp.101-109.

I do not know whether there is much more to debate about this. I can give you God’s immutable triune essence that is God’s self-possession in all of God’s life, including God’s life with a world God freely and lovingly brought to be and in relation to which God has an economic life. Yes, it is a ‘real relation’, meaning that God is affected by the reality of the world. It is a weird grammar to me that would suggest that means that the world is a ‘predicate’ of God—that only makes sense if you are a Thomistic theist [one rejects the predicate] or a process theist [one accepts the

predicate] and I am proposing that Xn theology should be neither. Incidentally, I assume you understand that Spinoza too believed that God is pure act of being, *ens realissimum*, and for him the only imaginable/rational candidate for that was the world in its nontranscendable unity!

3. We should move on but in this same direction. I genuinely did not know that Garrett had been dominated by process theologians for decades and that you have been reacting strongly to their adamant metaphysical beliefs and they reacted strongly to your beliefs. These process folk can be obstreperous, but I have been living with them all my professorial life. I could say more here, but let me say the major difference among so-called process thinkers are what I call those who are ‘categorical process thinkers’ and those who are ‘metaphorical process thinkers.’ You press the metaphorical thinkers and they squirm here and there and finally say they think God changes in time, etc. The categorical thinkers, however, depend on Whitehead’s ‘categorical scheme’ of which God is affirmed to be the chief exemplar and never an exception. While it is the case that that God changes over time, that must be understood as necessary for God; God’s nature requires some world. I trust you understand that I explicitly reject that grammar.

As you can imagine, Schubert Ogden and I argued often while I was at Perkins from 1965-75, though he was gone to Chicago for a brief interlude during that time. In fact, we both lived in Richardson and often shared rides into school. I think Schubert and I also shared a deep respect for each other as brothers in the faith, however drastic might be our differences. In my second year at Perkins, I team-taught a seminar with Charles Hartshorne on philosophical concepts of God—students came to hear Hartshorne! [By that time Hartshorne had moved from Chicago to UT at Austin and was available to travel for weekly sessions at Perkins.] When I went to Christian Theological Seminary in 1988 I was walking right into the bastion of process thought in all of Disciplesdom! When I finally got the curriculum there revised to have a full year of systematic theology, I insisted that Clark Williamson—a dear friend and vigorous process theologian—and I team-teach it regularly. After his first lecture on Christology, Clark sheepishly looked at me said ‘that’s a pretty shabby Christology?’ to which I replied ‘you said it!’ But that is the point: process theologians of whatever variation are conceptually disabled to produce a substantive Christology and Trinitarian theology. Now to be honest, I think the same can be said for classical theists—of course they repeatedly go through the motions but it just sits there bursting with anomalies and confusions.

Well, at least you can understand from these comments why Holmer would not claim me as a protégé and would not have thought he and I were doing the same thing theologically! I have been hopeful that Don Saliers, Holmer’s real protégé, might engage the *Grammar* a bit, but no such luck. Incidentally, I am an admirer of Saliers’ work.

But, Steve, the history of the church is full of anomalies that just sit there. They can be endured if the whole social order simply permits them or least gives lip-service to them. But when culture changes, the anomalies stand out as odd. Think of the all comments about salvation, freedom, sin, ecclesial authority! So why do I think the word ‘freedom’ gets up and walks around on us? That is why I am trying to find ways of talking/thinking that are cognizant of the various uses of a word/token and therefore have various signs at work that need not be thought of as contradictory.

4. A word about Hans Frei. I really have never thought of myself as a bearer of his theologizing, though I have thought many were the good insights therein, especially on Christology and narrative. He and I were in fact quite close, but not as close as the generation just behind—Placher, Marshall, Tanner, Hunsinger, Wood. There were times I would read Frei and wonder ‘what is going on here?’ and would challenge him on it and he would grimace! He was supposed to be on my dissertation committee but pleaded to get off at the last minute. He was really important to my daughter Serene, and I was hoping to have a good chat with him while she was a student but he died suddenly before we could talk. Interestingly, when his wife was dispersing his library she called me at CTS to ask if I would like to have some of his books for the CTS library. To this day I have no idea why I came to her mind.

As for his protégés mentioned above, with the exception of Tanner, I have never had a real conversation with any of them. Placher was close at hand at Wabash while I was at CTS, and, as I indicate often in the *Grammar*, his writings are quite helpful. But he and I never quite engaged in face to face theologizing. I travelled to Dallas a couple of years ago to speak at Perkins and was looking forward to some good conversation with Abraham, Wood, and Marshall—none of whom had I ever previously met—about my little article on the Trinity. Marshall was unable to meet and talk, Abraham and Wood thought I was whistling at ghosts by critiquing the notion of ‘Pure Act’, saying they had never heard anyone defending that sort of talk today!! And honest to deity, Wood asked me why the Spirit should be in the Trinity! All in all there was no real engagement with my article.

Kathy Tanner is in another league, and she and I have had many wonderful conversations. In fact it was Tanner’s encouragement that led me to pursue preparing my lecture notes in systematic theology for publication! Even though I admire the brilliance of her book on creation and God, I do not think her account is helpful in understanding God’s actions upon or in the world—as I make evident in the *Grammar*. I have just ordered her latest book on Christology.

5. About Milbank and MacIntyre. Milbank in his first book on Social Theory is quite good but as he gets to the end it appears he thinks Christology is really important. But in his hands, as time passed, he never really got Christologically thick in any of his other works that I have read, and how could he with his firm Platonic commitments? MacIntyre I read feverishly years before *After Virtue*. He was really on target. But AV meandered, hesitated, lost its train of thought, though others thought it brilliant. One flaw, however, had emerged for me in every theory that thought virtue ethics could stand on its own feet—namely, how can you know what the virtue of justice is without some strong sense of what it means to *do justice*—or are commanded to do justice. Yet surely, the recovery of virtue considerations that Hauerwas had done is a net gain, and I think it helped my work in the *Grammar* on sanctification. But Mac later writes a book with a really marvelous title: *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, and I thought that is really on target, until I read his meanderings in the text itself. The title provoked much thought, but the book was a filibuster. [Later: I did recently give the book another reading, and if one can endure it, the last few chapters are worth the money.] Yes, I still try to read him from time to time. But I did not need him to tell me about the social conditions of intelligibility and practices; I had been working on those issues for decades.

But I would rather remain fixed on how the church exists through the ages as a faithful community, with a deep rationality that boldly confesses the triune God known in Israel and in Jesus the Jew. Which rationality? That of the church as confessionally recognizing that it has no non-reformable/infallible reasoning but nevertheless a reasoning that boldly and urgently confesses and shows forth the strange truth of God in Christ who will not let us go into the night without grace, even though in that night many are they who know not the grace—but ultimately they will. Is the ‘Divine Name’ grammar—which you emphasize—able to sustain that sort of rational hopefulness that might seem foolish to the world? This old curmudgeonly Protestant does not lament at all the passing of that presumed medieval consensus that seems so continuously attractive to Mac. And that is why Yoder and Barth are for me more important for the church’s rationality than Aquinas and the Romans. Rome is too burdened with the need to be infallibly right on far too much and too many items of the church’s witness to the world. Since I began these brief remarks herein with Milbank and MacIntyre, let me end it by saying that I think both aspire to being intellectually and philosophically dominating in such a way as to restore or confirm what they take to be orthodox Christianity as intellectually supreme. Isn’t that aspiration embarrassingly evident in Milbank’s immodest stepchild, David Hart? I really do not think Barth ever had that aspiration.

6. Just an interesting note: I checked Calvin’s Institutes in the latest English translation and there is only one reference to Ex 3.14-15, and it might permit Aquinas’ gloss but certainly would not require it.

So why I am rehearsing these experiences? It might help you understand how unengaged my theological work has been and why I thought that there were a few professors/theologians—such as you—who, having used the *Grammar*, must have had some sense of what I was up to. And then, to read your short critique in your recent book just triggered my over-reaction: is that what folks think I am really up to? The deafening silence of the many in the theological/professorial world would seem to confirm some judgment of negativity or irrelevance or ignorance attached to my writings. Yet, I am grateful that you did engage what you thought was my position/work.

You need not respond to these ramblings. But it would be nice to stay in touch. You have a high calling as a theologian and teacher of the faith.

But truly, thanks for taking some efforts with the *Grammar*; you stand in a class of great distinction with a numerical membership in the single digits. ☺

Under a separate format I am sending some recent writings that you might find interesting. [“Spiritual Formation and Christian Discourse: The Shaping Power of Christian Discourse”; “Salvation”; “Yoder and Stone-Campbellites: Sorting the Grammar of Radical Orthodoxy and Radical Discipleship”—all of which are included on my web site.]

Hope the troublings you mentioned earlier have smoothed out and all is well.

Your brother in faith, even in the differences,
Joe