AJRCS AFRICAN JOURNAL OF RELIGION, CULTURE AND SOCIETY
By Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Calabar
ISSN: 1595-1340 ◆ Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 82-95

REBUKE OR RUIN? SOCIAL MEDIA, PATRISTIC WISDOM, AND THE CRISIS OF FRATERNAL CORRECTION IN THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes up a question that sits at the intersection of ecclesiology, historical theology, and digital culture: whether the wave of social media-driven public condemnation directed at erring preachers in contemporary Christianity is consistent with how the church has historically handled doctrinal error and moral failure. Drawing on biblical theology, patristic sources, and the Nigerian Pentecostal and charismatic context as a case study, the paper argues that although the church has always borne an obligation to guard doctrinal truth, the current viral culture of online condemnation has broken from the restorative, relational, and communally grounded methods that defined the church fathers' approach to correction. A comparison of early conciliar methods — the councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon — with how contemporary social media handles theological disputes reveals a structural and spiritual disjunction that cannot be explained away. The Nigerian church, which is among the world's most vigorous but also most fractious digital theological spaces, provides a particularly revealing window into these dynamics. The paper closes by sketching the outline of a theology of digital fraternal correction that draws on patristic resources while speaking to present realities, arguing that how the church corrects its members matters as much as whether it does.

Keywords: fraternal correction, patristic theology, social media, Nigerian Christianity, ecclesiology, heresy, Christian brotherhood

Introduction

Sometime in the spring of 2023, a video clip of a prominent Nigerian Pentecostal preacher making what many viewers considered heterodox claims about grace, sin, and divine judgment began circulating across social media platforms. Within hours it had spread to Facebook, WhatsApp groups, and YouTube. Within days, dozens of response videos had appeared — some running to three or four hours — from other Nigerian clergy and lay commentators. The comment threads beneath these posts swelled with thousands of replies, ranging from pointed theological critique to unambiguous character assassination. The preacher at the centre of the controversy was variously labelled a heretic, a deceiver, and a dangerous false prophet. Comparatively few voices in the digital storm called for prayer, for private dialogue, or for any kind of structured ecclesial process. The spectacle of condemnation had, in the most literal sense, become the event itself.

What happened in that episode is not unusual. Across global Christianity, and with particular force in Nigeria, social media has become the principal arena in which doctrinal disputes, ministerial failures, and theological controversies get litigated. YouTube, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and WhatsApp have effectively become the new councils — except that they bear almost none of the characteristics that made the early church's councils what they were: deliberativeness, relational accountability, structured authority, and an orientation toward restoration rather than destruction. The animating question of this paper is not complicated to state, even if it is difficult to answer: when the church rebukes its erring members publicly and virally, is it faithfully exercising ecclesial discipline, or is it doing something that corrodes the very community it believes itself to be protecting?

Let me be clear about what is not in dispute. The church does have a responsibility to guard doctrinal integrity, and this paper does not question that. What is in dispute is whether the tools, the tone, and the trajectory of online condemnation are consistent with the spirit of Christian brotherhood as Scripture defines it and as the church fathers practised it. My argument is that they are not — and that the gap between what the tradition prescribes and what social media practises is wider and more theologically damaging than has been adequately recognised.

The thesis I develop is this: while the church has always borne responsibility for guarding doctrinal integrity, the social media culture of public condemnation represents a departure from the restorative, relational, and communally accountable methods of the church fathers — a departure that now threatens the ecclesiological fabric of Christian brotherhood itself. The argument moves through four main stages: first, a biblical and theological account of what fraternal correction actually means; second, a historical survey of how the church fathers actually handled heresy and error; third, a critical examination of contemporary social media patterns of condemnation with particular attention to the Nigerian context; and fourth, a comparative analysis that issues in constructive proposals for a theology of digital fraternal correction.

The approach throughout is theological and historical, drawing on primary patristic sources, biblical exegesis, and secondary scholarship in ecclesiology, historical theology, and media studies. In treating the Nigerian case study, names are used where the individuals are genuinely public figures whose ministries have been extensively debated in open forums; appropriate discretion is exercised in other cases.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative, comparative historical-theological methodology. The approach proceeds in three interlocking movements: first, a close reading of the relevant biblical texts — principally Matthew 18:15–17, Galatians 6:1, and the Pastoral Epistles — to establish the normative framework for fraternal correction in the Christian tradition; second, a historical survey of primary patristic sources, including Irenaeus' Against Heresies, Augustine's correspondence, and Cyprian's On the Lapsed, alongside the conciliar records of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, to document how the early church actually practised correction; and third, a critical case study analysis of contemporary social media patterns in the Nigerian Pentecostal and charismatic context, drawing on publicly available digital content and secondary scholarship in digital religion and Nigerian Christianity. The comparison of patristic and contemporary practice is conducted against the normative biblical standard, with the aim not merely of description but of constructive theological evaluation. The paper operates from within the Christian theological tradition,

treating Scripture as authoritative and the patristic consensus as a substantial, if critically appropriated, resource for present ecclesiological reflection.

Conceptual and Theological Framework

Defining Fraternal Correction

Fraternal correction — the obligation one Christian bears to address the sin, error, or doctrinal failure of another — is not a marginal concern in the New Testament. It sits near the heart of how Jesus envisions community life. The most detailed treatment appears in Matthew 18:15–17, where a graduated process is prescribed: first, private engagement between the two parties; if that fails, the involvement of one or two witnesses; and only in the event of continued refusal, the wider community. The process is sequential and its goal is unmistakable — to "gain your brother" (Matt. 18:15, ESV). Not to expose him. Not to shame him publicly. Not to cancel him. The whole architecture of the passage is bent toward restoration.

Paul develops the same logic in Galatians 6:1. Those who are "spiritual" are to "restore" (Greek: katartizete — a surgical word, used of resetting a dislocated joint) anyone caught in a transgression, and they are to do so "in a spirit of gentleness," with the self-awareness that they themselves are not immune to failure. The medical metaphor here is not decorative. Correction is conceived as surgery — skilled, careful, painful, when necessary, but oriented always toward the patient's recovery, never toward the surgeon's self-display. The Pastoral Epistles follow the same logic, charging church leaders to correct with patience and careful instruction rather than combativeness (2 Tim. 2:24–26; Titus 1:9–11).

What connects these texts is a coherent vision of correction as an act of love — costly, relational, and directed always toward the health of the individual and the integrity of the community. Millard Erickson makes the point plainly: discipline in the New Testament is never retributive; it is always ordered toward healing (Erickson 1094). Even when the error in question rises to the level of heresy, the New Testament's concern is for those being deceived and for those the deceiver might lead astray — not for the performance of righteous condemnation.

The Ethic of Christian Brotherhood

The New Testament word for brotherhood, adelphotes, carries real theological weight. In the Johannine writings, love between believers is not merely recommended; it is presented as the definitive mark of discipleship and the primary apologetic of the church before a watching world (John 13:35; 1 John 3:14–18). Paul's body metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12 goes further still: the church is not a loose association of independent actors but an organic unity, one in which the suffering of a single member is felt by the whole. That conviction has direct bearing on how error and failure are handled. What one part of the body does to another, it does to itself.

The tension between truth and love is one of the recurring challenges of Christian communal life. John Stott's reading of Ephesians 4:15 — "speaking the truth in love" — remains one of the clearest accounts of what faithful engagement looks like: truth without love is brutality, and love without truth is sentimentality, and neither resembles the character of the God who is both holy and merciful (Stott 172–73). The church's calling is to hold these two together, and that holding is structurally very difficult in the conditions created by social media — where speed rewards the sharp retort and the algorithm rewards outrage.

Miroslav Volf's theology of embrace adds a further dimension here. Reading through the parable of the prodigal son, Volf argues that Christian community is characterised by a willingness to hold the other even in their failure — not by suppressing truth, but by speaking truth within a relational frame that remains open to reconciliation and the restoration of communion rather than seeking the satisfaction of judgment (Volf 100–105). The embrace precedes the conversation about what went wrong, and it remains open even during that conversation. That posture is almost structurally impossible to sustain in a social media environment designed to generate and amplify conflict.

Heresy, Error, and Moral Failure: Drawing Distinctions

Before moving to the historical survey, a distinction needs to be drawn that the patristic tradition took with great seriousness and that contemporary online discourse almost entirely collapses: the distinction between formal heresy, theological error, and moral failure. These are not the same category, and the appropriate response to each is different.

Formal heresy, in the classical sense, involves a deliberate and sustained rejection of dogma defined by the church as constitutive of Christian identity — convictions about the Trinity, the person of Christ, the resurrection. Theological error is a broader category: doctrinal positions that deviate from orthodox consensus without necessarily rising to the level of heresy, often reflecting incomplete understanding, cultural conditioning, or unexamined assumptions. Moral failure is different again — ethical lapses that may carry no direct doctrinal content but that compromise the integrity and witness of the one who commits them.

Alister McGrath notes that the early church was remarkably precise about these distinctions, reserving its most severe institutional responses for errors that directly threatened the heart of Christian identity, while exercising considerably more pastoral flexibility in other cases (McGrath 49–52). What happens on Nigerian Christian social media — where every theological deviation tends to be treated as equivalent to Arianism, and every moral failure as equivalent to apostasy — is a flattening of these distinctions that the patristic tradition would have regarded as both intellectually crude and pastorally irresponsible.

Patristic Methods of Correction: A Historical Survey

The Church Fathers and the Problem of Heresy

It is worth beginning with a reminder that the early church was never a community of undisturbed doctrinal harmony. From Paul's confrontations with proto-gnostic tendencies in Corinth and Colosse to the great Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries, the church was almost continuously engaged in the work of doctrinal clarification — and the work was often fiercely contested. What distinguished the patristic approach was not the absence of conflict but the structured, relational, and ultimately restorative framework within which conflict was conducted.

The heresies that most preoccupied the church fathers were not peripheral disputes. Arianism — associated with the Alexandrian priest Arius, who taught that the Son was a created being subordinate to the Father — struck at the very heart of Christian soteriology and worship. Gnosticism, in its various forms, undermined the goodness of creation and the full humanity of Christ. Donatism raised fundamental questions about the nature of the church and the validity of sacraments administered by morally compromised clergy. Pelagianism challenged the doctrine of grace at its root. These were, in the fathers' judgment, genuinely existential threats

to the faith. Yet the methods brought to bear on them were strikingly unlike anything one encounters in contemporary social media culture.

Methods Employed by the Church Fathers

The primary institutional instrument for addressing doctrinal disputes in the early church was the council. The Council of Nicaea (325 CE), convened by the Emperor Constantine and presided over by Bishop Hosius of Córdoba, brought approximately three hundred bishops from across the empire together to address the Arian controversy. Its procedures were deliberate, collegial, and transparent: positions were articulated, arguments were heard, and decisions were reached through a process of communal theological discernment. The Nicene Creed was not the product of a viral campaign; it was the fruit of sustained, structured dialogue among recognised church leaders (Davis 58–62).

The councils that followed — Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451) — took the same form, each addressing progressively refined Christological questions through ordered deliberation. What matters for the purposes of this paper is not simply the institutional mechanics of these councils but the theological conviction that gave rise to them: that doctrinal truth is best discerned communally, through the Spirit-guided deliberation of the body — not by independent voices proclaiming judgment from unaccountable platforms.

Alongside the conciliar method, the church fathers made extensive use of written refutation. Irenaeus of Lyon's Against Heresies (c. 180 CE) is the most instructive example: a sustained, systematic, and impressively learned engagement with Gnostic teaching that aimed not merely to condemn but to demonstrate — to show the internal incoherence of the heresy and the coherence of the apostolic tradition it sought to displace. It is worth noticing that Irenaeus writes with evident pastoral concern for those who had been deceived by the Gnostic teachers, not simply with contempt for the teachers themselves (Irenaeus 1.Pref.1–2). Athanasius' On the Incarnation and his anti-Arian polemical writings carry the same combination of theological rigour and genuine pastoral concern.

Augustine's handling of both the Donatist and Pelagian controversies adds yet another dimension. His letters — of which several hundred survive — reveal a theologian who invested enormous relational and intellectual energy in engaging his opponents personally, in sustained correspondence, before and alongside his public refutations (Brown 212–15). The personal letter comes before the public treatise. The relationship, however strained, precedes the argument. That sequence is almost the precise reverse of what happens on social media, where public condemnation typically precedes — and often forecloses — any private engagement.

The Spirit Behind Patristic Correction

Several characteristics run consistently through patristic correction even in its most vigorous forms. The first is that correction was oriented toward the protection of the flock, not the destruction of the individual. The fathers were primarily concerned with those who might be led astray by false teaching; their refutations were acts of pastoral protection, not personal vendetta. The second is that correction was exercised through recognised channels of authority. Individual bishops and theologians did not simply act on their own initiative; they operated within networks of ecclesial accountability that provided both legitimacy and restraint.

The third characteristic — and perhaps the most theologically significant for the argument of this paper — is that the patristic tradition consistently held open the possibility of repentance and restoration. Even formal excommunication, the most severe sanction available to the church, was not conceived as a permanent verdict.

Cyprian of Carthage's handling of the lapsed — those who had apostatized under persecution — is instructive here. Rather than following either the harsh rigorism of the Novatianists or the laxity of those who would readmit the lapsed without any process of discipline, Cyprian worked toward a middle way that maintained the community's integrity while keeping the door to restoration genuinely open (Cyprian, On the Lapsed, 28–36).
Frances Young's analysis of patristic heresiological writing suggests that the fathers understood themselves to be engaged not merely in intellectual combat but in a form of communal identity formation — a process of defining who the community is, precisely through the careful, reasoned, and relationally grounded articulation of what the community believes (Young 3–12). This communal and constructive dimension of patristic correction is largely absent from contemporary social media discourse, where the performance of denunciation tends to crowd out the harder, slower work of community formation.

Social Media and the Contemporary Culture of Ecclesiastical Condemnation

The Rise of Social Media as an Ecclesiastical Battleground

Social media has become one of the defining realities of twenty-first-century religious life. Heidi Campbell's foundational work on digital religion makes the point that religious communities do not simply adopt new technologies passively; they adapt them, negotiate their meaning, and are in turn reshaped by them (Campbell 3–7). What matters for the argument here is that social media platforms — with their engagement-rewarding algorithms, their architecture of public performance, and their structural compression of complex ideas into shareable fragments — have created an environment in which theological discourse is distorted almost before it begins. The medium carries its own theology, and it is not a particularly Christian one.
The specific characteristics that most damage ecclesial discourse are reasonably well understood. Speed: social media operates in real time, leaving no room for the kind of deliberation that patristic correction required and that the biblical model assumes. Virality: content spreads not on the basis of accuracy or depth but on the basis of emotional impact and shareability. Anonymity: a significant proportion of online theological commentary is produced by individuals who are accountable to no community and no authority structure. Performativity: on social media, the act of correction is itself performed for an audience, which creates incentives — building a following, establishing a reputation for orthodoxy, enjoying the social rewards of public moral positioning — that are entirely foreign to both the biblical and patristic models of correction.
Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner observe that these structural features tend to flatten nuance, reward extremity, and penalise moderation, making social media a singularly hostile environment for the kind of careful, graduated, relational correction that the New Testament envisions (Campbell and Garner 92–95). The medium is not theologically neutral, and churches and theologians who treat it as if it were are paying a price they may not yet have fully reckoned.

Patterns of Social Media Attacks on Erring Preachers: The Nigerian Context

Nigeria is one of the most instructive places in the world to study these dynamics. The Nigerian church — particularly its Pentecostal and charismatic wing, which is among the most globally significant expressions of contemporary Christianity — has developed a vibrant and sometimes ferocious culture of online theological policing. Several recurring patterns are worth identifying.
The most common is what might be called the viral takedown: a sermon clip, doctrinal statement, or recorded

teaching is extracted from its context, shared rapidly across platforms, and subjected to immediate public critique that escalates in intensity as it spreads. The brevity of the clip almost guarantees misrepresentation; the absence of context forecloses charitable interpretation; and the speed of circulation ensures that thousands of people have formed and expressed strong judgments long before the speaker has had any opportunity to respond, clarify, or be heard. This pattern has been particularly pronounced in controversies surrounding preachers in the Word of Faith and hyper-grace traditions in Nigeria.

The ministry of Abel Damina, a Port Harcourt-based theologian and senior pastor, has been a focal point of sustained and intense online controversy over several years. Damina's articulation of grace theology — his positions on the finished work of Christ, the nature of repentance, the continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments — has attracted criticism from multiple quarters, some of it substantive and some of it unmistakably personal. The two tend to blur together in the digital discourse surrounding his ministry, which is itself diagnostic of the problem this paper examines. What is worth noting here is not the theological merits or demerits of Damina's positions — those are debated by qualified theologians on various sides — but the manner of the critique: conducted almost entirely through public video responses, social media posts, and online forums, with virtually no evidence of the private engagement, structured accountability, or restorative intent that the New Testament prescribes.

The late Kesiena Esiri, a respected Pentecostal bishop, became the subject of similar online criticism in his later years. Certain of his teachings and ministry decisions attracted public condemnation from voices across Nigeria's digital church landscape, many of them entirely unconnected to his ecclesial community and operating with no accountability to any formal church structure. Again, the issue is not whether theological concern was warranted, but whether the form the concern took — public, unaccountable, and with no evident interest in the bishop's hearing or restoration — can be described as fraternal correction in any meaningful sense.

Perhaps the most revealing figure in this landscape is what has come to be known, somewhat loosely, as the doctrinal watchdog — individuals who have built significant social media followings by positioning themselves as guardians of theological orthodoxy through the critique and exposure of preachers deemed to be teaching error. Those associated with ministries operating under the banner of "contending for the faith" have produced extensive online content targeting specific Nigerian preachers, including figures connected to Emmanuel Ogbuele's ministry circle and others in the charismatic landscape. These watchdog figures occupy an ecclesially ambiguous position that deserves careful attention: they exercise real public influence over how orthodoxy and heterodoxy are perceived, while being accountable to no formal ecclesiastical structure whatsoever. Their authority derives entirely from their digital platform — not from ordination, not from communal recognition, not from any conciliar mandate. The early church would have found this arrangement not just unusual but theologically incoherent.

This is not to dismiss the legitimacy of theological discernment or to argue that error should circulate unchallenged. The patristic tradition is clear that the church has an obligation to guard doctrinal truth. The question is whether the watchdog model — operating outside ecclesial structures, through viral media, with audiences of thousands, and without the relational accountability of community — represents a faithful exercise of that obligation or a distortion of it. The evidence from the Nigerian context suggests the latter, strongly.

A second pattern worth naming is guilt by association: preachers are publicly condemned not for specific, documented theological positions of their own but for association with others who have been deemed heterodox. This pattern reproduces the worst logic of social media discourse more broadly — tribal, binary, allergic to nuance — and sits in direct contrast to the patristic insistence on precise doctrinal identification and careful argument before any verdict is pronounced.

A third pattern is the systematic inversion of Matthew 18's sequence. In the overwhelming majority of cases that populate Nigerian Christian social media, there is no evidence of prior private engagement — no attempt to seek clarification before critique, no orientation toward restoration. Public condemnation comes first, and private conversation, if it comes at all, comes much later and carries the character of aftermath rather than genuine process. This inversion is not accidental; it is the direct product of a medium that structurally rewards speed and public performance over the slow, private, unglamorous work of relational correction.

Ogungbile and Akinade's analysis of Nigerian Pentecostalism's relationship with media technologies is pertinent here: they note that the competitive and entrepreneurial character of the Nigerian Christian landscape creates powerful incentives for public theological positioning, in which denouncing rivals and asserting doctrinal superiority serve market functions as much as theological ones (Ogungbile and Akinade 78–84). This observation is not a wholesale indictment of online theological engagement in Nigeria, but it does identify structural pressures that distort the correction process in ways that no amount of sincere motivation can entirely overcome.

Motivations Behind Online Condemnation

The motivations behind social media condemnation of erring preachers are genuinely mixed, and intellectual honesty demands acknowledging that before proceeding to the critique. Genuine concern for doctrinal truth and for those who might be spiritually harmed by false teaching is certainly a real factor, and it would be both uncharitable and inaccurate to reduce all online theological critique to self-interest or malice. The challenges of the digital age are real: false teaching spreads faster and reaches farther than at any previous point in Christian history, and the spiritual damage it can cause is not trivial.

But alongside genuine concern, other motivations are at work that are considerably less edifying. Ecclesiastical tribalism — critiquing preachers from rival theological traditions while being conspicuously silent about equivalent errors in one's own — is a persistent feature of the online theological landscape. The performance of orthodoxy — demonstrating one's own doctrinal soundness through the condemnation of another — serves social and reputational functions that have nothing to do with correction and everything to do with identity management. And the monetisation of controversy — the brute financial reality that videos attacking prominent preachers attract vastly more views and therefore more revenue than videos devoted to constructive theological reflection — creates economic incentives for condemnatory content production that are entirely absent from the patristic context.

Peter Horsfield's analysis of the relationship between Christian communication and media economics is directly relevant here. He argues that the commercial logics governing contemporary media platforms systematically distort religious communication, rewarding content that generates emotional engagement — including, especially, outrage — over content that builds community or deepens understanding (Horsfield 145–49). A doctrinal watchdog who produces weekly videos condemning prominent preachers to an audience of eighty thousand subscribers is functioning as a media producer as much as a theological one, and the media

logic shapes the theological output in ways that are not always visible to either producer or consumer.

A Critical Comparative Analysis

6.1 Points of Continuity: Where Online Correction May Be Legitimate

Intellectual honesty requires that a comparative analysis acknowledge points of genuine continuity between patristic correction and contemporary online discourse before identifying the more significant points of divergence. The case for the legitimacy of public online correction is not without merit, and dismissing it entirely would be as intellectually dishonest as ignoring the problems.

There is genuine patristic precedent for publicly circulated written refutations. Irenaeus' Against Heresies was not a private note; it was a document intended to be read across the church. Athanasius' anti-Arian writings were distributed as widely as the technology of the age allowed. The church fathers understood very well that publicly proclaimed false teaching required a publicly accessible response. If a preacher teaches error to a television audience of millions or a YouTube audience of hundreds of thousands, an argument analogous to the patristic precedent can be made for a public response.

There is also something to be said for the accountability argument. When preachers exercise public influence and claim public authority — publishing books, selling online courses, commanding global digital audiences — they occupy a position that invites public scrutiny. The modern megachurch pastor or media minister is a genuinely public figure in a way that has few parallels in the early church, and public influence can legitimately attract public evaluation.

And in contexts where formal ecclesiastical structures are weak, fragmented, or compromised — as is arguable in significant portions of Nigerian Pentecostalism — informal mechanisms of doctrinal accountability may fill a function that formal structures have abdicated. The absence of effective denominational oversight does not make doctrinal error less dangerous; it may simply redirect the impulse to correct into less structured channels.

These arguments deserve to be taken seriously. They suggest that the real question is not whether online correction is ever legitimate, but whether the dominant patterns of online correction in contemporary Nigerian Christianity — and global Christianity more broadly — are oriented toward the right ends and pursued through means consistent with the Christian ethic of brotherhood.

Points of Discontinuity: Where Social Media Departs from Patristic Wisdom

The points of divergence are, however, more numerous and more theologically weighty. The first and most fundamental concerns the absence of relational accountability. Patristic correction was always embedded in a web of ecclesial relationships: bishop to bishop, council to council, community to community. Even Irenaeus' written refutations were produced by a bishop accountable to a community, addressing teachers he knew, within a network of ecclesial relationships that provided both authority and restraint. The contemporary doctrinal watchdog, by contrast, operates in a relational vacuum — accountable to no community, ordained by no church, restrained by no ecclesial authority. Their platform is their mandate. That is not a patristic ecclesiology; it is something else entirely.

The second discontinuity concerns deliberation. The councils that addressed Arianism, Nestorianism, and Eutychianism were not convened overnight. Nicaea was preceded by years of debate, correspondence, and local synodal deliberation. That deliberative slowness was not a logistical deficiency — it was a theological

commitment, a practical embodiment of the conviction that discernment of truth requires time, communal wisdom, and the discipline of sustained reflection. Social media operates on a precisely inverted logic: the first response wins the narrative, speed is rewarded, and deliberation is virtually indistinguishable from complicity in the minds of a platform-conditioned audience.

The third discontinuity is, from a theological standpoint, perhaps the most serious: the difference between restoration and cancellation as the governing end of correction. The patristic tradition, even in its most severe expressions, kept the door to repentance and return genuinely open. Excommunication, as Cyprian understood it, was a medicinal act — painful, yes, but therapeutic in intent, designed to bring the erring one to repentance and restore them to the community. Social media condemnation tends toward a very different logic: the permanent elimination of the condemned individual from positions of influence, with no mechanism for restoration and, frequently, no apparent interest in rehabilitation. The cancelled preacher is not invited to repent; they are invited to disappear. Those are not the same invitation.

The fourth discontinuity concerns authority. The patristic tradition maintained a clear, if sometimes contested, hierarchy of ecclesial authority: bishops corrected presbyters, councils corrected bishops, and the whole process was embedded in a theology of apostolic succession and communal discernment. Social media democratises correction in a way the patristic tradition would have found deeply problematic — anyone with an internet connection and a YouTube channel can position themselves as an arbiter of orthodoxy regardless of theological training, ecclesial accountability, or moral standing. This democratisation is not without its genuine attractions — the patristic authority structure had its own serious failures — but it creates a situation in which correction is entirely untethered from accountability and authority becomes purely a function of digital reach.

The Ecclesiological Cost

The ecclesiological cost of these patterns is significant, and it has not been sufficiently examined. The first cost is the fragmentation of the body of Christ. Every viral denunciation of an erring preacher is an event of ecclesial division — it draws lines, deepens suspicions, and makes the reconciliation of theological differences harder rather than easier. The cumulative effect of thousands of such events across years is a Christian community that has become structurally habituated to division and has gradually lost both the institutional memory and the relational capacity for the kind of reconciliation the New Testament envisions.

The second cost is a chilling effect on honest theological inquiry. When ministers know that any attempt to engage difficult theological questions seriously, or to explore ideas in new ways, may trigger a viral condemnation campaign, the rational response is conformism and timidity. The history of Christian thought is a history of courageous theological exploration — much of which involved positions that were initially contested before being received, refined, or rejected through the community's ongoing life. The culture of online condemnation makes that kind of exploration considerably more costly and less likely.

The third cost is perhaps the most immediately visible: the damage to the church's public witness. The spectacle of Christians publicly dismantling each other over doctrinal disagreements is not merely an internal problem — it is evangelistically corrosive. Jesus identifies love between believers as the primary apologetic of the Christian community (John 13:35). The dominant patterns of online theological discourse represent a systematic erosion of that apologetic.

Towards a Theology of Digital Fraternal Correction

Retrieving Patristic Wisdom for the Digital Age

To be clear about what this paper is and is not arguing: it is not arguing that social media should be abandoned as a space of theological discourse, nor that doctrinal error should be allowed to circulate without challenge in the digital sphere. It is arguing that the church needs to develop a theology of digital fraternal correction — a theologically grounded account of how correction ought to be practised in digital environments — that takes the wisdom of the patristic tradition seriously and applies it with contextual intelligence to present realities. Several principles emerge from the foregoing analysis.

The first is the priority of the private over the public. Matthew 18:15 is not an optional procedural suggestion; it is a theological mandate grounded in the logic of brotherhood. Before any public correction is made, the correcting party bears the obligation of private engagement — genuinely seeking to understand the position being critiqued, presenting concerns directly to the individual in question, and exhausting relational means before resorting to public ones. In the digital age, this principle does not become less relevant; it becomes more urgent precisely because it is more counter-cultural. Swimming against a powerful current requires more deliberate effort than drifting with it.

The second principle is the necessity of communal accountability. The patristic council model expressed a conviction that doctrinal discernment is a communal rather than an individual enterprise. Those who exercise public theological influence — including those who critique other preachers online — ought to be embedded in structures of communal accountability: denominational bodies, pastoral councils, networks of peer theologians capable of checking, challenging, and refining their conclusions. The lone-wolf doctrinal watchdog, however sincerely motivated, lacks the structural safeguards that make correction reliable and trustworthy.

The third principle is the orientation toward restoration. Every act of correction should be asked a simple but searching question: what is this for? If the end genuinely is the restoration of the erring individual to sound teaching and faithful ministry, the correction will look markedly different from one whose end is the elimination of a rival or the performance of one's own orthodoxy. Restorative correction is patient, genuinely hopeful, and interested in the outcome for the person being corrected. Punitive correction is satisfied by the act of condemnation itself. The two are not easily confused in practice, whatever their surface resemblance.

Constructive Proposals

Moving from principles to proposals, several practical steps can be recommended. First, Nigerian and global church leaders and denominational bodies should develop and publicly articulate clear protocols for the handling of doctrinal disputes, drawing explicitly on the conciliar model of the early church. Such protocols should specify the graduated process of private engagement before public response, involve recognised theological authorities in the assessment of doctrinal claims, and provide structured opportunities for the individual under scrutiny to respond and — where appropriate — to be restored. The existence of publicly known protocols would not prevent online commentary, but it would provide a theological reference point against which online commentary could be assessed and held accountable.

Second, theological institutions and seminaries — particularly those training ministers for the Nigerian Pentecostal and charismatic context — should incorporate the theology and practice of fraternal correction

into their core curricula. Ministerial formation that includes serious engagement with the history of patristic controversy, the methods of the early councils, and the biblical theology of correction and brotherhood will produce ministers better equipped to evaluate the contrast between conciliar deliberation and viral condemnation — and more resistant to the temptation to choose the latter for its speed and spectacle.

Third, Christian media producers — including those who create theological content for digital platforms — should work toward developing and adopting a voluntary code of ethical practice for digital theological discourse. Such a code might include commitments to seek private clarification before public critique; to present the position being critiqued accurately and in its full context; to make explicit one's own ecclesial accountability and theological formation; and to orient public critique explicitly toward the restoration of the individual and the health of the community rather than their elimination. This may sound idealistic, but it names the norms toward which a theologically informed digital discourse ought to aspire — and naming them publicly creates at least the possibility of accountability to them.

Fourth, the Nigerian church would benefit from the reinvigoration of inter-denominational theological dialogue structures — councils, forums, and deliberative platforms in which diverse voices from across the theological spectrum can engage in structured, accountable, face-to-face deliberation about contested doctrinal questions. Both the All Christian Federation of Nigeria (ACFN) and the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) are existing structures that could potentially serve this function, though their capacity in this regard remains underutilised. The conciliar model of the early church is not a historical relic; it is a living option for communities that are genuinely serious about combining doctrinal integrity with ecclesial unity.

Reclaiming Brotherhood as an Ecclesiological Commitment

At the deepest level, what this paper has been arguing for is the recovery of Christian brotherhood — adelphotes — as a governing ecclesiological commitment that shapes not only what the church believes but how it treats its own members in their failure and error. Brotherhood in the New Testament is not sentiment. It is not a metaphor. It is a theological reality grounded in the shared filiation of believers in Christ and expressed in concrete practices of mutual care, accountability, and restoration.

The question posed in the first of the two seminar topics that prompted this paper — "Are we still brethren?" — is not rhetorical. It asks whether the community that confesses one Lord, one faith, one baptism still recognises itself in the other who errs; whether it still regards the erring one as a member of the same body rather than a threat to be neutralised; whether it still understands the correction of error as an act of love rather than an occasion for the performance of its own superiority. The patristic tradition, at its best, answered that question with a costly yes — costly enough to sustain councils lasting months, correspondences extending over years, and engagements with heretical opponents that continued through decades.

Contemporary evangelical Christianity's social media culture — and the Nigerian church's version of it in particular — too often answers the same question differently. The answer implicit in viral denunciation, cancellation logic, and the performative culture of doctrinal warfare is that we are brothers and sisters in name only — that in practice, the erring one is a rival to be defeated rather than a sibling to be restored. Recovering the patristic vision of correction as an act of communal love is not a matter of ecclesiastical strategy alone; it is a matter of faithfulness to the gospel the church exists to embody and announce.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the dominant patterns of social media condemnation of erring preachers in contemporary Christianity — with particular attention to the Nigerian context — represent a significant departure from the restorative, relational, and communally accountable methods of the church fathers, and that this departure is carrying serious ecclesiological costs that the church has not yet adequately reckoned with. The argument has moved through four main stages: a biblical and theological account of what fraternal correction actually means; a historical survey of how the church fathers actually handled doctrinal error; a critical examination of contemporary social media patterns of condemnation with particular reference to Nigerian case studies; and a comparative analysis that has issued in concrete proposals for a theology of digital fraternal correction.

Several findings bear restating. The New Testament envisions correction as a graduated, relational, and restorative process oriented toward the recovery of the erring individual and the health of the community; this vision is structurally at odds with the speed, anonymity, and performative logic of social media. The patristic tradition addressed doctrinal error through structured conciliar deliberation, carefully argued written refutation, and personal engagement embedded in ecclesial accountability — methods that maintained doctrinal rigour while preserving pastoral care and keeping the door to repentance consistently open. Contemporary social media discourse, particularly in the Nigerian Pentecostal and charismatic context, tends instead toward viral denunciation, guilt by association, and a logic of cancellation, with little evidence of the graduated process Matthew 18 prescribes or the restorative orientation that characterised patristic correction.

None of this is to say that doctrinal error should go unchallenged, or that social media has no role in theological discourse. The argument is rather that the church — and the Nigerian church in particular — urgently needs a theology of digital fraternal correction that is genuinely informed by Scripture and nourished by the patristic tradition, rather than one shaped primarily by the logic of the platforms on which it happens to be enacted. The three principles proposed — the priority of the private over the public, the necessity of communal accountability, and the orientation toward restoration — are not impossibly idealistic. They are the consistent teaching of the Christian tradition, applied to a new technological moment.

How the church handles the failure of its own members is not a second-order matter. It is a question about the church's identity, its internal unity, and the credibility of its public witness. The patristic tradition understood this with a clarity the digital age desperately needs to recover. The church in the twenty-first century is called to the same fidelity — not to an uncritical repetition of ancient forms, but to the spirit that animated them: a spirit in which truth and love are genuinely inseparable, in which rigour and mercy are held together, in which correction is finally an act of brotherhood rather than a display of superiority. Whether that spirit can be sustained within the architecture of contemporary social media is one of the defining ecclesiological questions of our time.

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