



FRAMEWORKS FOR HANDLING SIN IN THE CHURCH

If our thinking is shaped by the Bible, we know that human beings are prone to sin. Even people who have been born of the Spirit have flesh that bucks his leading.

So it's the most logical thing in the world to expect that **believing members of the church, followers of Jesus, will sin**, and that every so often one will become exceptionally hardened and seriously led astray.

But if you're like me, you hate thinking this way—you don't want to believe it. Your theology is sound, but your day-to-day ministerial assumptions are that sinlessness is the normal state of affairs. Sure, people are going to sin in their heart-intentions that God can judge and you cannot, but as to forthright, black-and-white behaviors, people are going to keep their noses clean or at least admit it when they fall.

Then reality hits. Hard.

Someone is found to be doing something glaringly wrong, but it's not glaring to them. They see no reason to change. In fact, they think you're the bad guy for being judgmental.

As members discover the issue, they want to do the right thing. But they disagree as to what the right thing is. Discord and immobility develop, even though conflicted brothers and sisters in Christ mean well. **Not only the sinner but the church is in danger.**

One critical and common problem in situations like these is that people fail to grasp the breadth and diversity of the Scriptures on this topic. **The Bible**



describes three distinct frameworks for understanding and addressing the problem of sin in the church. They are designed to be maintained in paradoxical tension—a complex balance for the best outcome.

The problem is that **each of us has his or her bias toward one or two of the frameworks** based on temperament, culture, or past experience. We are prone to prioritize or even absolutize our preferred framework as **the** biblical way of doing things.

But the consequences of imbalance are bad. **If one of the frameworks is missing, the sinner and the church suffer as a result.** Both purity and unity become further compromised rather than restored.

The following tables describe the three frameworks and what happens when one is missing from the minds of those who are closest to the sin 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.**

Questions for discussion for your team

- ▶ Which framework(s) is each of you biased toward? (A clue: which Scriptures resonate most and least strongly with you?)
- ▶ Which framework is least represented on your team?
- ▶ How have you seen the consequences of imbalance play out on your team? (If you have trouble with this question, how about the consequences of imbalance in other settings you have been a part of?)
- ▶ What might have happened differently in a difficult past experience if all three frameworks had been engaged?
- ▶ What steps can your team take to listen more carefully and give more weight to advocates of the least represented framework?

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	Purity Framework	Rescue Framework	Unity Framework
Shape	Vertical	Triangular	Horizontal
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 sinner's death	Broken fellowship
Mindset	Legal	Missional	Familial
Intervention	Purge	Convince	Reconcile
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

Other precedents blend or fall between frameworks. In 1 Timothy and Titus, Paul identifies the problem as in the Unity Framework but takes the posture of the Purity Framework. 2 Thessalonians 3 employs a modified Purity Framework where the problem is a bad reputation among outsiders.

WHEN A FRAMEWORK IS MISSING

Missing Framework	Fear Driving Omission	Consequent Dangers
Purity Framework	Losing the brother/sister	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failure to reach a conclusion • Tacit acceptance of sin • Exposure to God's judgment and loss of his favor
Unity Framework	Not reaching a godly conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aggressiveness and tactlessness • Counterproductive outreach • Self-righteousness • Unhealed wounds on both sides
Rescue Framework	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 Unity solutions • Failure to bring back the sinner