Sanctified Entirely: The Theological Focus of Paul's Instructions for Church Discipline

Stacy R. Obenhaus

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/restorationquarterly

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons, Christian Denominations and Sects Commons, Christianity Commons, Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons, History of Christianity Commons, Liturgy and Worship Commons, Missions and World Christianity Commons, Practical Theology Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/restorationquarterly/vol43/iss1/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ ACU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Restoration Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ ACU.
1 Sanctified Entirely: The Theological Focus of Paul's Instructions for Church Discipline
STACY R. OBENHAUS

13 On Preaching "Fictive Argument": A Reader-response Look at a Lukan Parable and Three Sayings on Discipleship
ROBERT STEPHEN REID

33 The Stone-Campbell Millennium: A Historical Theological Perspective
KEVIN JAMES GILBERT

51 Book Reviews

62 Books Received
If one reads Paul's letters with an eye to discerning Paul's theology of "church discipline," three passages in particular stand out. In each passage, Paul instructs the church to whom he writes how and why to take collective action directed at a church member who has engaged in immoral conduct. However, among these passages Paul's instructions differ significantly. In Galatians Paul instructs the church that if any member is "detected in a transgression," those who are spiritual should restore that person "in a spirit of gentleness" (Gal 6:1). In 2 Corinthians, Paul speaks approvingly of the unspecified punishment a majority of the church has imposed on one of its members whose conduct has "caused pain... to all of you." However, he now counsels the church to "forgive and console" that person and "reaffirm your love for him" (2 Cor 2:1-11). In 1 Corinthians, Paul commands the church to expel a man who is living with his father's wife. Seeming to leave no room for the possibility of the man's repentance and restoration to the community, Paul concludes: "Drive out the wicked person from among you" (1 Cor 5:1-13).

In these passages one finds Paul recommending a range of responses to the erring church member: from gentle restoration, to punishment and forgiveness, to complete and absolute expulsion. To account for these differences, one is tempted to conclude that Paul was probably addressing different types or varying degrees of wrongdoing in each instance or perhaps that each instance involves a different social context or dynamic. However, the passages in question provide insufficient detail to support such conclusions with confidence. Thus it is not clear exactly what the wrongdoer did in 2 Corinthians 2 to merit punishment, and the general term "transgression" (paraptoma) in Gal 6:1 could cover nearly any kind of wrong.

1 All quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.
One might also attempt to resolve the difficulties by examining passages where Paul deals with similar issues. Thus one might consider Paul’s counsel to the church in Rome to avoid false teachers (Rom 16:17–19) or his pronouncement in 1 Corinthians of an enigmatic curse on “anyone . . . who has no love for the Lord” (1 Cor 16:22). But these passages do not direct a church to take collective action intended to affect a church member who has “done wrong.”2 In the Thessalonian correspondence Paul directs the church to “admonish” unruly members (1 Thess 5:14; cf. 2 Thess 3:6–15), but he assigns no specific theological significance to his counsel.3 Only in the three passages noted from Galatians and the Corinthian letters does one discern a theological warrant for Paul’s directions. Thus if a Pauline theology of “church discipline” exists, one would need to look mainly to these three passages to discern it.4

This article poses two questions. First, what theological premises does Paul offer for his counsel in the three passages in question, and what theological consistency (if any) exists among these passages? I shall demonstrate that two consistent theological themes underlie these passages: (a) the importance of the church’s spiritual health and moral character as a corporate body and (b) the extent to which Christ’s death serves as a warrant for the proper conduct of collective church life.5 When viewed with these two themes in

---

2 In Romans, Paul’s admonition is a “warning . . . against the influence of strangers who would introduce dissension and scandal” into the church. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Romans (AB 33; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 745–46. In 1 Corinthians, Paul likely means that a failure to obey Christ indicates a lack of love for him and that “to reject him in this way is to place oneself under the anathema.” Gordon Fee, 1 Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 838.


5 Discerning Paul’s theology means isolating in these passages the controlling theological conceptions that Paul makes explicit and seeing how those conceptions inform his counsel. See Victor P. Furnish, “Theology in 1 Corinthians,” in Pauline Theology II: 1 and 2 Corinthians (ed. David M. Hay; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 59–64. Thus one’s focus centers not so much on the specific action Paul recommends as on the theological statements Paul offers as the basis for his counsel, both in the
mind, Paul’s varying counsel in these three instances is not fundamentally inconsistent. Second, can the consistent theological themes among these passages tie Paul’s varying counsel together into a coherent program of church discipline? I suggest that although consistent pastoral concerns may be woven through these and similar passages in Paul’s letters, one should not interpret these passages as providing theological grounds for specific standards or procedures regarding the discipline of erring church members.

A. 1 Corinthians 5: The Unitary Sinlessness of the Church

In 1 Corinthians Paul is obviously preoccupied with, among other things, the unity of the Corinthian church. He chastises the church for the quarreling that arose from different groups’ allegiances to various personalities (1 Cor 1:11–17, 3:5–9). He berates them for taking their disputes before civil courts rather than before the church (1 Cor 6:1–7). He shames some of them for having used gatherings for private mealtime rather than for common observance of the Lord’s supper (1 Cor 11:17–34). He urges them to use their spiritual gifts in worship not for their own individual pleasure but for the edification of the entire church (1 Corinthians 12–14). Indeed, one could say that 1 Cor 1:10 expresses the thesis of the entire letter: “Now I appeal to you... that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”

One might well presume, then, that this preoccupation with church unity provides a key to understanding Paul’s command in chapter 5 that the church expel the man living with his father’s wife.

Key parts of this passage confirm that church unity rather than church discipline per se is the primary theme here. Paul’s discussion suggests that he is more concerned about the church’s response to this man than about the man himself. Thus he notes that “there is sexual immorality among you”; he twice (in only slightly different language) urges that the man be removed “from among you” (1 Cor 5:1–2, 13); he bemoans the arrogance of the church, not the man; and apart from verse 5, where he instructs that the church “hand this man over to Satan,” he says nothing else about the man. More important, however, is the theological argument that Paul makes for his counsel. He explains (a) that the church is like a mixture of dough, and a little leaven can


7 James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 691.

ruin the entire mixture, and (b) that the church should be unleavened as it celebrates the sacrifice of Christ, the paschal lamb (1 Cor 5:6–8).

The leaven/mixture metaphor suggests two things about the church (cf. Gal 5:9, Rom 11:16). First, it suggests that the church is an indivisible unity, a more permeant unity than that suggested by the metaphors of the church as God’s temple, with each person a building block, or of the church as the body of Christ, with each person a part of that body (1 Cor 3:10–17, 12:12–27). Thus the metaphor suggests “a fusion of members all sharing the same substance and, as such, subject in its entirety to the same influence and conditions.” Second, it suggests that if only a part of the church is polluted, then the whole church is susceptible to pollution that would spread throughout its entirety. In much of the ancient world, leaven was considered a corrupting element that could infect its surroundings. Yet Paul does not fear a corrupting social influence resulting from this man’s conduct, as in the discussion of meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 10:23–33). Rather, the corruption is spiritual and, one might say, automatic. In short, there cannot be one church member who is “leaven” while the rest of the church is not. The entire community is either leavened or unleavened.

The “paschal lamb” metaphor confirms that Paul fears a spiritual corruption of the church community. In insisting that “our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed,” Paul employs imagery from the Jewish rite of Passover, in which a family would rid the house of leaven and eat only unleavened bread with the Passover lamb. Just as the Israelites ate the Passover lamb only with pure, unleavened bread, so should the church celebrate Christ’s death in a likewise pure state (1 Cor 5:7–8). In short, Paul believed that Christ’s death allowed the church, through baptism, to be “raised sinless” (1 Cor 6:11); and in demanding the expulsion of this man, Paul indicates that the church as a whole should give concrete expression to that sinlessness by maintaining moral purity in the church’s daily life.

---

9 Ibid., 153.
11 Pascuzzi, 147.
12 Or “slaughtered.” As Professor Jouette Bassler pointed out to me, the Greek root θυ- is used elsewhere in the NT with reference to the slaughter of animals for eating or with respect to pagan sacrifices (e.g., Matt 22:4, Luke 15:23, Acts 10:13, 1 Cor 10:20) and is not used in reference to the sacrifice of atonement (for which see, e.g., Rom 3:25, Heb 2:17, 1 John 2:2). Thus Paul probably does not intend to invoke the latter idea here.
13 Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle, 216–17; D. Martin, 169.
14 Pascuzzi, 162–65.
From the standpoint of early church history, one could conclude that 1 Corinthians 5 "shows the undeveloped beginnings of church discipline." But as shown above, this reading would not be consistent with Pauline theology. One could also conclude that the passage reveals Paul's thinking on the nature of immorality, but when he notes that "even among pagans" this conduct is deemed immoral, he shows that the church's moral code is not the main issue (1 Cor 5:1). In addition, one could presume that a theology lies behind the sanction prescribed in verse 5 ("hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh"), but this puzzling phrase is hardly the theological center of the passage. As a result, one should read the passage primarily as expressing Paul's conviction about the need of the church as a whole to maintain moral purity as it celebrates Christ's death. By directing the Corinthians to expel this man from their midst, Paul affirms that the church is a discrete moral entity wherein negative actions have negative ramifications for the sanctified life of the entire community.

B. 2 Corinthians 2 and 7: Apostolic Authority and Reconciliation

One might assume that Paul's instructions for church discipline in 2 Corinthians 2 would relate to or arise from concerns such as those expressed in 1 Corinthians 5. This is not the case, however; in fact, the two passages have almost completely different purposes in view. Indeed, by contrast with 1 Corinthians 5, Paul here does not state specifically what the man did and what discipline was imposed. This fact suggests that once again Paul's concern is something other than a theology of church discipline per se. Instead, what is mainly at issue is Paul's apostleship and how the church should respond to his authority.

What seems to have led to the discipline mentioned in 2 Corinthians 2 is that Paul had an unpleasant confrontation with a member of the congregation during his "painful visit" (1 Cor 2:1), a man almost certainly other than the one in 1 Corinthians 5. This man apparently influenced others to oppose Paul, leading to Paul's demand in his "tearful letter" that this portion of the community repent—which they did, to Paul's consolation (2 Cor 7:8–12). This repentance manifested itself when a majority of the congregation imposed some punishment on the member, a punishment that caused that person considerable sorrow (2 Cor 2:6–7). Paul now urges the Corinthians to "forgive and console" this person and "reaffirm [their] love for him" lest he be

---

17 Pascuzzi, 159.
"overwhelmed by excessive sorrow" and give Satan an opening (2 Cor 2:7–11).

For several reasons, one should conclude that this passage demonstrates Paul's sense of apostolic mission rather than a particular concern for issues of church discipline.\(^\text{19}\) To begin with, Paul's purpose in 2 Corinthians as a whole was (a) to clarify what his apostolic commission meant for Christ's church in general and, given the intrusion of rival apostles, for the Corinthian church in particular and (b) to appeal for a stronger commitment to the gospel and to his apostleship.\(^\text{20}\) Second, Paul states quite plainly in this correspondence that his earlier "tearful letter" was not aimed at a matter of church discipline: "I wrote for this reason: to test you and to know whether you are obedient in everything" (2 Cor 2:9). Later in his letter, in commenting once again on this point, he states: "So although I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong, nor on account of the one who was wronged, but in order that your zeal for us might be made known" (2 Cor 7:12). Third, as in 1 Corinthians 5 Paul's primary concern is for the effect this incident had on the church as a whole rather than on the man's spiritual life. Thus he notes that the pain from this incident was caused "to all of you" (2 Cor 2:5). Moreover, he rejoiced not because the man repented but because the congregation did (2 Cor 7:9). He rejoiced in particular at Titus's news of "the obedience of all of you" and how they had welcomed Titus, as Paul's emissary, "with fear and trembling" (2 Cor 7:9, 15).

Thus Paul's discussion and counsel regarding this incident reveals more than anything else his beliefs about the proper relationship between a congregation and its founding apostle (1 Cor 9:2). Specifically, the church should defer to his apostolic authority (2 Cor 7:15; 10:6, 9), but he and they should also be the source of mutual encouragement and consolation (2 Cor 1:3–7; 7:13–16). These matters relate to a theology of apostleship in evidence throughout Paul's letters.\(^\text{21}\) The passages in 2 Corinthians confirm the congregation's obligation of deference to Paul's authority as "an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal 1:1). In particular, Paul may have believed that mistreatment of God's representative (as occurred here) constitutes a direct affront to God.\(^\text{22}\)

To be sure, Paul's apostleship is not the only theological issue raised. He is also concerned about forgiveness and repentance. He tells the Corinthians

\(^\text{19}\) Ibid., 392–98.
to end their punishment of this man, forgive and console him, and reaffirm their love for him lest he be overcome by excessive sorrow (2 Cor 2:6–8). Paul’s concern is that in the absence of forgiveness the man’s excessive sorrow might lead to worse harm, namely, that Satan can take advantage of the excessive sorrow caused by a too severe discipline23 as well as the discord arising from the lack of a spirit of forgiveness: “And we do this so that we may not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs” (2 Cor 2:11).24 However, Paul later emphasizes the church’s own collective grief (in response to his “tearful letter”) and Paul’s forgiveness of them, thereby showing that he is at least as concerned with the grief and repentance of the church as a whole.25 Thus Paul distinguishes between the godly grief the Corinthians felt, a grief that “produces a repentance that leads to salvation” and is thereby in accordance with God’s will, and a worldly grief that “produces death” (2 Cor 7:9–10).26 This teaching on repentance is not offered in relation to the repentance of “the one who did the wrong”—though the comments would seem equally applicable in that context—but in relation to the repentance of the church in acknowledging Paul’s apostolic authority (2 Cor 7:11–12).

Reading 2 Corinthians 2 in a much wider context, one senses an implied relationship between Paul’s counsel on forgiveness and repentance and his teaching that the Corinthians are called to engage in the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:16–21). Thus just as “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them,” so presumably should the Corinthians themselves engage in such a ministry, seeking reconciliation with Paul and among themselves. Although Paul does not make explicit this connection between the themes of reconciliation, repentance, and forgiveness, his rejoicing in chapter 7 over the church’s repentance in this matter follows directly after his express appeal in chapters 6 and 7 that the Corinthians be reconciled with Paul and his associates.27 Thus Paul’s encouragement and counsel with regard to the consequences of his “tearful letter” seem to follow as a natural consequence from his implied association of these themes.

23 Jan Lambrecht, Second Corinthians (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), 2.
24 The reference to Satan here reflects a view found elsewhere in Paul (e.g., 1 Cor 7:5; 2 Cor 11:14; 1 Thess 2:18), namely, that “the Satan” is a heavenly being or force actively involved in testing God’s servants and thwarting God’s plans. Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle, 37–38, 109.
25 Paul’s emphasis on repentance here is noteworthy, for the term is not otherwise prominent in his letters. Furnish, 2 Corinthians, 387; R. Martin, 229–30.
26 R. Martin, 233.
27 Furnish, 2 Corinthians, 392.
In summary, there is in 2 Cor 2:1–11 (and the related 7:6–16) little basis for developing a Pauline theology of church discipline per se. Despite Paul's attention to the relationship between grief and repentance and the importance of forgiveness, a doctrine of apostolic authority provides the primary basis for Paul's counsel with respect to the punishment of "the one who did the wrong," and the doctrine of reconciliation appears to inform much of that counsel as well. Moreover, even with respect to the matters of grief and repentance, Paul focuses as much on the repentance of the church as he does on that of the individual. Thus any program of church discipline that may be suggested by Paul's instructions does not appear to form the center of Paul's concern.

C. Galatians 6:1–2: Life in the Spirit and "the Law of Christ"

The conclusions offered above with regard to 1 Corinthians 5 and 2 Corinthians 2 and 7 are equally true of Paul's counsel in Gal 6:1 ("if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness"). That is, once again the warrant for Paul's counsel is not a theology that directly concerns or supports an approach to church discipline per se. The text and context provide several reasons for this conclusion.

Paul offers no clear reason to believe that a particular, concrete issue has arisen that compels him to address the treatment of transgressions within the Galatian churches. No particular person is named, though it is likely that Paul is referring to the transgression not of an outsider but of a church member, that is, one whom the congregation could "restore." Nor does Paul refer to a specific wrong, and in fact the word "transgression" (paraptoma) is a more general term than hamartia, the term Paul often uses elsewhere to denote "sin."28

As a result, apparently Paul is not overly concerned about the wrong itself, but rather with the possibility that the handling of the case might become a source of evil for those involved in restoring the erring member.29 Therefore, he precedes this counsel with a warning that Christians should "not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another" (Gal 5:26), and he follows with a warning that those who seek to correct the straying member should "take care that you yourselves are not tempted" (Gal 6:1b). He also warns them against pride and self-deception in their own spiritual lives (Gal 6:1, 3–4).

In addition, the entire passage in which this counsel appears, following as it does the more theoretical exposition of what it means to live "by the Spirit,"

shows Paul illustrating in practical terms how a community led "by the Spirit" would conduct itself. For example, the "works of the flesh" listed in verses 19–21 are "heavily weighted toward offenses against the unity of the community." Moreover, the spirit of gentleness with which restoration is to occur is itself a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23), and the fruit of patience, generosity, and self-control are arguably displayed in the counsel that follows in verses 2–5. Likewise, Paul’s instruction that the pneumatikoi ("you who have received the Spirit") restore the transgressor "in a spirit of gentleness" is likely a linguistic device meant to emphasize that his counsel is directed at the role of the pneuma in the community’s life.

This last observation suggests that Paul’s admonition "Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Gal 5:16) provides one of the main theological foundations of this passage. After explaining in broad terms what living by the Spirit means for character formation (i.e., by contrasting the fruit of the Spirit and the works of the flesh), Paul indicates how such living should become manifest in the daily life of the community. Instead of conceit, competition, and envy (the terms in Gal 5:26 that echo certain works of the flesh in 5:20–21), Paul urges the churches to pursue a life that evidences the fruit of the Spirit by, for example, restoring transgressors with a spirit of gentleness. Also (as noted above), Paul is concerned with how that fruit will become manifest not in the life of a repentant sinner but in the life of those working to restore the sinner. Thus he warns these “spiritual” members who seek to restore the transgressor (rather than the transgressor herself) against temptation, pride, and the self-deception of spiritual arrogance (Gal 6:1, 3–4). Such persons should rather have an attitude of self-discernment and critical self-appraisal.

Paul’s counsel, however, rests also on a second theological foundation: the idea expressed in the following verse that by bearing one another’s burdens Christians will "fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2). This reference to "the law of Christ" (nomon tou Christou) is found nowhere else in Paul, and commentators have speculated that Paul means by this certain teachings of Jesus, or perhaps the fulfillment of Mosaic law by the law of love, or

---

32 Martyn, 543, 547.
34 Ibid., 316.
35 Ibid., 325; Betz, 298.
36 Dunn, *Galatians*, 322.
37 Betz, 300–301.
Perhaps the principle of love as taught by Christ and as exemplified in his life.\textsuperscript{38} The last of these is undoubtedly correct in a general sense, insofar as bearing one another’s burdens is an example of loving one’s neighbor, which fulfills the entire law (Gal 5:14).\textsuperscript{39} However, “the law of Christ” arguably refers more specifically to an imitation motif founded on the example of Christ’s death.\textsuperscript{40} Thus just as Christ bore our burdens through his incarnation and death on the cross, so should Christians bear one another’s burdens.\textsuperscript{41} This is confirmed by the earlier command in Gal 5:13 that Christians “through love become slaves to one another” and by the related argument in Romans:

\begin{quote}
We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not please himself; but as it is written, “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” . Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you... (Rom 15:1–7).\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

Thus “Christ’s example of burden-bearing . . . establishes a normative pattern (nomos) which all who are in Christ are called to ‘fulfill’ in their relationships with others.”\textsuperscript{43} “The loving community, which is the focus of Paul’s concern, finds its moral imperative in the story of the cross.”\textsuperscript{44} To paraphrase Paul’s argument in Gal 6:1–2, one would thus say that gentle restoration of the transgressor is a way of bearing one another’s burdens and that Christ’s death for us both provides a model for such service and establishes a law imposing such service.

In summary, Paul’s counsel to restore the transgressor in a spirit of gentleness has a twofold theological basis. It is a concrete expression of how members of a community living “by the Spirit” will treat one another, and it demonstrates how Christians should fulfill “the law of Christ,” namely, by “bearing one another’s burdens” just as Christ bore ours. Thus this passage as well offers little with which one might reconstruct a Pauline program of church discipline.

\textbf{D. Conclusions: The Consistent Theological Themes}

In reviewing these three passages, I have passed over certain matters of theological interest. For example, there is in both Corinthian letters a reference to Satan, and one might well pursue how Paul’s ideas about evil and the
spiritual powers influence his counsel. Likewise, one could pursue further the relative importance of repentance in Paul’s understanding of the scheme of salvation (2 Cor 7:9–10) or the extent to which Paul’s notion of life “in the Spirit” in Galatians provides particular content to his moral exhortation. Thus one could well say considerably more about the theological content of these passages. I have tried to focus on what appear to be the central theological premises for Paul’s instructions.

Comparing these theological premises reveals a consistency one does not find in a comparison of the instructions themselves, with their range of potentially conflicting responses to the church member who has “done wrong.” One notes as a preliminary matter that in each case Paul does not address himself to overseers, deacons, or church leaders per se, but to the church as a whole. Even in Galatians where he directs his counsel to “you who are spiritual,” Paul was addressing those with the Spirit working in their lives, not persons holding a formal office. One also notes that, with the possible exception of the reference in 1 Corinthians to Deut 17:7 (“drive out the wicked person”), Paul does not establish a set of procedures or appeal to specific rules of conduct for the individual or the church.

Instead, Paul’s counsel has what one might call a more holistic or organic emphasis. Each passage emphasizes not the spiritual effect of the wrong on the wrongdoer, but the spiritual character of the church as a whole. This is most evident in 1 Corinthians 5, but it is true of the other two passages as well. Thus despite the emphasis on forgiveness of the wrongdoer in 2 Corinthians and gentle restoration of the transgressor in Galatians, Paul consistently exhibits more concern for repairing or avoiding damage to the church. In 2 Corinthians Paul rejoiced over the church’s repentance, and he urged the Galatians primarily to examine themselves when they sought to restore the transgressor. In short, the dangers about which Paul expressly warns mostly concern those who are administering punishment or engaging in restoration. It is they who can err by imposing too harsh a punishment; it is they who can err by yielding to temptation, conceit, and self-deception; and, indeed, it is they who can err by failing to rid themselves of immorality among them. In short, perhaps the most consistent item in Paul’s counsel is its emphasis on the spiritual condition of those who have not done wrong.

This is not to deny Paul’s concern, whether in these or other passages, for the individual church member who has erred. Paul certainly hopes for the ultimate salvation of the “spirit” of the man in 1 Corinthians 5. A pastoral concern no doubt underlies Paul’s instruction in 2 Corinthians to forgive and console the man who has wronged Paul (and the congregation as well). Yet the

46 Ibid., 645–49.
consistent *theological* focus in these passages is not the proper punishment and/or restoration of the sinner but the maintenance of the proper, spiritual character of the church as a whole.\(^47\) This conclusion is underlined by the function of the most fundamental theological constant in these passages: Christ’s death. In 1 Corinthians 5, Christ’s sanctifying death is the premise for maintaining the purity of the church’s collective moral character. In Galatians 6, Christ’s death is the model, for those who live “by the Spirit,” for mutual self-giving within the church. Because Christ’s death initiated the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18), Paul undoubtedly views Christ’s death as fundamental in 2 Corinthians with respect to the need for reconciliation between himself and the Corinthian church, as well as their own reconciliation among themselves.\(^48\) In each instance, the motif of Christ’s death functions not in relation to the spiritual condition of the erring church member but rather in relation to the church’s responsibility in responding to that member. Because Christ’s death sanctifies the entire community, the church must work to keep itself sanctified—by expelling the sinner in 1 Corinthians 5. Because through Christ’s death God reconciled the world to himself, the church should be reconciled with Paul and among its own members—through punishment and forgiveness of the wrongdoer in 2 Corinthians 2. Because through his death Christ bore the burdens of many, the church should practice mutual burden-bearing among its members—by restoring a sinner “in a spirit of gentleness” (Gal 6:1).

If one were looking for a Pauline theology of church discipline, one would hope to find it in these three passages. However, as the above discussion intimates, one should not read these three passages as suggesting the adoption of particular standards for disciplining church members. Paul’s instructions differ in each case because he is not developing a program of church discipline *per se*, a program demonstrating the consistent application of rules and degrees of punishment. Instead, Paul is establishing and applying fundamental, theological principles concerning the nature of the church as a distinct spiritual entity. Thus although Paul’s specific instructions vary in each case—ranging from gentle restoration, to punishment and forgiveness, to outright expulsion of one who has “done wrong”—when read with their *theological* purposes in mind, the passages are consistent. In terms of their theology, these passages primarily demonstrate Paul’s understanding of why Christians in community should work in unity to maintain the spiritual well-being of the church in its entirety.

\(^{47}\) Even Paul’s pastoral advice to the Thessalonians to admonish unruly members (1 Thess 5:14; cf. 2 Thess 3:6–15) is oriented more towards the well-being of the community than towards that of the unruly members themselves. See F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982), 122–23.

\(^{48}\) Martin, 239.