

Orthodox Theological Criteria from 1 Peter for Women's Ordination in the Church

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Introduction

The issue of women's ordination in the Eastern Orthodox Church involves not only theology, church tradition and history, it also includes society, secular society in particular. In 1976 at the Agapia consultation for Orthodox Christian women, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel commented that silence had been imposed upon Orthodox females "not by the genuine tradition of the Church, but by social customs and conventions."¹ Secular society holds and expresses views on matters pertinent to the issues involved in ordination, such as male and female identity, leadership structure, and human value. Most importantly, these views often influence the church.

Orthodox theologians bolster these claims regarding the significance of secular society on the church. Kalliope Bourdara writes, "In today's society there is a tragic denial of the value of human life. I believe that we Orthodox have a duty to uphold the value of the human person, female as well as male. . . . the church must always test over and over again the realities, the opinions, and the effects that fail to correspond to un-shakable theological and ecclesiological principles, but which have insidiously crept in from elsewhere."² Implicit in Bourdara's comments are the criteria required for testing the values offered by secular society. For the Orthodox Church, this task demands theological criteria.

But what criteria should the church employ in order to evaluate the competing voices of culture? Theologians have approached the issue from perspectives of Christology and tradition,³ others from history, ecclesiology, and the Trinity.⁴ Darko Djogo argues for a liturgical and Trinitarian basis for what he calls "social/political theology," a concept that explores the interaction between Eastern and Western churches, and the Orthodox church's relation to culture. He writes, "Liturgy is the most important act and fact of the Orthodox Church," and concludes that authentic social/political theology arises from witnessing "its Trinitarian fundamentals."⁵ However, few Orthodox theologians have employed the Old and New Testaments as a theological lens. They have overlooked a valuable source of evidence when answering the criteria question, namely, scripture. I contend that the Epistle of First Peter features theological criteria for the church that will guide the treatment of women's ordination.

I will examine Peter's first Epistle, because the context of the letter fits with our contemporary context; both contexts concern the church's relation with society. The Apostle Peter wrote to Christians who were asking questions regarding their role as the church in a secular society. While the epistle does not directly address women's ordination, it contextually resembles the church's twenty-first century situation. In this paper I will examine the theological criteria that Peter used to guide the church. How did he employ canonical, liturgical, Trinitarian, Christological, ecclesiological, eschatological, and sociological

1. Quoted in Philip Kariatlis, "The Role of Women in the Orthodox Church" (2006) 33

2. Kalliope Bourdara, "The Ordination of Women" (2002) 686; Stanley Harakas, "Orthodox Christianity in American Public Life" (2011) 387-388: And regarding the church's involvement with pluralism, Harakas states, "That is a challenge that Orthodox Christianity has not fully resolved." Why? Because, he continues, "The truth is that there is little experience in Orthodox history, thought, or practice that helps the Orthodox Church deal with pluralism."

3. Behr-Sigel, "The Ordination of Women" (2004) 56, 61; she claims the "patriarchal structure" is justified by Christ as model priest in culture and by tradition.

4. Vigen Guroian, "The Problem of an Orthodox Social Ethic" (1984) 718, 722, 723

5. Darko Djogo, "Trinity, Society, and 'Political Theology'" (2012) 103, 112; cf. Stanley Harakas, "Orthodox Christianity in American Public Life" (2011); he searches for theological resources to help the church, selecting "core theological affirmations of Orthodox theology" and "theologically rooted sociology" (377). See also Daniela Kakandjieva, "A Comparative Analysis on Church-State Relations in Eastern Orthodoxy" (2011)

theologies? I will then consider the significance of his criteria for the current question of women's ordination for the Orthodox Church and Theology.

The Context of 1 Peter

Peter's title for his audience reveals the context of the letter. He addresses the churches scattered throughout Asia Minor as "elect exiles" (1:1) and "sojourners and exiles" (2:11). The term *παρεπδημοι* often translated, "exiles," "foreigners," or "resident aliens," suggests that his readers lived within a culture alternative to the church, a contrast created due to their identity as Christians. For Peter announces their new birth in Christ almost immediately (1:3), those "born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (ESV). Miroslav Volf states, "They are not outsiders who either seek to become insiders or maintain strenuously the status of outsiders. Christians are the insiders who have diverted from their culture by being born again. They are by definition those who are not what they used to be, those who do not live like they used to live."⁶

If Peter's audience became "exiles" because of their new identity in Christ, then their situation pertains to the current state of the church. As Karen Jobes infers, "Peter would be transforming the personal situation of those to whom he writes into a powerful spiritual metaphor more broadly applicable to Christians living anywhere that society's values clashed with those of the gospel."⁷ Peter not only writes to an audience dealing with the tension between church and culture, his letter can inform the church's present struggle, as we continue to live as the church, and in that sense as *παρεπδημοι*, among secular society.

Peter addresses seven problems resulting from social pressure, one of which includes, "a surrounding, seductive non-Christian worldview."⁸ After underscoring the church's identity as a new people in Christ (1:1–2:10), Peter counters secular temptation by instructing the church regarding the roles of slaves and masters (2:18–25), and the relationship between husbands and wives (3:1–7). He introduces and concludes these topics by addressing the church's relationship with the government and society as a whole (2:11–17; 3:8–12). The remainder of the letter focuses on the church's suffering (3:13–4:19), with closing comments on elders and encouragement (5:1–14). We will examine the four parts in the central section of the letter (2:11–3:12), because Peter most explicitly addresses the conflicting values of church and society. He begins with general guidelines, then moves to servants and marriage, and closes with general instructions. In these four sections, Peter employs theological criteria in order to support his argument or make his point. I shall ask, what criteria does he use? And how do these criteria relate to each other? Does Peter rank or favor some over others?

Eschatological, God's Will and Honor (1 Peter 2:11–17)

Peter begins with general ethical admonitions (2:11–12) and transitions to more defined instructions for the church's relationship with Roman society (2:13–17). In verses 11–12, he urges good and honorable conduct among church members before Gentile society in order that the outsiders might see their "good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (2:12b). For the church living among secular society, he writes, when Gentiles speak against you, act honorably, because when they see your good deeds, they may glorify God.

His concluding phrase indicates the theological criteria for his statement. The Gentiles will glorify God "on the day of visitation" (2:12). Commentators do not entirely agree on the specifics of what the phrase refers to. Some argue that Peter has condemnation in view, while others see the verse referring to a salvific outcome. Thomas Schreiner argues convincingly that Gentiles will glorify God on the day of visitation, because they witnessed the good deeds of the church and thus became believers.⁹ Yet despite disagreement, all contend that it constitutes an eschatological issue. Thus, in Peter's introductory admonitions for the church's relation to society (2:11–12), he offers eschatological criteria.

In 2:13–17, Peter continues the pattern set in verses 11–12, that the church should practice good conduct and so influence the surrounding culture (2:16). Yet in this passage, he grounds the instruction

6. Miroslav Volf, "Soft Difference" (1994) 18–19

7. Karen Jobes, *1 Peter* (2005) 26–27

8. Jobes 43

9. Thomas Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* (2003) 123–124; see for opposing views.

in an alternative criterion: the person and will of God. The section begins with a key term in Peter's discourse: "be subject" (*υποτασσω*). This term introduces the two following sections regarding slaves (2:18) and marriage (3:1). In 2:13, Peter commands the church to "be subject" to all human institutions, underscoring political powers, but in his concluding verse, expanding the command to all aspects of life and society. He writes, "Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor" (2:17). In this passage we see a conflict of values between the church and secular society. Karen Jobes writes, "The Greco-Roman worldview was concerned with the pragmatic benefits of social stability; the Christian view of submission is concerned with honoring transcendent theological values that ought to capture the heart of believers and transform them within all of their relationships."¹⁰ The Roman world based its behavior on maintaining social norms; the church by contrast appealed to theological values. So while Peter does not override social stability or advocate revolution, he does not ground his commands in Roman values, rather, he grounds them theologically.

At 2:13, he writes "be subject for the Lord's sake . . . For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people" (2:13a, 15). Thus Peter commends honorable behavior for the church in society based on God's honor and will. Through these theological criteria—as well as the phrase, "living as servants of God" (2:16)—Peter prepares his readers for the sections to follow, where he develops the identity of servanthood and grounds his instructions in more theological criteria.

(Eschatology) Christology, Trinitarian, Scriptural (1 Peter 2:18–25)

In 2:18–25, Peter addresses the servant population of the church. He commands that they "be subject" to their masters, whether serving the just or unjust. He focuses on the outcome of submissive servanthood: that is, suffering. Peter twice claims that "this is a gracious thing" (2:19, 20), and more importantly, a gracious thing "in the sight of God" (2:20) or "when, mindful of God" (2:19). A "gracious" thing can refer to a reward (Luke 6:32–35), and Peter's reference to "credit" (2:20) suggests that the gracious thing corresponds to the believer's eschatological inheritance noted at 1:3–5.¹¹ While maintaining the emphasis on God's judgment, Peter shifts from eschatology to other criteria. The remainder of the passage reveals that his appeal to God entails Trinitarian and Christological theology.

Peter links the Christian servant's suffering with the suffering of Christ, claiming that "to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps" (2:21). Elliott combines the previous references to God's will with the appeal to Christ's example when he claims that "It is the will of their God and judge, and the model of their Lord who subordinated himself to God's will as an obedient suffering servant, that serve as the paramount and distinctive motivations for this behavior. . . . the subordination of Jesus Christ himself to God's will as God's servant provides the paramount model for Christian subordination."¹² Thus, Peter's theological criteria for 2:18–25 clearly includes Christology. Yet he does not stop there.

The explanation of Jesus' suffering includes a collection of terms from Isaiah. While omitting a direct quotation, Peter's phrases in 2:20–25 echo the Septuagint of Isaiah 53 and the portrayal of the suffering servant.¹³ Why does Peter use Isaiah's words to address the issue of unjust suffering? We get a hint at 2:23, as the suffering servant "continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly." Peter attributes a Trinitarian model of suffering, whereby the servant entrusts himself to the Father. Jobes concludes that when the church's servants suffer because of faithfulness to Christ, it is actually "evidence that, like the Messiah, they have been chosen of God."¹⁴ In short, while Peter employs societal terms and honors the order of society in general, he ultimately derives his model for submission from another source. In 2:18–25, he mentions eschatology but most prominently forwards Christological, Trinitarian, and Scriptural theological criteria to commend submission among servants in the church.

Yet did Christ's model apply only to slaves, excluding all other members of the church? No. For in the previous passage and at a later reference, Peter addresses all believers as servants of God (2:16), who like Greco-Roman servants suffer unjustly and heed God's will (cf. 2:15, 19; 3:14–15). And so through an ex-

10. Jobes 210

11. Schreiner (2003) 138–140

12. Elliott 488; Jobes notes that suffering did not appear in non-Christian household codes (191)

13. Jobes 192–194. Particularly Isaiah 53:6–12.

14. Jobes 200

tended address to the social slave, Peter forwards “a paradigm for the Christian believer who follows Jesus Christ.”¹⁵ The instructions, the model, and theological criteria apply for all members of the church.

Sociological, (Scriptural) Tradition, Eschatological (1 Peter 3:1–7)

Peter opens his section on marriage by addressing wives and repeating the verb *υποτασσω* (“be subject”; 3:1). We cannot explore the full meaning of this passage, neither its controversial nor uncontroversial portions, but must focus on the values that conflict between the Roman and Christian world, and the theological criteria that support Peter’s position. In the first place, Peter implicitly uses sociological criteria. Darko Djogo defines Christian sociology as “a living in the community of the existential values which are based in the Divine Community of Three Persons of the same essence.”¹⁶ It is communal reflection of divine values. Thus, Peter affirms the authority of the husband, as fits Roman society, and also encourages virtues recognized by Greek philosophy, such as the wives’ subordination, loyalty, and honor that maintained domestic harmony and good reputation.¹⁷ However, he offers neither value system as motivation for the wife or the husband, but instead links marital posture with the model of a servant. So he follows the passage about servants (2:18–25) with “likewise” and repeats the verb “be subject” (3:1). As we found, this refers not simply to social servant-master relations but holds the example of Christ as a mirror for the entire church. Thus, he models human marriage on the divine community. In the midst of sociological theology, Peter forwards the “authority and example of the crucified and resurrected Christ.”¹⁸ Thus Peter does not wreck the sociological order of his readers; he subverts secular society by exchanging the proper motivational model.

Peter’s subversion also includes Scripture. He appeals to Sarah as one obedient and submissive to her husband (3:6), and therefore not only subverts culture’s criteria but adds one: the Old Testament. However, Peter does not quote or even allude to a specific passage.¹⁹ He may have Genesis 18 in mind, but more significantly, we know that Sarah recurs in Jewish texts as a symbol of virtue.²⁰ So as Peter does draw on the narrative scriptures, he inclines more towards tradition in his appeal to an Old Testament figure.

Finally, Peter instructs husbands to live with their wives, “in an understanding way” because “they are heirs with you of the grace of life” (3:7). The term *συγκληρονομος* (heir or “co-heir”) refers to Christian kinship and a common share in the “inheritance” mentioned at 1:4.²¹ This inheritance most likely represents an eschatological inheritance, one realized at the consummation of the world, as revealed by the context of 1:4. Peter describes the inheritance with terms that match the eternal realm: “imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” (1:4). In short, in the context of competing marital values, Peter offers criteria for the church that include sociological, scriptural, traditional, and eschatological, with undertones of the Christology established in chapter 2.

Tradition, Scripture (1 Peter 3:8–12)

Peter begins the final section by re-expanding his address to every member of the church. “All of you,” (3:8) he writes, “have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.” Most of these terms reflect virtues that appear in familial contexts of Hellenistic literature.²² But as mentioned in the martial context, Peter does not here attach Greek values to the divine community. Thus he probably does not have sociological criteria in mind. However, with more clarity we read in verse 9: “Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless.” This probably reflects Jesus’ admonitions in Luke 6:27–28, when he says, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those

15. Jobes 180

16. Djogo, “Trinity, Society and ‘Political Theology’” (2012) 96

17. Elliott (2000) 554–555

18. Jobes 204

19. Jobes 206

20. Elliott (2000) claims Peter alludes to Genesis 18, drawing parallels with 18:1–3. However, he also cites Philo and Josephus who reference Sarah as a model of womanhood with less concern for a particular Old Testament account (571–572).

21. Elliott 580

22. Jobes 214

who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”²³ So rather than ancient Jewish tradition, as with Sarah in 3:6, Peter culls from the transmitted teaching tradition of Jesus himself as instruction for the church as a whole. Moreover, based on logical order, it seems that his blessing passage of verse 9 qualifies the virtues mentioned in verse 8.

Peter's list of virtues in 3:8 does not entirely concur with non-Christian society. According to Elliott, “In the highly competitive and stratified world of Greco-Roman antiquity, only those of degraded social status were ‘humble,’ and humility was regarded as a sign of weakness and shame.”²⁴ Peter concludes his virtue list with a trait incongruent with secular society, transitioning to a total override in verse 9. For blessing in the place of cursing reversed rather than affirmed the Hellenistic values mentioned at the outset. Again, Peter espouses culture but not whole-heartedly. He subverts secular sociological criteria with theological tradition. Finally, in 3:10–12, Peter quotes Psalm 34:12–16 at length with language that resembles the text of the Septuagint. Within this quote, we see the Lord's favor and disfavor as the primary criteria (3:12), a perspective similar to those in preceding passages. Closing his section on particular topics of church and society relations, Peter offers theological criteria from tradition and scripture.

Conclusions on Theological Criteria

In 2:11–3:12, Peter instructs the church in their relationship with society, a scenario that resembles our modern context. Through four sub-sections, he employs criteria from God's will and honor, eschatological, Christological, tradition, scriptural, Trinitarian and sociological theologies. How are these significant for the Orthodox Church today? Based on his use of these categories, I draw a few conclusions intended to aid the issue of women's ordination.

First, the motif of Christ as servant permeates three of the four sections. Peter grounds the “exiles” identity in Christ, which produces their alternative relationship to secular society and thus produces the letter. This suggests that Christology stands as the fundamental theological criterion for Peter's instructions.

Second, a Trinitarian aspect arises in every section, as Peter reference's the church's relation to God the Father as reflected in Christ's relation to him. This affirms why theological criteria are theological: they depend upon God. Since its installment, God has ruled and protected his church. Thus, we must depend upon the Lord in the midst of difficult questions, divisions, and theological controversy.

Third, Peter does not appear to employ canonical, liturgical, or ecclesial criteria. This may sound anachronistic, but it lends significant insights. What the Orthodox Church now considers canonical theology, I might align with Peter's use of tradition. While his tradition stems from material affirmed by God's authoritative spokespersons, it constitutes Scripture or the words of Jesus himself. Thus today's church, when creating or revising canons, ought to adhere to biblical norms. Peter's dearth of liturgical and ecclesial criteria may be due to the infancy of the first century church. However, it only illuminates those criteria he does feature, which leads to the fourth point.

Peter does not readily forward sociological theology, but rather emphasizes Christology, scripture, Trinitarian and eschatological criteria. I am not claiming that the church should not use ecclesial or sociological theologies. But based on 1 Peter, I do argue that when considering theological matters influenced by secular society, the church should not favor ecclesial and sociological perspectives. Peter incorporates society, typically in the form of Greco-Roman virtue terms, yet consistently subverts these with theological criteria, particularly Christ's teaching tradition and scripture (3:1–7, 8–12). This suggests that today's church ought to be wary of cultural norms, especially on issues that pertain to women's ordination, such as male and female identity, leadership structure, and human value. Furthermore, the church should evaluate these views with scripture.

I do not have space here to elaborate further on how these findings inform women's ordination in the Orthodox Church. But I hope to have provided some firm and convincing conclusions regarding the theological criteria that the church should employ and avoid when deciding upon, conversing about, or evaluating such an important matter.

23. Similar phrases occur throughout the New Testament corpus, suggesting it does mark an oral tradition (Schreiner, 2003, 164).

24. Elliott (2000) 605