

CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND THE LAW OF LOVE

If our thinking is shaped by the Bible, we know that conflict is bound to happen in ministry. We human beings are limited in understanding, prone to sin, and prone to mistrust. Even we who have experienced new birth through the Spirit still have flesh that bucks his leading.

Not all our disagreements and misunderstandings lead to out-and-out conflict, but just about anything can. There is especially ripe potential for discord when leaders try lead a Program Church into becoming a Future Church; it's as if people bump their heads on the ceiling of the Lower Room on their way up the stairs. When people begin catching wind that the social contract of church has been altered by one of the parties, some get excited, but others feel threatened. Conflict is a short step away.

If you're like us, you hate thinking this way. You want to believe that peace and harmony are the normal state of affairs, that disunity is something out of the ordinary. It's common to act on this ministry assumption even though it contradicts what we know from the Bible to be true.

But the Bible also depicts conflict as holy ground. Almost without exception, when God appears to people in Scripture and gives them a message of salvation, it is against a backdrop of conflict. In short, conflict is where God shows up. If we are ready to view conflict as he does and embrace its potential for wholeness his way, we will find him there.

THE THREE DIMENSIONS TOOL

To keep the Law of Love, we have to learn to see disunity as God sees it and become skilled at handling it accordingly. One critical and common problem in situations like these is that people fail to grasp the breadth and diversity of the Scriptures on the topic.

Within the wealth of the Bible's wisdom on conflict, it describes three dimensions for understanding and addressing disunity among the people of God. These are designed to be maintained in paradoxical tension—a complex balance for the best outcome. It's like looking at a building from the north, from the west, and from above all at the same time.

The **purity** dimension views the problem of disunity vertically. God has established a standard of faith, life, and mission for his people to abide by. When we carelessly violate the standard, even when

we merely tolerate violations in the name of keeping peace, this is a unity problem, and it puts us at risk of being disciplined by God. The purity dimension urges us to purge the violation from our midst decisively and to banish anyone who persists in it if they won't let it go.

At the opposite pole, the **harmony** dimension views disunity horizontally as a fracture in the body. Where there is discord, the harmony dimension sees the broken fellowship as everyone's problem. The focus is on how factions can get together, and as such, even when individual wrongdoing is identified, the approach is cautious and humble with an acute recognition that all sides are liable to stumble.

To a degree, the **rescue** dimension mediates or combines the other two by recognizing three parties: God, a believer who is straying, and faithful believers. God sends his people to bring their friend back as a shepherd goes after one lost sheep. The major concern in the rescue dimension is the dangerous consequence that the wanderer is headed for if they don't keep in step with the fold.

We have to view the brokenness along all three dimensions or we will not see it clearly and address it as God intended. The problem is that each of us has our own bias toward one or two of the dimensions based on temperament, culture, or past experience. We are prone to prioritize or even absolutize our preferred dimension as the biblical way of doing things.

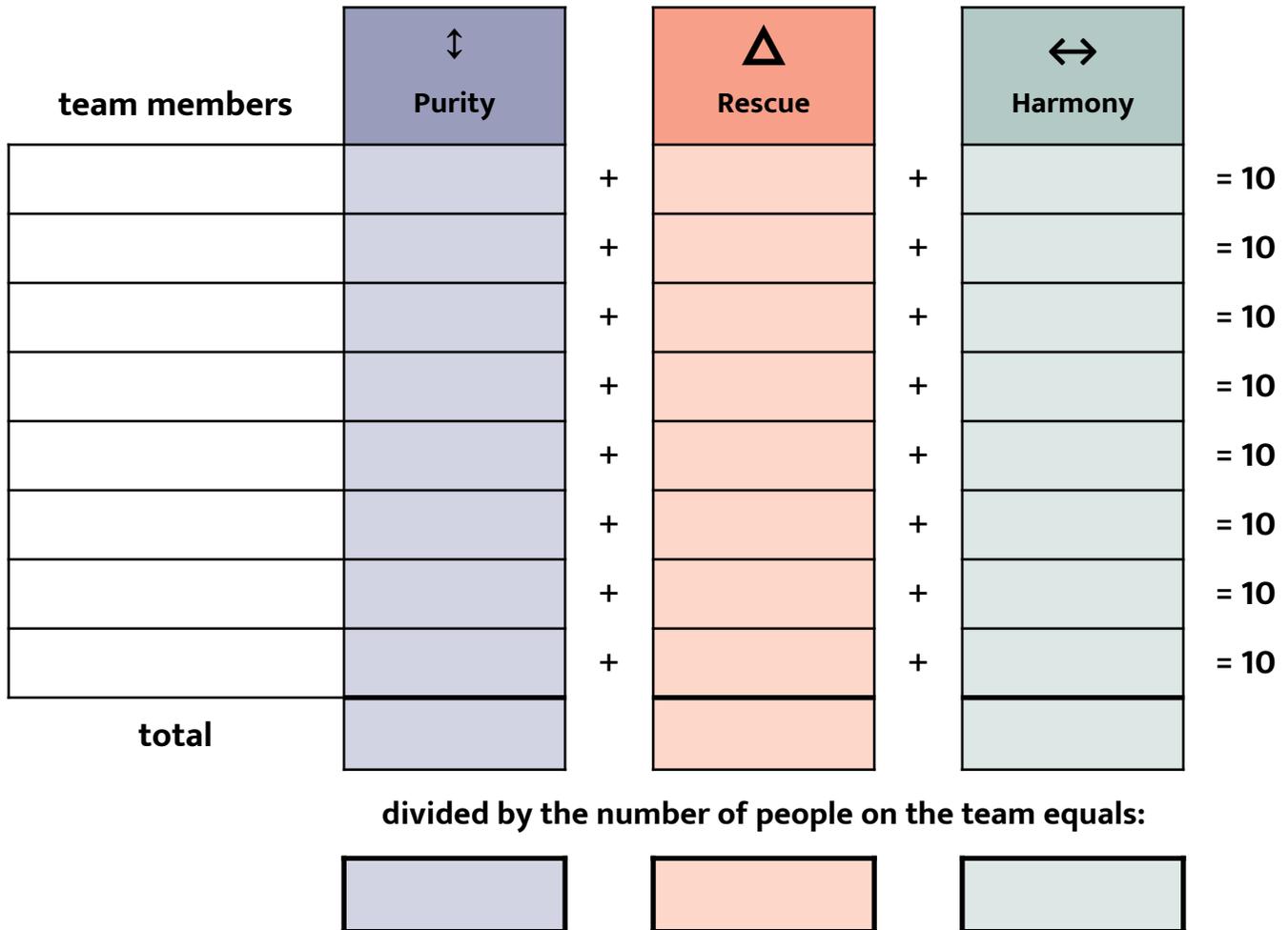
But the consequences of imbalance are serious. If one of the dimensions is missing, both the church and any individual identified as the cause of disunity suffer as a result. Both purity and harmony become further compromised rather than restored.

The following tables describe the three dimensions and what happens when one is missing from the minds of those who are closest to the conflict situation. When all three are present and active, there is still no guarantee that everything will work out well. But the likelihood of a happy, holy ending rises.

	↕ Purity Dimension	△ Rescue Dimension	↔ Harmony Dimension
Parties	God and his people (Christ and his body, the Holy Spirit and his temple)	God, a straying believer, and faithful believers	Two groups, separated and conflicted
Problem	God's judgment	The wanderer's danger	Broken fellowship
Mindset	Legal	Missional	Familial
Intervention	Purge	Convince	Reconcile
Appeal	Uphold the standard	Trust the friends	Preserve the body
Posture	Protective, vigilant, decisive, unambiguous, corporate	Concerned, imploring, persistent, engaging, passionate	Humble, listening, mediatorial, merciful, cautious
Precedents	Joshua 7, 1 Corinthians 5, Revelation 2-3	Ezekiel 33:1-20; Matthew 18; Luke 15; James 5:19-20	Galatians 6:1-5; Philippians 2:1-16; 4:2-3; 2 Timothy 2:14-26

When This Dimension Is Missing ...	Fear Driving Omission	Consequent Dangers
↕ Purity Dimension	Losing the brother/sister or appearing judgmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failure to reach a conclusion • Tacit acceptance of disunity or sin • Exposure to God's judgment and loss of his favor
↔ Harmony Dimension	Not reaching a godly conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aggressiveness and tactlessness • Counterproductive outreach • Self-righteousness • Unhealed wounds on both sides
△ Rescue Dimension	The church's disruption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viewing the offender as a problem to be solved instead of a person to be loved • Conflict metastasizes as factions form around purity and harmony solutions • Failure to bring back the person headed for trouble

OUR TEAM'S DIMENSION PREFERENCES



1. Who on or off our team needs a louder voice to ensure we are balanced?
2. How have the consequences of imbalance played out in our church?
3. What might have happened differently in a difficult past experience if we had engaged all three dimensions?

Adapted from Cory Hartman, "Dimensions for Handling Sin in the Church," rev. 2020, coryhartman.com. Used by permission. Adaptation © 2020 Future Church Co.