Text: Acts 1:3-8
Title: Distinguishing the Kingdom from the Church
Truth: Dispensationalism recognizes a clear differentiation between the church and the kingdom.
Date/Location: 9/9/2026 9:25-10:05am DBTS Chapel & 9/13/2026 FBC

Introduction

Greetings. Ask prayer for Jansen and Kalee Lorch. Mention opening for practical internship in pastoral ministry at FBC.

To orient you to the topic of my message this morning, let me direct your attention to the doctrine of dispensationalism. More specifically, think about the essential elements of the dispensational understanding of the big picture of Scripture. These are, by one account of traditional dispensationalism, as follows:

1. A distinction between Israel and the church.
2. Consistent literal hermeneutics.
3. A doxological center of the Bible's message.

I prefer to think of these Ryrian *sine qua non* as part of a modified traditional dispensationalism. In the latter half of the 20th century, Dispensationalism improved, not nearly so far as progressive dispensationalism, but nonetheless it moved a concrete step forward from somewhat less systematized roots. I was student of those roots, being a theological grandson of Lewis Sperry Chafer through my former pastor who sat in Chafer's classroom. However, a more recent theologian and teacher, Dr. McCune, with his lineage from Alva McClain, proved to be more clear and convincing than the Dallas school of thought.

I would suggest, however, that Ryrie's so-called *sine qua non* need not be discarded. They can, as Dr. Snoeberger has suggested in his 2022 article, be rehabilitated. I suggest that rehab as follows:

1. A *dispensation* is a distinguishable administration in the outworking of God's sovereignty over His world.[1]

[1] "Kingdom program" helpfully modifies Ryrie's statement, but is not clear on the fact that that kingdom has redemptive and secular spheres in the present age. But then in the future it will *not* have separate spheres when the Millennium comes, as it seems

2. The goal of history is indeed the glory of God, worked out through the sequence of dispensations[2] revealed in Scripture, culminating in the future kingdom of God ruled by the Messiah.

3. The right hermeneutical approach is consistent *originalism*, which subjects interpretation to the original author's intended meaning conveyed by the text of Scripture, and carefully does so not only in narrative passages, but also in the Bible's poetic, prophetic, epistolary, and legal genres.

4. The current dispensation is the dispensation of the Church, not the dispensation of grace nor the dispensation of the Spirit. This is because there was plenty of God's grace demonstrated in all of his administrations; thus grace is not a good distinguishing factor for the present administration.

When I speak of *kingdom*, I am not speaking of the rule of God's sovereignty over all things which never ends (Psalm 47:8). Nor am I speaking of the gospel of individual salvation. I am speaking of the future distinguishable *administration* of the kingdom of God, a very Jewish-flavored, millennial, mediatorial kingdom, which is the subject of extensive revelation in Scripture.

Transition: At this point, our orientation is complete.

I. Proposal

A. For this message, I want to focus on the first of Ryrie's essentials, namely the distinction between Israel and the church. There *is* a distinction between Israel and the church—as McCune taught—in origin, nature, purpose, and destiny. Israel's covenants will be fulfilled, and it will have a future as a saved, restored nation distinct from the church (Feinberg) while spiritually united to it

there will be no effective separation of church and state during that dispensation. I do not think "the whole government of God" does much better on that count. And, whole government misses the connection between itself and the "manifold government" of God. I think the latter would actually be better than "whole government" for clarity and also showing the unity of the system.

[2] "Manifold government" is somewhat vague. It is really "manifold dispensations" or better, the sequence of administrations God has chosen, in their Biblically revealed order, to achieve His goal of His own glory and the good of His creatures.

(Vlach). There are distinct senses of terms like *seed of Abraham* and *Jew*, but these do not undercut a genuine distinction between Israel and the church.

B. My proposal is along a different line, not having to do with proper labelling of the dispensation, but instead having to do with an additional distinction that I believe we should embrace based on the disclosure available to us in Scripture. That distinction is this: as Israel and the church are distinct "things," so both **Israel and the church *and the kingdom* are distinct** "things." In other words, instead of two distinct "things," we should have *three* in the sine qua non, corresponding to the prior, current, and immediately next dispensational administrations. I will try to justify this in the rest of this message, but initially it seems reasonable since if the church and Israel are different things, and both the church and Israel will participate in the kingdom, then the kingdom must logically be different than its (at least) two constituent parts.

II. Clearing Up Confusion

A. Someone may object that the essentials of dispensationalism should describe it has it has stood for decades, especially to avoid fracturing it further. I appreciate that, but I am saying that how it *has* stood needs further clarification and development because as it stands, the common approach is imprecise and inaccurate to the Scriptural text. Those dispensationalists who disagree with what I suggest here are already grandfathered in, and I'm not suggesting excommunication!

B. What is the imprecision and inaccuracy of which I speak? It seems that every man believes that which is right in his own eyes about the kingdom, and this affects more than just dispensationalists. As to timing:

1. For some, the kingdom is now, and it would be entirely unsatisfying to them to have no current form of the kingdom to justify their form of church and parachurch work.

2. For some the kingdom is already and not yet at the same time. Jesus inaugurated a new form of the kingdom at his first coming (F.F. Bruce). A fuller form will come later.

3. For others, the kingdom is strictly future, the view I hold. Salvation is prerequisite to entering the kingdom and constitutes a person as a kingdom citizen-in-waiting.[3]

As to type of kingdom:

1. For most, the kingdom is a spiritual thing. The *kingdom* and the *church* are practically synonymous. There may be more to come in the future, but they see the church as doing kingdom work now. Entering the church is entering the kingdom.
2. A related spiritual view is that *kingdom* and *gospel* are synonyms. Preaching the life, death and resurrection of Christ, repentance and forgiveness, the good news of the grace of Christ, *is* preaching the good news of the Kingdom of God. I argue that truncates the Kingdom message.
3. For others such as myself, the kingdom is of a dispensational sort, not spiritualized into a generic "rule of God in the heart." It therefore is different than the church.

For too many pastors and especially church members, confusion reigns as to what exactly the kingdom is.[4] But I think the New Testament does not leave us in such an uncertain state as to **timing** or **type** of kingdom, or its **relationship** to the church. To that point, please look at Acts 1.

III. Acts 1:3-8 on the Difference Between Church and Kingdom

A. After the Lord's resurrection, he appeared to the disciples a number of times and spoke to them about the kingdom of God. The Lord commanded the disciples to stay in Jerusalem, and in a few days they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

[3] On the matter of whether we are presently connected to the kingdom, the answer is simple enough—yes, we are citizens of it, but in exile in a foreign country awaiting our king to return and inaugurate His kingdom (Luke 19:12).

[4] Anecdotally, I remember a pastor preaching on the differences between the kingdom of God, the kingdom of Heaven, the spiritual kingdom, the mystery kingdom, the millennial kingdom, and the historical Israelite kingdom—and it did feel like six different kingdoms. It was very difficult to understand. I am convinced the New Testament's teaching is much simpler.

B. It seems that the "few days" triggered the disciples' question about the timing of the restoration of the Jewish kingdom. "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

It could be that some of the disciples thought only of removing Rome as occupying power. But given the Lord's teaching over the prior 40 days on the subject of the kingdom, I doubt that their notion of the kingdom was so uninformed. Instead, they had hopes for the rebuilding of the historical house of David, but now with a worldwide influence, as foretold by the prophets. The kingdom's **type** was clear to them. *Their* question was one of **timing**.

Their question shows the eagerness of all followers of Christ. We are looking forward to his kingdom. We desire it to come sooner rather than later, whatever form we think it will take.

I want to encourage you in this regard. I hope you are looking forward with eager anticipation, not merely to a heavenly existence in a completely "other" world, but in a world with a substantial continuity with our current one, one in which righteousness rules instead of injustice and corruption. One in which humans flourish and live tremendously long lives, instead of our current vale of tears. One that provides in large measure an answer to the problem of evil—that God has done and will do something about the moral and natural evil in our world.

C. The Lord's answer: "It is not for you to know the times or seasons…" They could not know the time, for it was associated with the second advent, which time was unrevealed. I understand this to mean simply, "No, I will not at this **time** restore the kingdom to Israel." On the most basic level, Jesus tells the disciples the times and seasons are not their business because it is under the Father's direction. At this time, they have another task that *is* their business, and that is the work of global witness about the Lord Jesus Christ, namely the Great Commission.

"Mind your own business" is a good reminder. I have seen people's lives greatly damaged by their desire to mind everyone else's affairs—families, lives, churches, moral failures, etc. while at the same time they are not minding their own spiritual health,

family situation, or church life. It reminds me of Paul's exhortations not to meddle in the business of others (see 1 Thess. 4:11, 2 Thess. 3:11-12, 1 Peter 4:15, 1 Tim. 5:13, Mat. 7:3-5, Rom. 14:4, Prov. 26:17, 20:19).

As a church, we too must have our minds on our own business. Our business is the Great Commission. Making and maturing disciples. That is hard enough that we should be satisfied if we can make progress at it, not worrying about all other manner of stuff. If kingdom-trellis has become the focus and growing the vine has fallen behind, we must get back to vine-tending. "You shall be my witnesses…" must be our focus.

D. The other views of the kingdom (see the list above) explain Jesus's answer a different way. Like this: "No, your view of *timing* is at least partially correct, but your understanding of the *type* of kingdom is wrong. It is not an earthly kingdom, but a spiritual one, either in Heaven in the future, or already inaugurated in the church and in the hearts of people."

   To the contrary, it seems that when Jesus says "No" to the timing question, he makes no comment as to change in **type**, form or function of the prophetic kingdom—because there *is no change in the type of kingdom*. We can still expect the kingdom just like the prophets laid it out. Instead, Jesus says there is *another, different* matter to attend to—building His church, which began in Acts 2. Their church work in Acts 2-28 shows precisely how the disciples understood the Lord's directive—not as a new type of kingdom but as a prerequisite activity to the kingdom's coming.

E. Now consider the phrase "times and seasons."[5] When I read that phrase, it strikes me that those words have a real dispensational flavor. Jesus is saying that when the epoch changes is not your concern. In addition to that, the rulership words "set" and "authority" evoke a potentate who is administrating the matters of his rule as he sees fit. Jesus, I think, is answering a dispensational

[5] χρόνους ἢ καιροὺς. See also 1 Thess. 5:1 which has a dispensationally related "times and seasons" reference. There are also texts like Acts 3:19, 21 which talk about times of refreshing and restoration. The disciples' question is about restoration (Acts 1:6).

question with a dispensational answer about the administration of the kingdom relative to the church.

F. The tenor of the passage reads this way: Jesus is saying, "Not *that*, but instead *this*." Not the kingdom, but instead the church! And that speaks to the **relationship** question. The church and the kingdom are definitely *related*, but they are not overlapping in the present dispensation. The church dispensation is first; the kingdom is next. The church is *already*. The kingdom is *not yet*.

IV. Further Evidence that the Church is not the Kingdom

A. The Kingdom is distinct in time from the church. It is in the future. Luke 19:11-27 is decisive on this matter with its king going to a far country to receive a kingdom and to return. An "immediate" kingdom is not in the offing. The "future entry" texts are clear on this point as well (Acts 14:22, Gal. 5:21, 1 Cor. 6:9-10, 2 Peter 1:11, and even John 3:5).

B. The Kingdom is distinct from the church in its governmental structure. The church is separate from secular government (Matthew 22:21) and has no role governing the nations of earth. The kingdom has international governance built in. "The government will be upon his shoulder" (Isaiah 9:6) and he will rule from sea to sea (Zech 9:10).

C. The Kingdom is distinct in its emphasis on land and agriculture and other "physical" things. The church has no promises of land, agriculture, climate, etc. For instance, Isaiah 11:6-7 speaks of the wolf dwelling with the lamb. Human healing is a very notable factor in the kingdom (Isaiah 33:24), but not in the church. Agriculture will be plentiful in the kingdom (Amos 9:13), but such is not promised in the church.

D. The Kingdom is distinct in terms of the present activity of Christ. Christ is not presently reigning on the Davidic throne. Instead, with regard to kingdom rule, he is **sitting and waiting** until his enemies are made a footstool (Heb. 10:12-13). With respect to His people in the church, He is interceding and advocating for them (1 John 2:1).

I take it that the Son of God in His divine office is reigning with the Father in His universal sovereignty. That has never ceased. But in

terms his humanity, the mediator between God and men is not presently reigning over the millennial kingdom. Advocacy and seated waiting are far different from reigning.

E. The Kingdom is distinct in its origin. It originates with the second coming of Christ. The church resulted from His first coming.

V. Advantages of Clear Thinking on This Differentiation

A. Clear mission statement. If your mission statement were "to make and mature disciples for ministry in His **kingdom**," most evangelicals would have no problem with that. But this assumes that the kingdom is now, because I doubt that the mission statement means they are preparing people for their future role in the millennium as co-regents with Christ. Instead, our thinking should be squarely on **church** ministry. We are training saints for **church** ministry today.

B. Clear center of God's work: the local church. When the kingdom looms large in your mind, you can come to think of the church as optional. "I am a kingdom citizen/I'm doing kingdom work/I started a kingdom non-profit organization/I am doing campus work, the church is secondary/I can do 'church' at home." The problem? You never see that approach in the ministry of the apostles. Keeping the church as the church instead of as an alias for the kingdom helps you focus your attention on what God calls to be our focus in this age: the church and its ministry.

C. Clear practical ministry focus. As has been well documented, a kingdom focus can derail the church into a focus on social ministry instead of gospel ministry. A clear-eyed view of the distinction between church and kingdom keeps you on point. The church does not have a social program mandate. It has a gospel mandate. It is crucial to have this focus in practice, not just in theory.[6]

[6] How then does the church remain relevant in social issues today? First, relevance on those matters is not to be our primary concern. Christians in the church are to be good citizens, caring for widows, orphans, the poor, and needy, *just like all people have been required by God's moral law to be doing for all of human history*. God's people in every age are to be the best examples of that sort of conduct. There is therefore no special church benevolence mandate. Nothing changed at Pentecost that laid a special

D. Clear teaching. We need not explain many different kingdoms, nor try to explain a view which strains words like *Israel* or *church* beyond their natural meaning. It will increase clarity and reduce confusion in the pew.

Conclusion

So, thank you for considering my proposal to keep Israel, the church, *and the kingdom* cleanly differentiated in your mind. It will help your ministry focus, your teaching, and those under your care.

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responsibility on the church, a responsibility which all humanity had for centuries before. This responsibility extends especially to one's family, and similarly we are called to do good "especially" to the those in the household of faith (Gal. 6:10) like 1 Tim 5:8's providing "especially" for those of his household.