

ESCHATOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

PART 52

RAPTURE PASSAGES, PART 2

There is one major argument used by opponents of the doctrine of the Rapture to try and counter the doctrine and many people have fallen for this incorrect explanation. Among other theologians, we will examine the work of one former dispensationalist who fell for this trick and it played a major role in his departure from premillennial dispensational theology as a system of theology as well as assisting in his departure from a biblical understanding of Eschatology. It involves an exegetical fallacy called false assumptions about technical meaning. It is about the word “meet” in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Once they incorrectly assign a technical meaning for “meet” in this verse, they use that conclusion to force their interpretation of all Rapture texts. They have to assign a very narrow, technical meaning to this word in order to make Rapture passages refer to the Second Coming.

“In this fallacy, an interpreter falsely assumes that a word always or nearly always has a certain technical meaning—a meaning usually derived either from a subset of the evidence or from the interpreter’s personal systematic theology.” [D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed., p. 45]. What is ironic about this, Carson is a Calvinist Baptist and he is very involved with Reformed theologians. I suspect—I don’t know for sure, but I suspect—he holds this very exegetical fallacy he identified here when it comes to 1 Thessalonians 4:17. He is certainly not a premillennial dispensationalist. Note that Carson admits this fallacy flows out of the imposition of theology onto the text. This is an ever-present danger for those of us seeking to know what God had to say rather than what man has to say about what God had to say.

When we say a word has a technical meaning, we are saying that word carries with it the same meaning whenever it is used. For example, Dr. Ice believes the words used to denote “earth dwellers” in Revelation have a technical meaning because they are always referring to unbelievers. Fruchtenbaum denies that and says it refers to believers and unbelievers, but that doesn’t seem to be correct. I believe Ice correctly understands the issue in Revelation.

1 Thessalonians 4:17 ¹⁷Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet [ἀπαντήσιν] the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.

ἀπαντήσιν means to meet up with; to encounter. To come near to and to meet either in a friendly or a hostile sense [Louw-Nida]. “In 1 Thess. 4:17, the expression *eis (unto) apantesin* (meeting) indicates that the Lord will be coming from one direction and we shall be coming from another to meet together in the air.” [Spiros Zodhiates, *The Com-*

plete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament, s.v. “ἀπαντήσις,” p. 203]. This is a very simple word and it is used across a spectrum of contexts to refer to a meeting. It is not a technical term.

The problem is those who want to refute the Rapture make this a technical term involving meeting a dignitary and escorting him back into the city. In this way, theologians can make 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 about the Second Coming when Jesus returns to earth. This is the exegetical fallacy of false assumptions about technical meaning Dr. Carson identified. Words may or may not have a technical meaning and the fallacy is implemented when a technical meaning is assigned to a word when its context won't allow it. That is the case in this situation and it has harmed many people's understanding of this verse and the doctrine of the Rapture.

“In a number of books and commentaries on 1 Thessalonians the interpretation of *apantesis* in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 in the phrase ‘to meet (*apantesis*) the Lord in the air’ may qualify as an instance of this fallacy [the fallacy of false assumptions about technical meaning Dr. Carson identified].... [T]he view that *apantesis* has a very specific technical meaning, one that would prevent us from interpreting Paul as teaching a pre-tribulational rapture, is very widely espoused in the literature on 1 Thessalonians. This view suggests that 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is not describing ‘Christ coming for His Church’ but ‘His church coming for Him!’ This view contends, on the basis of this specific technical meaning of *apantesis* that Paul is describing, not ‘The Bridegroom Coming for His Bride,’ but rather the ‘Subjects of the King going out to greet and welcome the King to His Kingdom.’ However, the question in this case would be, can this be an instance of the *terminus technicus* fallacy if the word *apantesis* is not actually a ‘technical term’ at all?” [Kevin D. Zuber, “Metaphor & the Rapture” in *Dispensationalism tomorrow & beyond: a theological collection in honor of Charles C. Ryrie*, p. 343]. One of the problems with assigning a technical meaning to the word is the implication that the King is returning at that time to set up His Kingdom. That doesn't happen until the end of the Tribulation which has not even started yet at the time this meeting in the air takes place. In the two letters to the church at Thessalonica, Paul makes it clear the Church will be rescued from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:10, 5:9).

The presupposition behind this faulty presupposition is there is no Rapture and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is revealing the circumstances of the Second Coming when everyone is resurrected, believers will be called into the air to meet the Lord, accompany Him back to earth to judge all people, and to begin the eternal Kingdom.

Here is an example of how this looks in most commentaries. “[T]he Greek ‘meeting’ is not simply going to encounter someone, but rather ‘the action of going out to meet an arrival, especially as a mark of honour.’ When a dignitary came to visit a city in those days, the inhabitants would pay him tribute by going out of the city to meet him at the proper time. They would then *accompany him back* to the city he was planning to enter.... What makes Paul's language unusual is the spatial reorientation of the ‘meeting.’

He turns the horizontal action of the dignitary's approach, reception, and entrance into a gated city into a vertical action: when Christ comes, he 'will come down' to his domain, and his subjects ascend 'in the clouds ... in the air,' as befits his deserved honor. Based on this conventional usage of 'meeting,' it may be concluded with a relatively high degree of certainty that Paul envisions Jesus coming in the air, resurrected believers and then living ones will ascend to honor him, and *they will then accompany him back to the earth.*" [Gary S. Shogren, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, pp. 189-190].

The problem is, this cannot in any way be termed a "conventional usage" of the word. It is used that way at times, but to say that it represents this specific scenario is absolutely untrue. In fact, this is a fairly rare use of the word. The word is strictly about a meeting; the type of meeting is totally dependent on the context. In other words, it is not a technical term that must carry the meaning of meeting a dignitary and accompanying him back to the city every time it is used. Only context can determine that.

The word ἀπαντήσις is used only three times in the New Testament and a synonym, ὑπάντησις, is used three times.

The word is used in Acts 28:15 to indicate some of the brethren at Rome met Paul and escorted him to the city. This appears to be a similar situation to the meaning the anti-Rapture crowd wants to assign to it, but it is somewhat different and the similarities are forced and superficial. Paul is not a dignitary to anyone except the believers in Rome, in fact, he is a prisoner of Rome. The meaning here is simply referring to some believers meeting Paul and then accompanying him back to the city without fanfare. The particulars of this meeting do not fit the particulars of the Greek formal greeting and reception of an important person. It is not representing the technical meaning they want to assign to it. Even if it conveys the same sort of situation, that does make it a technical word that must carry the same meaning at all times.

Acts 28:15 ¹⁵And the brethren, when they heard about us, came from there as far as the Market of Appius and Three Inns to meet [ἀπαντήσις] us; and when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage.

The word is used in Matthew 25:6, but in this case it actually carries the opposite meaning they want to assign and affirms meaning premillennialists assign to it in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. For our purposes, what this Scripture does do, is affirm the metaphor of the Jewish wedding with the Lord's relationship to the Bride of Christ. The synonym, ὑπάντησις, is used in Matthew 25:1 and there is no discernable difference between the way the words are used; they have the same meaning.

Matthew 25:1, ⁶ ¹"Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet [ὑπάντησις] the bridegroom.... ⁶"But at midnight there was a shout, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet [ἀπαντήσις] him.'

In this case, the people come out to meet the Lord, but rather than escorting Him back to their abode, He takes them to His. That's the picture of the Rapture. The Lord comes for the Bride, the Bride meets Him, and they accompany Him back to His abode, the Father's house where the bridal chamber awaits. This verse does not confirm the technical meaning Rapture opponents want to assign to it. The *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, the editors of which are Reformed Calvinists who deny the Rapture, say that "the virgins leave 'to meet' the bridegroom (representing the Lord), to whom they wish to give a festive reception (Matt 25:1 [ὑπάντησις], 6 [ἀπαντήσις]). [*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, s.v. "καταντάω," 2:638]. This is reading the technical meaning into the word.

Those who claim ἀπαντήσις is used as a technical term in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 claim Matthew 25:6 and Acts 28:15 support their position, but they don't meet the particulars of the way kings and other important dignitaries were greeted. We will see in a moment the fact these Scriptures don't match the reality caused one theologian to cease using the argument that ἀπαντήσις is a technical term. We cannot get blinded by the fact the word is used only three times in the New Testament and superficially at least seems to convey the same scenario in each instance. [See, for example, Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, pp. 168-169; Curtis I. Crenshaw and Grover E. Gunn, III, *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow*, pp. 420-423; Craig L. Blomberg, "The Post-tribulationism of the New Testament: Leaving 'Left Behind' Behind" in *A Case for Historic Premillennialism*, p. 79]. When Greek literature is examined, one finds numerous uses of the word that simply refer to a meeting of some sort. Cosby discovered that of all the early church fathers, only Chrysostom used 1 Thessalonians 4:17 to refer to the formal greeting of a dignitary. By the time of Chrysostom, many theologians had abandoned literal hermeneutics; therefore, when studying them, it is wise to exercise the appropriate level of biblical discernment. The early Greek literature most often uses the word to refer to a meeting of soldiers in battle. Josephus used the word 92 times but only 10 times did it refer to a formal reception. [see Michael R. Cosby, "Hellenistic Formal Receptions and Paul's use of ΑΠΑΝΤΗΣΙΣ in 1 Thessalonians 4:17" in the *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, vol. 4 (1994), pp. 15-32].

The *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* says both words (ὑπάντησις, ἀπαντήσις) are "used in an everyday sense" meaning they do not carry any sort of technical meaning; both words simply mean to have a meeting. The editors, in order to confirm their theological bias, inserted the technical meaning into their text. "Many have seen here an allusion to the ancient practice of giving a civic welcome to an important visitor or to a new ruler in his triumphal entry into the capital city." [*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, s.v. "καταντάω," 2:638].

The synonym, ὑπάντησις, is used in two other verses and both times it carries no semblance of anything other than simply meeting someone.

Matthew 8:34 ³⁴And behold, the whole city came out to meet [ὑπάντησις] Jesus; and when they saw Him, they implored Him to leave their region.

In this Scripture, the people of the Gadarenes were begging the Lord to leave their area so they went to meet Him and convey that message to Him.

John 12:13 ¹³took the branches of the palm trees and went out to meet [ὑπάντησις] Him, and began to shout, "Hosanna! BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD, even the King of Israel."

In this case, people are simply meeting the Lord and welcoming Him as He entered the city. The particulars do not fit the particulars of the technical meaning people want to assign to its synonym.

Archibald Robertson does refer to 1 Thessalonians 4:17 as the "rapture," but I'm not certain he believes in a premillennial Rapture as we understand it, in fact, I would be surprised if he did. He was a Southern Baptist professor at Southern Seminary in Louisville, KY., which has been anti-dispensationalist for decades. He did not say the word carries a technical meaning. He said, "This is the outcome, to be forever with the Lord, whether with a return to earth or with an immediate departure for heaven Paul does not say." [A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, pp. 32-33].

This aberrant doctrine has been around for a long time, but it really took hold in 1930 when a German theologian named Erik Peterson wrote a book about it. Nearly every modern theologian who relies on this theory to disprove the Rapture and present a technical meaning for the word cites Peterson's work for support. All post-millennialists use this theory. F. F. Bruce uses it in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, David J. Williams favorably cites this theory and views the word as a technical term but not as dogmatic fact in the *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series*, Leon Morris views it as a technical term affirming this theory in *The Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, the *Cornerstone Bible Commentary* presents this theory, and many more that I checked present it as fact. Lexicons also refer to Peterson's work. BDAG refers to him and Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* entry on this word is only two sentences but it was written by Peterson. We need to understand that most commentaries were not written by premillennial dispensationalists and are not founded upon literal hermeneutics.

In 1994, a man named Michael R. Cosby wanted to prove Peterson right because he desperately wanted to prove dispensational theology wrong. Much to his consternation, however, when he actually studied the Bible, he found out Peterson's assertion that ὑπάντησις is a technical term is unfounded. It didn't cause him to change his mind about the meaning of 1 Thessalonians 4:17—he still thinks it refers to the Second Coming—but he did abandon the idea that ὑπάντησις is a technical term. The quotations below are from his article entitled "Hellenistic Formal Receptions and Paul's use of ΑΠΑΝΤΗΣΙΣ in 1 Thessalonians 4:17" in the *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, vol. 4 (1994), pp.

15-32. Notice how often he uses the word “scholar” or a derivative which seems to play a large role in his abandonment of dispensationalism and also note the disdain and harsh words he uses to describe dispensational theology.

Cosby first described his journey to abandoning premillennial dispensational theology.

“Paul’s description of the Parousia reverberates with megadecibel blasts of sound. Although many scholars today readily acknowledge multiple readings of texts, one can hardly imagine any envisioning Paul’s words as describing a secret rapture of Christians into the sky. Yet “myriads and myriads” of Christians in fact read the text in precisely this manner, as a casual reading of the multitude of works produced by prophecy enthusiasts so readily reveals.

Over against this naive approach stands the widely held scholarly view that Paul had in mind the Hellenistic formal reception when he dictated 1 Thess 4:15–17. Nevertheless, it would be overly simplistic to assert that on the one side we have the passionately held, anachronistic [old-fashioned] nonsense of the uninformed and on the other side the assured facts of historical criticism. Increasingly, biblical scholars are articulating the decisive role played by their own presuppositions in exegesis. Instead of appealing to the long discredited myth of objectivity still prevalent in some circles, scholars are expressing their personal agendas that lead to particular understandings. Such honesty need not imply a sort of sociological determinism in which all readings are relativized and the biblical documents have no power to speak for themselves. It indicates a healthy avoidance of the hubris that the inscription over the entrance of the temple of Apollo at Delphi warned against: “Know Thyself” (know that you are but a mortal and not a deity).

My own sociological setting, for example, included a Christian community that read 1 Thess 4:15–17 as describing the “Rapture of the Church” prior to the Great Tribulation. One of my fondest beliefs was that all *true* Christians would be spared the dreadful woes depicted in Revelation by being snatched up into heaven. Not until my undergraduate college experience did this whimsical notion collapse before me, a casualty of simple observation. A teacher at a summer camp I attended said with a wry smile that with the *blowing of trumpets and shouting of the archangel* in 1 Thess 4:16, there was enough noise to raise the dead. Stunned, I saw the passage as if for the first time, experiencing what Gadamer calls “being pulled up short by the text.” So strongly did my beliefs dominate my perception that I was blind to obvious details.

Later, while doing my doctoral studies, the whole dispensational approach to such matters collapsed around me like the walls of Jericho when Joshua’s men blew *their* trumpets and shouted. With the dust of its destruction settling on my head like some ancient Hebrew mourning ritual, I translated Erik Peterson’s 1930 article “Die Einholung des Kyrios.” His citations of material from ancient Greek papyri, inscriptions, and literature found fertile soil in my dusted condition. I was completely persuaded by his explanation that Paul’s use of εἰς ἀπάντησιν in 1 Thess 4:17 presupposed a well known custom: the Hellenistic formal reception.

Recently, with the prophetic beliefs of my youth glimmering as fanciful dreams of a bygone era, a new threat to dogma raised its ten horns and seven heads out of the apocalyptic sea of chaos. While reviewing Peterson’s assertions, I discovered to my horror that some of them are simply not persuasive. The potential demise of Peterson’s

widely accepted argument posed eschatological terror for me. For years I have taught students on the basis of his understanding. For years I have dispensed with the bothersome teaching about the Rapture of the Church by using his explanation. But what if Paul did not have in mind the formal reception of a king when he described the victorious return of Christ?

In retrospect I realize that my commitment to Peterson's view was based somewhat on my desire to distance myself from the childhood teachings that were now a source of embarrassment. My emotional commitment prevented me from even wanting to notice any problems with his reconstruction. What began as an effort to strengthen Peterson's argument became a disturbing exercise in scholarly honesty."

Cosby goes on to describe the circumstances of meeting a dignitary and escorting him back into the city. This is a representative documentation of the widespread doctrine of assigning a technical meaning to *ἀπαντήσις*.

"In anticipation of the coming, a formal resolution would be made to announce the event. On the day of the arrival, the city dignitaries would lead a large contingent of the local populace out of the city walls to conduct a formal reception and escort the esteemed individual back into the city. In this procession would be people representing various groups of citizens, such as priests dressed in their finest and carrying cult objects, soldiers in dress uniform, and teachers from the gymnasium with their students. The people typically wore garlands, and frequently the city was specially decorated and performed [perfumed?] with burning incense. At the actual meeting the people shouted their welcome and praises to honor the arriving dignitary and often sang songs. Once inside the city, the arriving official would usually offer sacrifice on one or more altars and sometimes pronounce judgment on selected prisoners, liberating some and sentencing others to execution.

According to Peterson, Paul's use of *εἰς ἀπάντησιν* in 1 Thess 4:17 presupposes this standard celebration. At the Parousia, Christians leave the gate of this world and rush to meet the Lord in the air, ceremoniously coming to meet their king. But in this case the city is enlarged to become the entire world, which is the same view as is presented in Phil 2:10–11, where everyone in heaven and on earth bows before Christ and confesses him as Lord. Angels, the resurrected dead, and transformed Christians all welcome the returning Lord with a shout of acclamation and escort him down to the earth. When he arrives on the earth, he will then pronounce judgment, rewarding the faithful believers and condemning those who have not believed. Thus, Peterson reads into Paul's words the entire conceptual framework of the Hellenistic reception as a way of understanding Paul's meaning."

When Cosby actually compared this scenario with the details of 1 Thessalonians 4:17, he became convinced assigning a technical meaning to this word was in error.

"My investigations into 1 Thess 4:13–17 took me through a series of unexpected transitions of thought but did not lead me full circle. The journey into this research forced me to confront my own deeply held biases. I still detest what I perceive to be the misguided teaching on the Rapture of the Church in some Christian circles because of the abuses it produces. So I did not want to face the possibility that Peterson's interpretation was

incorrect, since it was such an effective and easy means of dispensing with the fanciful notion of the Rapture.

The initial goal of my research was to provide English translations of the material presented by Peterson so that it would be readily available to Christians. In so doing I would provide a service to the Church, helping to steer Christians away from the escapist theology that leads some to view the world as destined to end in a nuclear holocaust, right after the elect are raptured off to heaven. A man with a mission, I sought to locate further texts describing Hellenistic formal receptions so that the case would be airtight and the information readily accessible. When I first began to see some problems with the theory, I did not want to face them.

Only after a period of about a year was I able to admit the possibility that Peterson's exegesis was eisegesis. With great hesitation I carefully examined the data, and honesty forced me to admit I had been wrong. In a way this was a triumph, for it illustrated again the power of the text to transform the view of the reader.

At this point, with only a small amount of residual resentment, I admit that the text of 1 Thess 4:13–17 leaves open the matter of whether or not the Christians are caught up in the air in order to escort the Lord back to earth. By comparing this passage with the other New Testament texts that speak of the Parousia it remains clear, at least to me, that the Parousia in Paul's mind included divine reward of the righteous and judgment of the wicked. But honesty forced me to defuse the most effective bomb in my historical arsenal that so readily destroys the fanciful notion of the Rapture. How much of our scholarship do we perform while looking over our shoulders at the beliefs of our youth that have become sources of embarrassment to us as scholars?"

Cosby's conclusion: "The dominant scholarly understanding of the ἀπάντησις in 1 Thess 4:17, based on the work of Peterson, does not sufficiently account for the differences between Paul's words and descriptions of receptions of dignitaries. All of the main elements of Hellenistic receptions found in ancient papyri, inscriptions and literature are missing from 1 Thess 4:15–17. Asserting that Paul assumed his readers would automatically fill in such details lacks cogency when we compare Paul's words with these accounts. If he truly assumed his audience would presuppose these details, then he deliberately reversed most of the usual elements. Claiming that ἀπάντησις was a technical term carrying with it a standard set of expectations is not convincing. Furthermore, even if one assumes that Paul understood ἀπάντησις in this way, the evidence demonstrates that he did not read such meaning wholesale into his description of the Parousia." [Michael R. Cosby, "Hellenistic Formal Receptions and Paul's Use of ΑΠΑΝΤΗΣΙΣ in 1 Thessalonians 4:17," in *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, Vol. 4 (1994): 15-32].

In my opinion, Cosby's major impetus for abandoning dispensational theology is that he wanted to be thought of as a scholar and accepted by the theological world that rejects dispensational theology. In just these two pages of quoting him, he used the word "scholar" or a derivative ten times and he used "teacher" and "taught" once each. Dispensational theologians are generally looked down upon by highly educated theologians of the Reformed system, and others, and many dispensationalists can't seem to take the rejection and even the hatred directed at them when they enter the theological, academic world. That also seems to be the reason Progressive Dispensational Theology came into being. The other problem was that he was not well taught in either

dispensational theology or the Bible when he was young. If he was, he would have understood the errors in the arguments that convinced him to abandon dispensational theology. At any rate, Cosby, for some lengthy period of time, embraced this exegetical fallacy [false assumption about technical meaning] in order to refute dispensationalism, but at least he had the integrity to change his mind when he did a real exegetical study on this particular part of the issue. He didn't return to dispensational doctrine and he still believed Paul was talking about the Second Coming, but he no longer used Peterson's false assumption about technical meaning as the reason.

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