DOI:10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00170.x

Phenomenal Theology

James P. Danaher

Abstract

We no longer believe that the mind is a blank slate that simply records sense-data as given. Over the last two centuries, we have become increasingly aware of the fact that we bring something to what is given to us in experience. It is what we bring to our experience in the form of our conceptual perspective that molds and shapes our understanding or interpretation of the experience. This is especially true of religious experience. What is given in our God experiences is from God, but our interpretive understanding and reaction to our God experiences are uniquely our own. This paper considers several aspects of religious experience from such a phenomenal perspective.

Keywords

Phenomenal reality, Scripture, Jonathan Edwards, Revelation, Perspectivalism.

Since the time of Immanuel Kant, we have understood that we bring something to our experience of the world and the world is not simply given. For Kant what we brought was a universal, conceptual hardware that was shared by all of humanity. With the 19th century we began to understand that this filter was not as universal as Kant had thought. Rather, the conceptual grid through which we filter our experience is relative to our respective cultures, historical epochs, and philosophies.

In the 20th century Ludwig Wittgenstein[1] showed us that much of what we had thought were metaphysical problems and part of the reality of the external world were really problems of language and traceable to the reality of our language communities. Additionally, the structuralists and poststructuralists of the 20th century have made us aware of the fact that words have their meaning, not because of their reference to things but their reference to concepts. Furthermore, these concepts do not simply have atomic meanings but take their

[1] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations.* Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1968.

© The author 2007. Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148, USA

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00170.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

meaning from their relationship to other concepts. The consequence of this is that our understanding of one concept is affected by our understanding of another concept. Since so many of these concepts are philosophically rich, and since they all affect each other, our minds are webs of understanding that are as unique as our fingerprints. Human fingers may all look alike when considered from a distance, but, on closer examination, no two are exactly alike.

By the second half of the 20th century, Thomas Kuhn[2] added to all of this by making us aware of the fact that our understanding of the world is always based on paradigms or theoretical models that further filter and mold our understanding. These theoretical models are not, and cannot be, chosen by some objective criterion but are based in some agenda. Aristotle, for example, imagined that the world was biological. Such a paradigm was coherent in that it was consistent with the rest of Aristotelian thought, but it also gave Aristotle and those who followed him the kind of understanding they desired. By contrast, Isaac Newton's paradigm was that of a machine, and that paradigm gave him and his followers the kind of understanding they desired. Newton's paradigm of the world as a machine provides a better model by which to pursue technological progress than did Aristotle's biological paradigm. Of course, if our interest is ecology rather than technological progress, it may be best to conceive the world according to a biological model.

Since such paradigms cannot find a rational ground in observation, but are rather based in some agenda, we need to be aware of those agendas that so greatly affect our understanding. Much of Michel Foucault's work had been to point out that many of the paradigms we inherit from our language communities and cultures were originally selected by the powerful because they served their interest and not because they best represent some objective reality. Of course, most of us are unaware of the agendas behind these paradigms and merely accept them as cultural norms. Once accepted, we then naively suppose that they represent something "real." This is the case not only with paradigms but with our concepts as well. They come to us through language acquisition and acculturation, but we remain oblivious to the agendas and philosophies at their base. The common notion is that philosophy is something we come to at the pinnacle of our thinking, but in fact philosophy is at the very base of all of our thinking, at least to the extent that at the base of our thinking are concepts that are philosophically loaded even if they go philosophically unexamined.

With these facts considered, what we had previously held to be our objective understanding of the world begins to deconstruct, and we

[2] Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962.

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00170.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

realize that the nature of language does not allow our understanding to be a perfect reflection of some objective reality. That, however, does not mean that language breaks down and communication becomes impossible. What has broken down is the myth that human beings can get to some objective reality that is unaffected by language and our perspectival understanding. What deconstructs is the myth that human language, and thus our understanding which is cast in language, are based upon an identity between words and objective reality. In truth, words are part of the noetic reality of our understanding and can never escape the understanding in order to get to some "thing" in itself.

The great revelation of our day is that the world, as we know it, is always filtered. We do not have access to an objective understanding of the world, and the most we can ever know is a phenomenal reality or reality as we conceive it. Furthermore, just as our understanding of the world is phenomenal rather than objective, so too is our understanding of God. Our theology will always be a phenomenal theology or a human perspective of who God is. Of course, we were not always aware of this.

In the past, our ancestors were unaware of all the filters that we now know exist. They thought that we did have something like an objective knowledge of both the world and God. For them, our understanding was, for the most part, objective and universal rather than unique to historical periods, cultures, or individual perspectives. Many bemoan the loss of such an objective and universal view of the world. They reason that if we are not able to know an ultimate, objective reality, we are not able to know God, since God is the ultimate, objective reality. This, however, is a mistake. It may have been Plato and Aristotle's ambition to know an ultimate objective reality but it should never have been the ambition of anyone who wishes to follow Jesus. In order to follow Jesus, what we want to know is not some objective reality but a correct perspective through which to understand our experience and relationship with God. This is the understanding Jesus offers.

Human language may not be capable of getting at objective reality but it is well suited to communicate our unique conceptualizations to one another. Language is still very much suited for that purpose. Although Jacques Derrida may claim that language is not suited to accurately describe the world as we had traditionally supposed it to be, that does not prevent him, or anyone else, from communicating his unique conceptual understanding. When I read Derrida, I am convinced that language cannot reflect or mirror objective reality, but I am also convinced that language is able to allow Derrida to communicate his unique perspective. For the purpose of communicating a unique personal understanding, language is still intact. In fact, it is better than ever. Since we are now aware that our conceptual

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00170.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

understandings are not universal, but are unique to our own perspective, we are now sensitive to certain difficulties in communication which went unnoticed in the past. We now know, as never before, that if we want to intimately know another person there is a uniqueness to their understanding which we must grasp. In the past this uniqueness was not so obvious. Since much of our understanding is shared because of language acquisition and education, it was assumed that our understanding was common and universal. Today that innocence has been lost, and we have come to realize that people often have very different conceptual understandings. Such different understandings, however, are able to be communicated as long as we begin by acknowledging the potential for such differences.

Such contemporary insights are enormously beneficial in attempting to know another person, especially the person of Jesus. In attempting to know and follow Jesus, it is essential that we understand that what he is attempting to communicate to us is not some objective reality but rather his unique conceptualization of who God is and who we are in relationship to God. What Jesus gives us is not knowledge of who God objectively is, but a correct perspective or understanding from which to interpret our God experiences. In order to know and follow Jesus, we need to have his perspective. We need to bring to our every experience the perspective and understanding that Jesus brought to his experiences. This is what we seek to know. It is not knowledge of who God objectively is, which we could never take in, but the correct perspective that God desires us to have concerning our relationship with him.

This humbling but enlightened view means that our experience of God involves two things. It involves both what God is doing and our conceptual understanding which interprets what God is doing. While the experience may be from God, the interpretation of the experience is largely our own and, at least initially, much more human than divine.

This view, that we bring something to our God experience, and thus our experience of God is a composite of both what God is doing and our conceptualization of what God is doing, is not new. Something very much like what we are explaining was articulated by Jonathan Edwards over two hundred years ago.

Jonathan Edwards

Edwards was one of the key figures during The Great Awakening in the New England colonies of the 18th century. During that revival, there were many strange manifestations among the people taking part in it. Unlike the critics of The Great Awakening, Edwards believed that the things these people were experiencing were from God, but he equally believed that the matter was complicated because of what we

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00170.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

brought to those experiences. Furthermore, in contrast to his medieval predecessors and Enlightenment contemporaries, Edwards did not see Christianity as a purely cognitive matter and thought that Christianity possessed a very important emotive element as well.[3] For Edwards, a cognitive understanding was not the whole story. It was more important how one felt about what they understood. "Any man could understand intellectually what a verse in the Bible or a doctrine of theology said, but not all could feel what it meant."[4]

For Edwards this emotive element was rather complex. Although he believed that God could touch us in supernatural ways that would stimulate the emotions, most emotions have a cognitive element as well. A small child would not feel a sense of heroic awe in witnessing or thinking about people giving their lives for some noble cause, because the small child lacks the conceptual framework that would be necessary for such an emotive experience. This conceptual element may be the most significant determinant concerning emotions, since

> . . . a man is affected by – that is, he loves or hates – not things as they are in themselves, but things as he perceives them.[5]

We perceive things, not as they are given, but as we conceptualize them. This is true of any experience, but Edwards thought it was particularly complicated with emotive experience. Unlike our experience of the physical world, with emotive experience there could be a variety of different stimuli, and depending upon what we judge the stimuli to be will have a great effect upon our conceptualization of the experience. Unlike physical experience, in which case it is rather easy to discern between being in a fire and imagining that you are in a fire, it is not so easy to discern the origin of emotive experience.

The sorting out of the source and meaning of various emotions was a very real and pressing problem to Edwards. He believed that The Great Awakening was from God, but he did not want to defend everything associated with The Great Awakening as from God. Edwards was aware that the imagination was also involved in what people were experiencing, but that did not mean that their experience was nothing but imagination. Edwards would argue that, although the imagination was certainly at work in the interpretation and response to what people were experiencing, that did not mean that what stimulated the emotion was not God.[6]

In attempting to sort this out, Edwards agreed with his critics that all of the physical manifestations experienced by those individuals

[3] Edwards, Jonathan. *The Religious Affections.* Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, (1997): 24.

[4] Miller, Perry. *Jonathan Edwards.* Toronto: William Sloan Associates, Inc., (1949): 65.

[5] Ibid., 152–53.

[6] Ibid., 170.

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00170.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

associated with The Great Awakening were purely natural and a psychological response to emotions rather than emotions themselves.[7] Edwards argued that people naturally responded when they experience emotions and their response is neither the emotion itself nor is it any indication of the origin of the emotion. Thus, Edwards separated the emotion itself (or pure experience), from our conceptualization of it, and our physical reaction to it. The experience may be from God but the conceptualization of it, and the response to it, is our own. With such a view, Edwards was able to maintain a middle ground whereby he could accept an emotive experience as being from God, without having to accept every human response to such emotions as a manifestation that was heaven sent.

Edward's separation of the stimuli from our conceptualization and reaction to it is very much like the 21st century, phenomenal view we are setting forth here. Such a view sees God's work in our lives as always convoluted. It always has to be interpreted, and our response or lack of response also plays a part, although it is not God's part. Many people have difficulty with such a view. They wish to imagine that whatever God is involved in is pure God and nothing of us. It certainly is understandable that we would be tempted to think this way, for to understand God's work in our lives as a phenomenal convolution of both what God is doing, and our own interpretation and reaction to what God is doing makes matters awfully muddy. Nevertheless, muddy as it may be, this seems to be the reality in which we find ourselves. This is the reality into which God has been pleased to place us, and understanding the phenomenal nature of this reality goes a long way to explain why our lives are not as ideal as we think they should be in light of our surrender to God and his purposes for our lives.

Our Muddy, Phenomenal Reality

With the surrender that begins the Christian life, we often imagine that, since God is now at work in our lives, our future will be very different from our past. Of course, there is some good reason for this belief but it is certainly not that simple. For one thing, the truth is that God has always been at work in our lives, and our surrender and entry into the Christian life is merely a matter of our becoming aware of God's work in our lives. The born again experience is phenomenal in so far as it involves both the fact that God is at work in our lives (which has always been the case) and our awareness of God being at work in our lives. Although the born again experience, and the Christian life that follows, is made up of both these elements, it is

[7] Ibid., 169–70.

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00170.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

quite natural for us to collapse the two and imagine a single, objective God experience.

When we experience God and his love for us, for the first time, it is natural for us to think that God has decided to love us. If that experience was preceded by some repentance on our part, we suppose that the reason God has decided to start loving us was because of our repentance. Of course, this is all the result of what we bring to the experience rather than what God is doing. The fact is that God has always loved us, and our first experience of that love is just our awareness of that love. It is easy, however, to believe that since this is the first time we have experienced God's love, it must be the first time God has actually loved us. This is very far from the truth, and it gives us a wrong perspective of our relationship with God. God does not decide to start loving us at a certain point because we have accepted his forgiveness. Love always precedes and is the thing that initiates true forgiveness. God has always loved us. We are his beloved sons and daughters, and he has always had a plan for our lives whether we were aware of it or not. From our perspective, however, that love and plan for our lives is new and originates with our awareness of it. Our mistake is to think that our awareness of God's love mirrors some objective reality rather than being merely our awareness of that reality.

This is the phenomenal nature of the Christian life. It is not that we enter into God's love, but that we enter into an awareness of that love. Of course, that awareness is only possible because of the objective reality that God does in fact love us, but it is the awareness of that love that creates the new reality into which we enter and begin the transformation which is the Christian life. The rest of the world may live in God's love, but those who have begun the transformation process, and are being made into the likeness of his son, live in the awareness of that love. Since it is our awareness, or lack of awareness, of what God is doing, rather than what God is actually doing that shapes our reality, it should not be surprising that our lives are the way they are. In spite of God being at work in our lives, that fact is marred by our ill-conceived understanding of, and our inappropriate reaction to, what God is doing. Thus, what we actually experience are not God's blessings but our awareness and understanding of God's blessings. Since these two things are often quite different, our collapsing them, and imagining that they are simply the work of God, produces problems. By seeing God's work in our lives as all God and nothing of us, it is hard to understand why our lives are still less than ideal. What very naturally crosses our mind is that there must be something lacking in either God's goodness or wisdom. Of course, it is not something in God that is flawed but rather the understanding that we bring to our God experience. It is our ill-conceived understanding that creates the mess that makes God's work seem less than ideal.

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00170.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

The same is true concerning our attempts to bless others. Our motive may be good, and God is certainly at work in our ministry and wishes to use us in order to bless others, but the outcome may not always be what God intents because what God is doing is being filtered through the understanding we bring to that experience. When we attempt to bless others, the problem is doubled, since ministry is marred by both our misunderstanding of what God is doing and the ill-conceived understandings of the persons to whom we are ministering. It certainly would be an advantage in ministering, or in being ministered to, if we all had an understanding of the phenomenal nature of this Christian reality. Such an understanding would make us much more tolerant and less disappointed when ministry does not produce the results we desire.

The place that we can perhaps best see the phenomenal nature of the Christian life is in our reading and understanding of Scripture. Although we may all be prone to equate our understanding or interpretation of the Scripture with the Scripture itself, the truth is that it is always our understanding of the text and never the text itself that we encounter. We interpret the Scripture through a host of concepts and theories that are not God-given but are the product of human forces at work within our language communities and cultures. Thus, our understanding of Scripture is a composite of what is given in Scripture and what we bring to the text in the form of our conceptual understanding. The Scripture has to be interpreted, and therefore the Scripture, as we know it, is phenomenal.

No one objectively reads the Bible just as no one objectively studies the physical universe. We always focus our attention upon what is most important to us and marginalize what is not important to our interests. In our study of the physical world, we focus on those aspects that are most relevant to us as a species. As individual scholars and scientists we focus on those areas that are of most interest to us. The same is true with our reading of the Scripture. We pick out what is dearest to us. The pacifist finds Scripture to support her pacifism and the elitist focuses on Scripture that speak of the elect. Even the same person over the course of their life may change perspectives, thus causing certain Scriptures to increase or diminish in importance. When I first became aware of God's presence in my life, the Scripture which I found most beautiful was, "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior which is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11)." That Scripture jumped out and had special meaning to me because when I first became aware of God's presence in my life, what I was most interested in was my own salvation and promise of eternal life. Later, as I became more aware of the fact that God's presence in my life was ultimately intended to make me more after his likeness, other Scriptures loomed large.

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00170.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

If this is the inescapable reality of the human condition, and all we can ever know is a phenomenal reality, it would make sense that this is the reality that God would reveal to us in the Scripture. Indeed, if the whole of our spiritual reality is, like the rest of our reality, phenomenal, then why would the Scripture itself be anything but a revelation of a phenomenal reality.

The Phenomenal Nature of Scripture

When we thought that we lived in an objective reality, largely untainted by our own perspective, it was natural to suppose that the Biblical revelation was equally a revelation of objective reality, or the reality of who God objectively was. Since we now know that the nature of the reality into which God has placed us is a phenomenal reality and objectivity is beyond us, it should be obvious that the nature of the reality that is revealed to us in Scripture would be phenomenal as well.

As a phenomenal revelation of who we understand God to be rather than some impossible notion of who God objectively is, the Bible begins by portraying what is typically our initial, ill-conceived notion of God. The notion of God most of us begin with is that of some ultimate authority intent upon law and order. It is no wonder that this is where we begin in our understanding of God, since a god of wrath, intent upon law and order, is what our experience with human authority has brought us to anticipate. Human authority, from our earliest experience, has wished us to behave in a certain way. When we do not behave as the authority wishes, we are very often punished. The authority of parents, teachers, police, and judges all communicate the same message, so it is quite natural that this is what we initially expect from God. Therefore, it should not be surprising that this is the way God is initially depicted in Scripture. This is not to say that the Scripture is the product of human beings expressing who they imagine God to be. It is rather God's revelation of who human beings imagine God to be, and how God continues to work in their lives in order to reveal a God very different from who they had imagined. Such a revelation of who we imagine God to be quite appropriately begins with an initial understanding of a God intent upon law and punishment. As communication with God continues, however, the people depicted in Scripture begin to get a better perspective of who God is. This mirrors what we experience in our individual lives. As individuals, our experience with God changes our perspective and understanding of God. This is the progressive revelation that is both depicted in Scripture and experienced in our own individual lives.

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00170.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

This idea of a progressive revelation should not be taken as somehow less than God's inspired revelation. The Scripture is perfect and exactly what God wishes to reveal. But what God wishes to reveal, as we said before, is not some impossible notion of who God objectively is, which we could never take in, but rather who human beings should understand God to be. The Scripture also reveals how God patiently works with our ill-conceived notions in order to slowly bring us to a better understanding of who we are and who he is to us. This phenomenal view also gives us a beautiful picture of how we are to be like our heavenly father and patiently minister to people who, like ourselves in earlier times, had ill-conceived notions of ourselves and God.

God may be the same yesterday, today, and forever, but our understanding of God is not, and, hopefully, we are growing in our knowledge of our relationship to him. This is the progressive, historical revelation that the Bible depicts. It is revelation of a people who, having become God-aware, have their perspective of who God is slowly changed over time. This progression, which is the spiritual life, ultimately culminates in the Jesus revelation that God is "our father."

The fact that there is a progression to our understanding of who God is, and who we are, should not be taken to mean that the Jews of the Old Testament had less of a relationship with God than the New Testament Christians. There were people in the Old Testament who had a rich understanding of who God was and understood his mercy in a way that many Christians today do not. Very few of us fully take in the Jesus revelation, and the Bible depicts human beings at all sorts of places in their journey toward that ultimate revelation. All of those places are part of a progressive process of coming to know God. The process, however, is most often a matter of two steps forward and one step back. Of course, God loves us even in our one step back. He loves us even with our ill-conceived notions of who he is. We all begin with a wrong understanding, but God loves us just as much at the early stages of our relationship with him as at the latter stages. Of course, the fullness of life, as we experience it, only comes with the Jesus revelation that God is our father and nothing can separate us from his love. Without that understanding, human life will always be less than what God intents for us.

So although God loves us, both as individuals and as a species, in spite of our misunderstanding of who he is, the fullness of life only comes by understanding who we truly are in relationship to him. This understanding is the Jesus perspective that God is our father, and we are his beloved sons and daughters. In order that we would know the fullness of life and come to dwell in the ultimate phenomenal reality God has for us, we need to bring to our every circumstance that perspective that God is our father and nothing can separate us

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00170.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

from his love. Jesus lived constantly out of that perspective, but most of us who consider ourselves his followers have only a very limited sense of the fact that God is as personal as our own father. Likewise, although there were people throughout the Bible who had a very rich relationship with God, it was not until Jesus that we get the revelation of God as "our father."

Nothing like Jesus' revelation of God as "our father" appears in the Old Testament, and it was *the* scandalous blasphemy for which the religious people of Jesus' day wished to put him to death. Certainly there were Old Testament Scriptures that could have led us to believe that we were God's beloved sons and daughters, but no one seemed able to really take that in until Jesus. Until Jesus, no one brought that perspective to their every experience. Of course, this is the ultimate perspective that we are to bring to our every experience in order to know the fullness of life that God has for us in Christ Jesus. This is the perspective that will create the ultimate, phenomenal reality in which God wishes us to dwell.

The Benefits of a Phenomenal Theology

A phenomenal theology has some important benefits. The first is that it places Jesus at the center of our faith rather than a certain theory about how to interpret the Bible. When we place, at the center of our faith, the theory that we need to interpret the entire Bible as a revelation of who God objectively is, it has the devastating consequence of neutralizing the words of Jesus.

Often, when I mention to people who consider themselves followers of Jesus certain things that Jesus said, they immediately respond by referring to other portions of Scripture that contradict Jesus' words. Their purpose is to say that Jesus couldn't really have meant that, and we really don't have to love our enemies because, in other places in Scripture, God tells us to kill our enemies. It seems that we would much rather live our lives according to a particular theory about what it means for the Bible to be the perfect and infallible word of God than to let the words of Jesus create our perspective and thereby transform our reality.

Jesus tells us to follow him – to live as he lived and have the relationship with God that he had. Seventeen times throughout the Gospels Jesus says, "follow me."[8] We can avoid following Jesus, however, by looking to other portions of Scripture that represent a more human perspective of who God is rather than the divine perspective Jesus brings. Without a phenomenal theology which sees

[8] Matt. 4:19, 8:22, 9:9, 16:24, 19:21, Mark 2:14, 8:34, 10:21, Luke 5:27, 9:23, 9:59, 18:22, John 1:43, 10:27, 12:26, 13:36, 21:19.

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00170.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Scripture as a progressive revelation culminating in the Jesus revelation of God as "our father," we can see the fact that God loves his enemies and is "kind to the ungrateful and wicked"[9] as representing one side of God, but there is another side to God that tells us to kill our enemies, including their women and children.[10] Such a view allows us to suppress the words of Jesus and understand them as only part of the revelation of who God is. God is not only "kind to the ungrateful and wicked," but he also hates his enemies and destroys them, or tells his people to destroy them, as we see in the early books of the Old Testament. Such a perspective allows us to hate our enemies and feel righteous and Godly in our hatred. We can hate our enemies because even God hates his enemies.

By contrast, if we see Jesus as the complete and ultimate revelation of who we should understand God to be, we are without excuse and have no way to claim that our hatred is righteous. Again, this is not in any way to say that the Scripture in its entirety is not God-breathed and inerrant. The Scripture is God's perfect and exact revelation, but what God wants to reveal is who human beings understand God to be. Of course, such a revelation will contain points of confusion along with the occasional great insight into the nature of God. The great benefit of such a view is that it places the perspective of the God-man, Jesus far above all the other revelations. Such a view best enables us to do as Jesus commands. That is, to follow him. If our purpose is to bring people to know Jesus and thus come into the fullness of life that he promises, then a phenomenal theology is much more conducive to that purpose than the theory that the entire Bible is a picture of who God objectively is.

Of course, what we are offering here is also a theory about how to interpret the Bible. The difference, however, is that our phenomenal view is much more compatible with what we have come know about the nature of the human condition. Furthermore, and more importantly, it makes it easier for us to understand a major point of Christian orthodoxy. That is, that Jesus is the ultimate and entire revelation of all that God wishes to reveal to us. It is not that Jesus represent one side or aspect of God and Moses and David represent another. Jesus is the complete revelation, and there is nothing concerning what God wishes to reveal to us about himself that is not found in the Jesus revelation. We are seduced and led away from this truth when we treat the entire Scripture as an objective revelation of who God is.

Another benefit to a phenomenal theology is that it allows us to understand that there are many places along the path that is our relationship with God, and we are able to experience God's love from

[9] Luke 6:35.
[10] Joshua 6:21.

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00170.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

any place along that path. Such an understanding should sufficiently humble us and reduce our confidence in the particular place we feel so privileged to find ourselves. Such a humbling should promote unity among God's children. One of the things that has separated the body of Christ for two thousand years has been the belief that God's word and our understanding of God's word are one and the same thing. By embracing a phenomenal theology, we recognize that there is a great difference between the two, and that my understanding of God and the Scripture are very much determined by my all-too-human perspective. A phenomenal theology exposes the fact that when we claim to be defending God and his truth, it is often ego that we seek to defend. By exposing our egos, we are sufficiently humbled, and, as our confidence in our own understanding is reduced, we are able to join together in the kind of unity God desires for his children.

James P. Danaher. Ph.D.
Professor of Philosophy
Head, Department of Philosophy
Nyack College
Nyack, NY 10960
Email: James.Danaher@nyack.edu

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00170.x Published online by Cambridge University Press