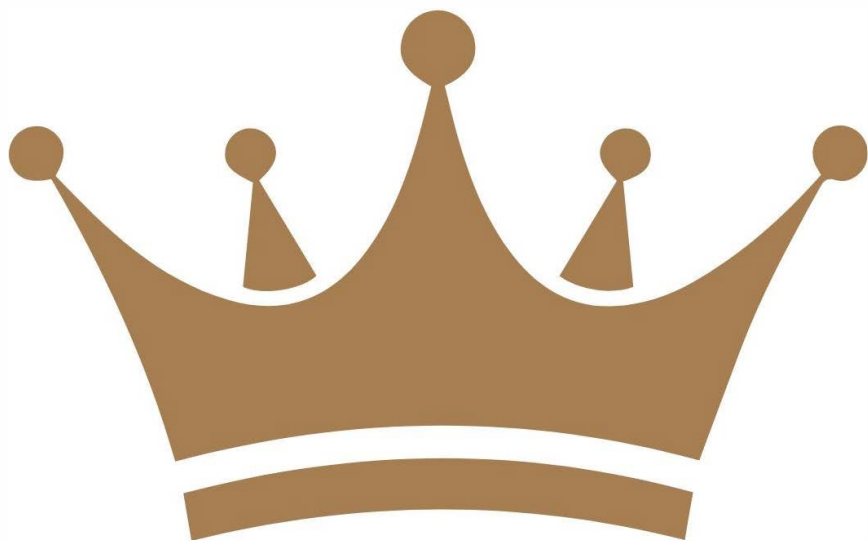


A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF AUTHORITY



Grace Church Distinctives

GRACE CHURCH OF
TALLAHASSEE

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A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF AUTHORITY

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GRACE CHURCH POSITION PAPER

A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF AUTHORITY

I. PROLOGUE

We live in a culture that champions rebellion against authority while simultaneously demanding greater government control over every aspect of life.¹ Rather than conforming to the culture, Grace Church of Tallahassee desires to be faithful to God’s revealed will in all matters of life and doctrine. Thus, this position paper aims to set forth many of the biblical principles regarding authority so that the members of Grace Church of Tallahassee will honor God in the way they relate to the authorities God has placed in their lives.

II. FOUNDATIONS OF AUTHORITY

A. *What is Authority?*

Authority is essentially the right to be obeyed. A person in authority has the “right to give orders, make decisions, and

¹ Examples of rebellion include riots, looting, and a general disrespect for authority. Demands for more government control are seen in lawsuits to compel speech, efforts to keep parents from controlling education boards, and laws designed to punish those who reject the LGBTQ+ worldview. Thus, there is a movement toward authoritarianism and totalitarianism. In each of these, the state takes on authority that is not delegated to it, and the state is effectively made into a god.

enforce obedience.”² A *right* is something that is either inherent or granted to an individual.

B. All Authority Belongs to God

The biblical storyline makes it clear that God alone possesses all authority by virtue of His being the Creator (Gen. 1-2, Ps. 24:1). As the author of everything that exists, He is the rightful *authority* over all. “For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him” (Col. 1:16). One day, every knee in heaven and on earth will bow before Jesus Christ and profess that He is Lord of all (Phil. 2:10-11).

C. God Delegates Authority

The Bible also reveals that God delegates specific exercises of authority to humanity. In a general way, he gives dominion to men and women over creation (Gen. 1:26). God alone can delegate authority (Rom. 13:1). The question is whether God delegates authority to certain people over other people. The answer is that He has ordained certain spheres of delegated authority.

III. SPHERES OF DELEGATED AUTHORITY

While the phrase “spheres of authority” does not appear in the Bible, it is a helpful (and biblical) idea. The word “sphere” indicates a limited but actual area or domain. Without using the

² Oxford English Dictionary. See also Matthew 8:8-9.

phrase, the Bible shows that God has ordained three spheres of authority to govern human life. This authority is delegated, which means that the ultimate right belongs to God and is given as a stewardship. God commands those in charge to use their authority in godly ways, and they must provide an account to God.³

A. The Sphere of the Family

The fundamental building block of human society is the family, consisting of a husband and wife as well as any children they have (Gen. 1:27-28; 2:20-24, 3:20).⁴ The family exists to bind a man and woman together in a one-flesh relationship that pictures Christ and the church and for the nurturing of children. In the family, parents are the authority over their children (Eph. 6:1-4). Children must obey their parents. Parents, especially fathers, are responsible for bringing their children up in the “discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). Parents are to care for their children’s spiritual, educational, and physical well-being (Deut. 6:4-7; Prov. 1:8, 3:1-2; Luke 11:11-12). They must give an account to God for how they exercise their authority (Eph. 6:4).

B. The Sphere of the Church

The church exists for the spiritual well-being of God’s people and the evangelization of the lost. God has given elders

³ Jesus’ example shows that authority is not given for selfish gain but for serving the good of others (Matt. 20:25-28).

⁴ See Grace Church of Tallahassee’s Statement of Faith, article X. Though the original design for a family is a father and mother, a single mother or father is still the authority of his or her child(ren).

authority in the church. Elders are men who possess the required character qualifications (Titus 1:5-9) and who are appointed to the role of shepherding and providing oversight to a local church (Acts 20:28). They are given authority from God to lead and care for the flock of God that is entrusted to them (1 Pet. 5:2). The members of the congregation are to obey and submit to them, and the elders will have to give an account to God for those they oversee (Heb. 13:17).⁵

C. The Sphere of the Civil Government

Civil government exists to ensure that society is well-ordered and protected from evildoers (1 Tim. 2:2, 1 Pet. 2:14).⁶ The government has authority from God to punish wrongdoers (even bearing the sword) and to defend their citizens (1 Pet. 2:13-17, Rom. 13:1-4). It has the right to collect taxes to provide for this task (Rom. 13:6-7, Matt. 22:16-21). Government officials are God's servants (Rom. 13:6). Therefore, citizens must obey laws, pay taxes, and show honor to leaders (Rom. 13:4, 7). The fact that government officials are God's servants also indicates that their authority is delegated from God, and they are accountable to Him (Rom. 13:1).

IV. ALL DELEGATED AUTHORITY IS LIMITED

God never gives unlimited authority. He alone possesses authority over *all* heaven and earth (Dan. 4:34-35). God-given

⁵ See Grace Church of Tallahassee's Member Commitments, statement 4.

⁶ See Grace Church of Tallahassee's Statement of Faith, article XI.

parameters limit all three spheres of delegated authority; there are boundaries built into human authority.

Thus, when we read the following commands, we know there are limits to authority and required obedience.

- “Children, obey your parents in the Lord” (Eph. 6:1a).
- “Obey your leaders and submit *to them*, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account.” (Heb. 13:17a).
- “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him” (1 Pet. 2:13-14a).

We do not believe Hebrews 13:17 means that a church member must obey anything a pastor tells him or her (e.g., he could not command a member to buy a certain brand of chips or send a child to a particular school). In the same way, we do not believe that a citizen must obey every command a government official gives. What parameters limit the extent of delegated authority?⁷

A. Authority is Limited by the Person’s Role

First, delegated authority is always limited to specific roles and relationships. For example, parents have authority over their non-adult child because of their relationship and role in that child’s life. However, those same parents do not have the authority to parent or discipline any child they come across at

⁷ The three points below are adapted from Anthony Forsyth’s book *Caesar and the Church: A Biblical Study of Government and the Church* (Chapters 3-5).

the playground. Another example, from modern American government, is that a judge does not have the authority to pull a person over and issue him a ticket for speeding. That is not the judge's role, though it can be an exercise of legitimate governmental authority for the police to do that.

A biblical example of someone overstepping his role is found in 2 Chronicles 26:16-21. King Uzziah takes it upon himself to enter the temple and offer incense. The priests remove him from the temple. He is told, "It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the Lord, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron who are consecrated to burn incense" (2 Chron. 26:18). He was not the right person; he did not have the proper role. Thus, he did not have the authority to offer incense.

B. Authority is Limited to a Person's Particular Sphere

Second, human authority is limited to a particular sphere. Uzziah's example illustrates this too. The priests had authority *in the area of worship*, not the king.⁸ Jesus points to this principle of authority being limited to a particular sphere when he answers a question about paying taxes by saying, "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:20). There is a realm that is delegated to Caesar, but he does not have authority over every sphere. The

⁸ It is worth noting that Uzziah overstepped the parameters of his authority because he became prideful (2 Chron. 26:16). This is often the root cause of people overstepping their role or sphere of authority (see also Is. 14:12-14).

government does not have dominion over the spheres of the church or family.⁹

C. Authority is Limited by God's Righteousness

A third limitation of authority is that it cannot be used to command what is unrighteous. In the book of Daniel, King Darius (a pagan king) commands that no one can pray to any god or person besides Darius for 30 days (Dan. 6:6-9). Daniel fears God and disobeys the king's edict. He is thrown into the lions' den.¹⁰ The Lord spares Daniel because he was "found innocent" before God, *and* he had "committed no crime" against King Darius (Dan. 6:22). In other words, Daniel did not sin against the king in disobeying his command. Darius did not have legitimate authority to command this sin of omission (i.e., not to pray) because it was not righteous and was outside his sphere of authority.

Another example is found in 2 Samuel. David tries to cover his adultery by putting Uriah (the woman's husband) in a position where he would die in battle. David commands the leader of the army, Joab, to put Uriah in a dangerous spot and then pull the rest of the men back so that Uriah would die. David does have the authority to command his military leaders and to make decisions about battle strategy (it is in his sphere). However, he was wrong to use this authority for his own selfish ends and in a way that resulted in Uriah being killed (2 Sam. 12:9). David had

⁹ Though we recognize there are some situations in which spheres overlap. See section VI of this document.

¹⁰ It must be noted that even when someone does not have authority over an area, he could still possess the ability to enforce his will or punish those who resist.

authority in this realm, but it did not give him liberty to do whatever he wanted in it. He was still limited by the need to do what was right.

V. BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES FOR RELATING TO AUTHORITIES

In light of all human authority being from God and having limits, how should people relate to those in authority over them? There are three different responses depending on the specific situation.

A. *Times We Must Obey*

Obedience is required when a person or entity in a legitimate role of authority gives a command that is (1) within his sphere and (2) does not require unrighteousness.

Romans 13:1-2 says,

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.

Since God is the one who establishes legitimate authority, to resist it would be to oppose God. If a person does resist such authority, he is subject to just consequences. If one disobeys civil government, there are consequences that fit the crime—the government bears the “sword” to punish evil (Rom. 13:4; 1

Pet. 2:13-14). If a church member opposes right doctrine or living, the church, under the leadership of the elders, follows the course of church discipline (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; Titus 1:10-11). If a child is walking in foolish disobedience, parents must discipline (Prov. 3:11-12, 13:24).¹¹ In every situation, the person resisting right authority is accountable to God.

B. Times We Must Disobey

*Disobedience is required when an authority commands a person to sin, omit righteousness, or overlook/praise evil.*¹² When told to act contrary to the will of God, as revealed in Scripture, people must disobey the manmade ordinance because God is the ultimate authority. If a person with delegated authority commands what is opposed to God, that person does not stay within the limits of his God-given authority.

An example is when Peter and others were jailed for preaching the gospel. The authorities gave them “strict orders” to stop the preaching, and Peter responded, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:28-29). Another example is the Hebrew midwives, who refused to murder the baby boys they delivered even though Pharaoh commanded it (Ex. 1:15-22).

This requirement to disobey remains true even if the command is to omit a righteous action and if the command is temporary. An example is King Darius’s command that no one could pray to God for 30 days (Dan. 6:6). The command was not made

¹¹ Note, in each case where there is legitimate authority there are God-given means of enforcement: the sword, excommunication, and the rod.

¹² This is also obviously true if the person commanding it is not a legitimate authority.

legitimate simply because it was temporary. It was an unrighteous command because it would require omitting what is right by prohibiting God's people from praying (Dan. 6:22-23).

C. Times We May Disobey

In between the first two categories is a command that *may* be disobeyed. *This situation arises when the person issuing the command does not have legitimate authority to give such an order.* Since authority is delegated to particular people and in specific spheres, the command can be disobeyed when an overreach occurs. This is true even if the command is seen as "reasonable."¹³ Though our decision to follow such guidelines (for that is what they would be) might depend on whether they are reasonable or temporary.

A biblical example of a time in which an authority overstepped his sphere appears in 2 Samuel 11. David committed adultery with Bathsheba while her husband, Uriah, was away serving in the military. She becomes pregnant, and David tries to cover up his wrongdoing by bringing Uriah back home. He hoped that Uriah would have marital relations with Bathsheba. David commands Uriah to go to his house and enjoy some time with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:8). Uriah does not obey the command.¹⁴ His disobedience is not condemned by God or David because the king does not possess legitimate authority in Uriah and

¹³ Authority is not based on being reasonable but, rather, its being delegated by God. Thus, a teenager must still obey his or her parents even if their rule seems unreasonable.

¹⁴ This is not because he knows what happened, but because he does not think he should enjoy this legitimate pleasure while his fellow soldiers are still on the frontlines.

Bathsheba's family.¹⁵ David did have the right to command him to come back from the war, but he did not have the authority to command him in his relationship with his wife.

Perhaps a couple of examples from modern life will further elucidate this point. A pastor would be outside his authority if he required a church member to repaint his house blue. Thus, the member could rightly ignore the command. If, however, the pastor told a member that he needed to remove racial slurs that the member had painted on the side of the house, he would be acting within his authority (for Ephesians 4:29 commands Christians to avoid corrupt speech and only say what is good for building up).

Possible future examples could be found if the government

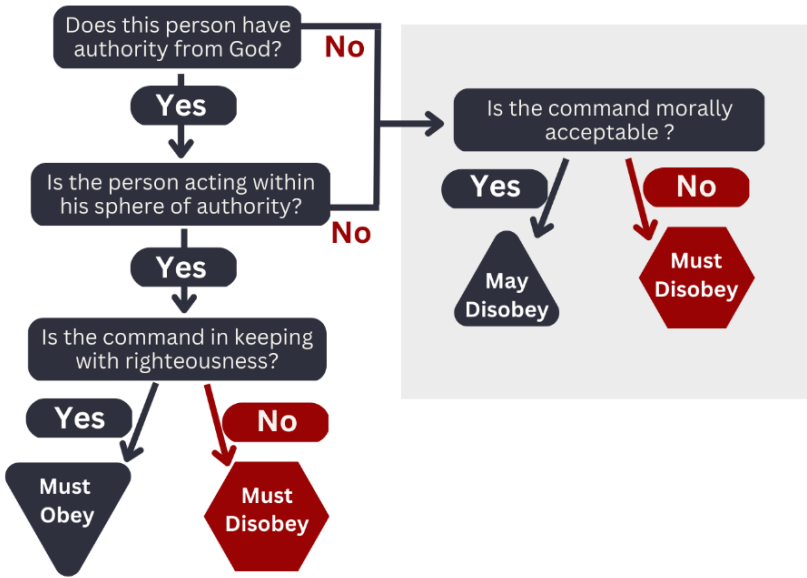
- required all children to attend a government-controlled school,
- said that sermons could be no longer than 30 minutes,
- required every citizen to drink a glass of wine each week for health purposes, or
- capped churches at 15 people.

In all these areas, the government would be outside its sphere of authority and could rightly be disobeyed.

D. Summarizing the Decisions about Obeying Authority

The decision tree below summarizes the biblical principles for responding in a God-honoring way to those claiming authority.

¹⁵ Though there can be an overlap when criminal activity such as abuse occurs. See Section VI for more.



E. In All Situations, a Godly Disposition

In all the above situations, Christians must be marked by godliness and are to pray for those in authority. *In obeying a command*, they must display a humble and submissive attitude. It will not suffice to outwardly obey while inwardly grumbling, because God has established all authority. To grumble against proper authority is to complain against God.

When disobeying, Christians must maintain a respectful and humble attitude. This does not mean they cannot speak against the wrong being commanded. However, they must do it with gentleness. They recognize that God is still on the throne, and they do not need to respond out of fear.

When it comes to times they may disobey, they must exercise their conscience, love, humility, and wisdom.

VI. BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES FOR DEALING WITH GRAY AREAS

Situations will arise when there is not a clear requirement for how Christians should respond to a command from a person claiming authority. This often occurs when a leader *oversteps* his sphere or when spheres *overlap* on an issue.

Examples of *overreach* have already been seen (e.g., David stepping into Uriah's family or Uzziah stepping into the area of the priests). Situations of overreach can be gray areas in that it is not always immediately obvious when an authority has overstepped its sphere.

When spheres *overlap*, gray areas will often exist also. An example of spheres overlapping can be seen in child welfare laws. The government does have legitimate authority to punish evildoers. Abusing a child is evil, and the government can rightly punish abuse and protect children. However, parents have the authority to teach and discipline their children. So, a situation might cross the line from an area of family authority into an area of governmental authority. Alternatively, the government could try to step in and call a parental decision or action abuse even when it is not.¹⁶ Often we can discern the line, but sometimes it will be more complicated because of the overlap in spheres.

¹⁶ For example, a court in Canada ruled that a father had to refer to his child as a boy when she was really a girl because that is what the child wanted (<https://decisionmagazine.com/canadian-appeals-court-rules-father-must-affirm-teen-daughters-gender-transition> accessed 3/3/23). Another example that could arise would be a government calling spanking a form of abuse.

Other examples can be found in how the government responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Trying to coordinate a response to a society-wide threat has aspects that belong to civil government. However, many decisions belonged to the family, such as what was best for their health and when to gather with loved ones. And many decisions belonged to the church, such as deciding if and for how long to suspend worship gatherings and whether or not to sing.

When situations of overstep or overlap occur, Christians must understand the specific situation and apply biblical principles to decide how they will respond. Below are several guidelines for dealing with these gray areas.

A. The Role of Conscience

First, Christians must not act against their conscience. When Paul was unjustly arrested and put on trial for preaching the gospel, he told Felix, a ruler, “I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience *both* before God and before men” (Acts 24:16).

The conscience is a God-given warning light. It indicates when a person is disobeying God, though it is not the standard of right and wrong. The conscience is affected by the sinful nature and must be increasingly brought into alignment with God’s Word. Thus, being excused by one’s conscience does not necessarily mean a person is guiltless, and being condemned does not necessarily mean one is guilty. Nonetheless, Christians should not violate their conscience.

Additionally, a Christian should not pass judgment on other Christians in matters of conscience (Rom. 14:1-11; 1 Cor. 10:29). Instead, each one should live in light of the fact that he or she must give an account to God (Rom. 14:12).

B. Applying Love and Humility, Seeking Unity in the Body of Christ

Though a Christian might have liberty in a particular situation, he or she must take care not to cause another person to act against conscience (Rom. 14:13-20; 1 Cor. 8:1-13). Each Christian must walk in love and pursue what makes for peace and the mutual upbuilding of the body of Christ (Rom. 14:19). It will not do for Christians to steamroll other Christians with demands of “my rights.” Nor will it do for them to demand that love requires specific actions not clearly found in Scripture. Philippians 2:3-4 is the guiding principle as Christians navigate gray areas: “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.”

C. Applying Wisdom

Just because a command is not legitimate does not mean there will be no consequences for disobeying it. When an authority oversteps his sphere, he does not usually think that is what he did. Since those in authority have enforcement mechanisms, it is no surprise that they will punish such “disobedience,” even though such punishment is unjust.

Thus, Christians should exercise wisdom. Even though they may disobey a particular command, they might decide to obey it to avoid consequences.¹⁷ So, for example, if the government required all parents to send their children to public school or else have their kids taken into state custody, parents would have to apply wisdom to decide what to do. In this situation, it is clearly an overstep of governmental authority. But what is unclear (at least without more details) is what parents who believe it is best to homeschool their children might do in response.

In some jurisdictions, the parents might sue the government to stop such a law from taking effect. In other locations, this option might not exist. Some parents might agree to send their kids to the public school, without abdicating their role to educate their children, to avoid what would be a worse outcome. Still, other parents might disobey the illegitimate command. If a large enough group was in this category, they might do it openly as a protest. Others would secretly disobey. Hiding one's disobedience to an illegitimate command is not necessarily wrong. It is similar to when Paul did not turn himself in when the Jews sought to kill him for preaching the gospel (Acts 9:23-25), to when David fled from Saul (1 Sam. 20-21), and to when the Hebrew midwives covered up their disobedience to Pharaoh's command to murder babies (Ex. 1:19-21).

¹⁷ To be clear, a command to sin must be disobeyed even if it brings consequences.

VII. CONCLUSION

The Bible makes it clear that God alone possesses all authority by virtue of his nature as God and role as Creator. It also shows that God has delegated authority as a stewardship, which is limited by the person's role and sphere and by God's righteousness. The Bible commands us to obey proper authority. It also teaches that improper authority can and sometimes must be disobeyed.

Abuses and abdication of authority have existed since the fall into sin and will continue until Jesus returns. Nonetheless, God has established authority, and it is good and right for his people to submit to legitimate authority. Proper human authority is a blessing from God, for it keeps everyone from doing what is right in his own eyes and provides structures that promote human flourishing.

VIII. AFFIRMATIONS AND DENIALS

A. *Affirmed*

1. God alone possesses all authority, and any human authority derives its legitimacy from God, who alone can delegate it.
2. God has delegated authority to the family to oversee society's most foundational relationships—marriage and children.¹⁸

¹⁸ This does not mean “marriage” can be anything people want it to be. Marriage is designed by God as the lifelong union of one man and one woman.

3. God has delegated authority to the church for the worship of God, the spiritual well-being of God's people, and the spread of the gospel.
4. God has delegated authority to the civil government to promote a stable society by rewarding good and punishing evil so that citizens can lead a peaceful and quiet life.
5. Christians must pray for all those in authority and treat them with the respect due to them because of their God-given position.
6. Christians should be known for their submissive disposition, even if they must or can disobey an illegitimate mandate.
7. People must obey when a person or entity in a legitimate role of authority gives a command that is (1) within his sphere and (2) does not require unrighteousness.
8. People may rightly choose to disobey a command when an authority acts outside of their sphere; these decisions are a matter of conscience and wisdom.
9. People must disobey commands from an authority to disobey God, to set aside active obedience to God, or to overlook/praise evil.

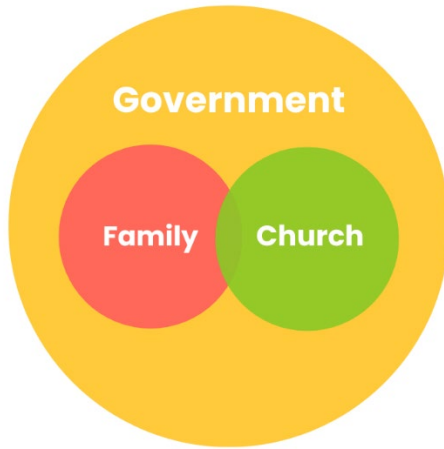
B. Denied

1. Denied: Any human or institution has authority over all aspects of a person's life.
2. Denied: Authoritarianism, totalitarianism, or statism are biblically permissible views of governmental authority.

3. Denied: The civil government has the authority to control the church's governance and worship or parents' right to educate their children.
4. Denied: The church has the authority to require things not found in the Bible of its members.
5. Denied: Abuse or neglect, which significantly harms the parent/child or husband/wife relationship, are private matters and outside the jurisdiction of the government and church.

APPENDIX: SPHERES OF AUTHORITY DIAGRAMS

Below is a diagram illustrating a **wrong view** which places governmental authority above other spheres of delegated authority (i.e., totalitarianism).¹⁹



¹⁹ These diagrams were adapted from Dan Jarms at Faith Bible Church in Spokane, WA. Accessed at <https://fbchurch.org/resource/biblical-spheres-of-authority>

Below is a diagram illustrating a *proper view* of the three spheres of authority. Note that there is overlap. Principles for navigating these gray areas are provided in section VI of this document.

