Elim Hiu


Tongues and prophecy are not among the most familiar of experiences for Christians today; nor are tongues and prophecy the most enthralling topics for the professional guild of biblical scholars. Luke T. Johnson’s book *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity: A Missing Dimension in New Testament Study* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) is correct in its assessment that the academic study of Christianity has tended toward discussions of theology and institutional development, not religious experiences. Yet there are still churches in which tongues and prophecy are normal, and the number of books offered on the market regarding tongues and prophecy indicates no shortage of interest on the popular front. Elim Hiu’s book is a welcome contribution that offers sound scholarship for the guild and sober understanding for churches.

The academic and religious integrity of Hiu’s contribution is suggested by the title and subtitle, which delineate the scope of the book: *Regulations Concerning Tongues and Prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14.26–40: Relevance Beyond the Corinthian Church.* Hiu does state explicitly in the last paragraph of the concluding chapter, as well as in the Introduction, that his historical-exegetical investigation and conclusion do not intend “to make any application to the situation in twentieth-century churches” (197–98). Indeed, Chapter 5 makes it clear that the book’s subtitle refers to Hiu’s comparison of the church in Corinth with other churches found in the New Testament, not with churches today. Nevertheless, Hiu’s exegetical arguments provide interpretative insights throughout the book that are rife with theological and practical wisdom for churches in all times and places.

The first three chapters serve as propaedeutic to the main objective of Hiu’s book, that is, to investigate Paul’s instructions regarding tongues and prophecy in 1 Cor. 14:26–40. Understanding tongues and prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14 as ecstatic gifts demonstrating experiences of the supernatural, Hiu offers in Chapter 1 a brief religionsgeschichtliche survey of possible Hellenistic and Jewish influences on Corinthian ecstatic speech. From examining a variety of classical and Hellenistic Greek texts as well as Old Testament and intertestamental Jewish texts, Hiu concludes that glossolalia, as “unintelligible speech that was a means of communicating with God, did not exist outside Christianity” (38). Although arguing for the uniqueness of glossolalia, Hiu points out that there are significant continuities between Judaism and early Christianity regarding the characteristics of prophecy.
Chapter 2 offers a brief review of glossolalia in the New Testament with particular interest in the purpose, nature, and function of glossolalia. While examining texts from Mark, 1 Peter, and Acts, Hiu devotes the majority of the chapter to relevant texts from 1 Corinthians 12-14. Whereas Chapter 1 demonstrated glossolalia to be uniquely Christian, this chapter contends that it was not unique to Corinth. Significant in this chapter is the conclusion that interpreted tongues in Corinth are basically equivalent to prophecy, especially given their common function of edifying the church, which sets the proper context for understanding the regulations in 1 Cor. 14:26-40.

Chapter 3 examines prophecy in the New Testament through evidence from even more texts beyond 1 Corinthians 12-14 than in Chapter 2. Hiu argues that the New Testament and Judaism shared a common understanding of prophecy that included revelation, prediction of the future, and divine inspiration conveying God’s words for “advancing God’s plan or people” (103).

The first three chapters are appropriately abbreviated because their purpose is to sketch hermeneutically the historical and exegetical landscape required for understanding the Corinthian regulations regarding glossolalia and prophecy. Notwithstanding this brevity, Hiu covers diverse territories and minute details that are worthy of further examination. When fully engaged in understanding the regulations in 1 Cor. 14:26-40 concerning tongues and prophecy, Chapters 4 and 5 present previous scholarship even more thoroughly than the preceding chapters. These two chapters on the Corinthian regulations and their significance for other churches in the New Testament provide detailed exegetical analysis and a rich variety of interpretative proposals that could frame and fill our understanding of the significant issues in the text (e.g. key terminology, the identity of the interpreters of tongues).

Chapter 4 begins commendably by accentuating, as does the entire book, the importance of grasping the content of 1 Cor. 14:26-40 in proper context, like the immediate textual context(s), the broader context of “the whole regulation of the Corinthian worship service” (195), the reality of conflict in Corinth (whether within the church or with Paul), and the cultural context of the Greco-Roman world. Hiu casts this contextual emphasis as the key hermeneutical net to cover all the specific regulations, including the debated matter of women and prophecy. Navigating through various knotty issues, Hiu concludes in Sachexegese or Sachkritik fashion that all the specific regulations (e.g. the number and sequence of speakers) depend on the fundamental apprehension that orderly worship is necessary for the edification of the church, which is the ultimate principle articulated in 1 Cor. 14:26, 33a, 40 and underlying the differences in non-Corinthian churches in the New Testament.