

The continuity of prophecy

by Douglas E. Cox

The metaphor of a chain, made of a series of links connected together, is similar to the metaphor of a river, when applied to the revelations of God in scripture. There are links in the later scriptures, to earlier ones, and the themes found in Genesis are developed throughout the Bible. This concept of a chain as a metaphor that applies to prophecy was expressed in a 1842 book on the prophet Obadiah, by Carl Paul Caspari. The following is a translation: [1]

The Old Testament prophets form a regular succession; they are members of an unbroken continuous chain; one perpetually reaches forth the hand to another. The later prophets had always either heard or read the prophecies of the earlier, and had these deeply impressed upon their minds. When, therefore, the Spirit of God came upon a prophet and irresistibly impelled him to prophesy (Amos iii. 8), it naturally happened, first, that here and there, sometimes more, sometimes less, he clothed what the Spirit imparted to him, in the words of one or other of the prophets, he had heard or read—the words of his prophetic forerunner thus cleaving to his memory, and forming part of the materials of utterance of which the Spirit availed himself; and second, that the later prophet attached himself to the prophetic views of the earlier, and in the power of the prophetic Spirit, which descended on him from above and wrought in his soul, either confirmed them anew by a fresh promulgation, or expanded and completed them. For the most part, the coincidence in thought and expression, is found united in the prophets.

The principle of continuity of prophecy is supported in the New Testament in several ways. It is expressed in the statement of James in Acts 15:18, "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world." Paul said the promise to Abraham, that in his seed all nations will be blessed, was the gospel. [Galatians 3:8] And in the Old Testament, Amos said, "Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets." [Amos 3:7] The

teachings of Jesus and the apostles confirm the things that were revealed to the prophets. Jesus said, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil." [Matthew 5:17]

In his first epistle, the apostle Peter said the prophets wrote about the gospel – *"the salvation of your souls"*; they wrote by *"the Spirit of Christ which was in them,"* and their message was intended for the church, –*"unto us they did minister"*; not to themselves, or to people of their own time. [1 Peter 1:9-12]

F. David Farnell discussed the continuity of prophecy in the Old and New Testaments in the second of a series of four articles on the question: "Is the Gift of Prophecy for Today?" He wrote: [2]

Crucial to understanding New Testament prophecy is the direct relationship this gift sustains to Old Testament prophecy. New Testament prophecy did not develop in isolation from the phenomenon of Old Testament prophecy. As noted in the previous article in this series, the postapostolic early church affirmed the idea of a fundamental continuity between Old and New Testament prophets. Montanism or the 'New Prophecy' was labeled a heresy because of its departure from standards of prophecy reflected in the Old Testament. The church judged New Testament prophets on the basis of its understanding of Old Testament prophetic phenomena and requirements. Current novel attempts at redefining the nature of New Testament prophecy (dividing it into two contrasting forms) result from an erroneous assumption of a sharp discontinuity between New Testament and Old Testament prophecy. An examination of the relationship between the two is needed to understand properly the nature and function of prophecy in the New Testament church era.

A revival of the gift of prophecy in the last days is one of the things that the prophets foretold. Farnell wrote: [3]

The revival of the prophetic gift was promised in Joel 2:28-32. Earlier in that chapter, desolation in the eschatological "day of the Lord" was promised for the nation because of their failure to repent (vv. 1-11). Yahweh pleaded for His disobedient and idolatrous people to return to Him (vv. 12-14). The prophet cried out for the people to gather in a solemn assembly as an act of repentance, so that Yahweh would spare them (w. 15-17). Pity was promised to the people if they would respond to the Lord's instructions (v. 18).

In Joel 2:28-32, Yahweh promised Israel that in a future time He would pour out His Spirit in abundance on His people. A spiritual abundance is predicted that would be far greater than any mere physical blessings that could be associated with the promised "latter rains" (vv. 22-26). The Holy Spirit would be given in unparalleled power and ways in the land of Israel. This spiritual restoration and outpouring of Yahweh's Spirit on His people is mentioned frequently in the Old Testament. The same Spirit who empowered the Old Testament prophets is promised once again to return.

Farnell noted that the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus and his ascent to the throne of God was interpreted as a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy by Peter. He wrote: [4]

The phenomena at Pentecost were connected by Peter to the expected messianic times in the "latter days" (... , Acts 2:17; cf. Joel 2:28). Emphasis on fulfillment is heightened by his use of "the latter days," which brings out the meaning of "afterwards" in the Masoretic and Septuagint texts ... As Marshall notes, "Peter regards Joel's prophecy as applying to the last days, and claims that his hearers are now living in the last days. God's final act of salvation has begun to take place."

This emphasis on fulfillment is also heightened by Peter's particular focus on the revival of prophesying, which was promised in the Old Testament. He did this by adding the phrase "and they will prophesy" ... in Acts 2:18 to highlight the restoration of the Old Testament gift of prophecy.

Farnell pointed out that the events described in Acts 2 demonstrate the continuity of prophecy in the New Testament era and that of the Old Testament. He wrote: [5]

By quoting Joel 2:28-32 in Acts 2:17-21, Peter demonstrated that the early church was experiencing an unprecedented outpouring of God's Spirit, which was manifested through the return of the prophetic gift among God's people. This return of prophecy was a direct result of Jesus' ascension and exaltation to the right hand of God as the promised Messiah (Acts 2:33).

In light of this, Joel 2 and Acts 2 establish a fundamental continuity between Old and New Testament prophecy. "Thus, here we have prophecy of the Old Testament type entering into the New Testament era. And this is according to Peter's divinely inspired interpretation of Joel. . . . This establishes a fundamental continuity linking Old and New Testament prophecy. . . . This divinely expected prophetic gift appears in numerous places in Acts, 1 Corinthians, and other New Testament books." New Testament prophets and prophecy stood in direct line with their Old Testament counterparts who proclaimed God's message and will to the people of God. Therefore New Testament prophecy is fundamentally a development and continuation of Old Testament prophecy.

Farnell discussed several prophets who lived in New Testament times, whose ministries followed the pattern of Old Testament prophets in various ways. They include Zacharias, John the Baptist, Agabus, and the Apostle John. In the conclusion of his article he wrote: [6]

The fundamental continuity of Old Testament and New Testament prophecy was demonstrated in several ways in the New Testament. As such, it stands in direct contradiction to recent attempts to bifurcate the New Testament prophetic gift into two distinct forms such as authoritative apostolic prophecy and nonauthoritative congregational prophecy. The case for nonauthoritative "congregational" prophecy in 1 Corinthians 12-14 and elsewhere in Scripture incorrectly posits a strong discontinuity between Old Testament and New Testament prophecy. Such a view does injustice to the fact that New Testament prophecy is founded on and has a significant continuity with the Old Testament prophetic phenomena and experience. Such a dichotomy also results in the assertion that New Testament prophecy contained fallible revelation, which in itself is a contradiction in terms.

Farnell's argument supporting the continuity of prophecy agrees with the apostle Peter's statement that the Spirit of Christ was in the prophets, and with Paul's statement that the prophets and apostles are the foundation of the church. [Ephesians 2:20]

The prophet Isaiah, who refers to prophetic rivers in several prophecies, also revealed the continuity of prophecy when he said the word of the Lord has to be understood "precept upon precept." That is very similar to the metaphor of a chain, each link being connected to another. God's revelations were given over many centuries; thus he refers to "stammering lips." The message is not fully understood, until it is fully expressed and completed, by Christ and the apostles, and by the Spirit, as revealed in the New Testament. And it is given in "another tongue," which is the language of symbols, parables, and metaphors. These principles discredit the literalist approach, the mantra of dispensationalism.

Isaiah 28:9-11

Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts.

For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little: For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people.

References

1. Carl Paul Caspari. Uer Prophet Obadiab. Leipzig. 1842. pp. 21. 22. Tr. by Patrick Fairbairn, Prophecy viewed in respect to its distinctive nature, its special function, and proper interpretation p. 194.
2. F. David Farnell. The Gift of Prophecy in the Old and New Testaments. *Bibliotheca Sacra*. Oct.–Dec. 1992. p. 387.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*