

The meaning of ἀπάντησις in 1 Thessalonians 4:17:

“Meeting the Dignitary” or “Retrieving the Bride”?

Dr. Kevin D. Zuber

Introduction: Almost every dispensational scholar who holds to the pretribulational rapture has had to face what Charles Ryrie identified over 40 years ago as “the intellectual attack.”¹ In brief this attack, in one form or another, suggests that serious, critical scholarship has, for sometimes rather vague and other times very technical reasons, abandoned the notion of a pre-tribulational rapture. This paper deals with one of those supposedly technical reasons.²

In his nearly classic work *Exegetical Fallacies*, D. A. Carson exposes, among other word study fallacies, the fallacy of “false assumptions about technical meaning.” “In this fallacy, an interpreter falsely assumes that a word always or nearly always has a certain technical meaning.”³ Carson, of course, is dealing with instances where a term may or may not have a technical meaning and the fallacy is “importing” the technical meaning into a context where it is inappropriate. In a number of books and commentaries on 1 Thessalonians the interpretation of ἀπάντησις in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 in the phrase “to meet (ἀπάντησιν) the Lord in the air” might seem to qualify as an instance of this fallacy. As will be demonstrated below, the view that ἀπάντησις has a very specific technical meaning, a meaning that would prevent an interpreter from understanding that Paul is 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 the Church” but “His church coming for Him!” This view contends, on the basis of a specific technical meaning of ἀπάντησις 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

¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, Chicago: Moody, 1965, 13.

² An earlier version of this paper was published in Christopher Cone, ed., *Dispensationalism Tomorrow and Beyond*, Fort Worth, Texas: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2008, as: Kevin D. Zuber, “Metaphor and the Rapture,” 343-56.

³ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996, second edition, 45-46.

His Kingdom.” However, the question I want to pursue in this paper is this: can ἀπάντησις this be an instance of the *terminus technicus* fallacy if the word ἀπάντησις is not actually a “technical term” at all?

Structure

In other words, I will argue that 1) ἀπάντησις is not such a technical term, that is to say, it does not have the “full technical meaning” confidently asserted by many. I will examine what I will call the “full technical meaning” proposed for ἀπάντησις and show that a) it is weakly *attested*, b) is actually *contested* by many scholars (which makes any confident assertion that 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is undoubtedly an instance of such a technical meaning a bit more than a little suspect) and c) that such a technical meaning claims too much for the word standing by itself, particularly in the light of its other uses in the New Testament. In other words, ἀπάντησις on its own, apart from particular contexts, does not have a technical meaning such that one can determine the nature of the “meeting” indicated, much less the direction the parties take after the meeting. I will suggest a “limited technical meaning” of the term, that fits virtually all the uses of ἀπάντησις both outside and inside the New Testament but does not prevent us from seeing a pre-tribulational rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Furthermore, I will argue that 2) even if there were such a technical term, the context of 1 Thessalonians 4:17, renders the imposition of any presumed “full technical meaning” here impossible. In other words, this *would be* an instance of the *terminus technicus* fallacy if in fact the term ἀπάντησις were such a specific technical term. I will also argue that 3) the supposed metaphor or picture drawn by those who understand ἀπάντησις in the “full technical” way does not do justice to this and the other texts which describe the prophetic event(s) in view. My argument here is that the interpretive picture drawn by the advocates of the “full technical meaning” of ἀπάντησις a) confuses the Rapture of the Saints with the Second Coming (a very typical mistake of advocates of non-pre-tribulational views) and b) leaves the several texts that do speak of the Rapture, as well as the Lord’s relationship to His church rather disconnected. In short, I want to ask which picture brings more texts together and which draws a more biblically consistent picture—the view

of those who imagine a technical meaning for ἀπάντησις, a formal reception for a dignitary or those who understand 1 Thessalonians 4 as teaching the Rapture, the coming of Christ, the Bridegroom, for His bride, the church?

Summary of the view that ἀπάντησις is a technical term.

Let me begin with a brief synopsis of the view that ἀπάντησις is a technical term and then I will briefly suggest what it means for the interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. In the simplest terms the view of those who take ἀπάντησις as a technical term (in what I call the “full technical sense”) is the view that this term itself indicates a particular type, “meeting” (“meeting” is the basic lexical meaning of ἀπάντησις). This is a “meeting” that would entail some the rather specific proceedings such as: it would take place between a delegation of citizens or officials and a visiting dignitary; it would take place just prior to the visiting dignitary’s arrival at a predetermined specific location, often just outside a city; there would often be certain formal preparations for this visit; the “greeting party” so to speak would take the initiative to go out from the city to receive the dignitary; and then they would escort him back into the city. It is this last detail that is most significant for advocates of this view, for they would contend that this technical meaning precludes any view that understands Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 to be describing a pre-tribulational rapture, for, if the technical meaning is granted, the procedure would be for the dignitary to continue (with the delegation) into (back into) the city. In no case where this technical meaning applies, it is argued, did the delegation return with the dignitary back to *his* point of origin.

Evaluation and Analysis

What should we think of this supposed technical meaning of ἀπάντησις? A little background on the origin of this view will help us to evaluate it. Virtually all advocates of this view reference (as if a “proof text”) an article written by Erik Peterson in 1929-30-- Erik Peterson, “Die Einholung Des Kyrios”, *Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie* 7, 1929-30 [682-702]. Peterson also wrote the brief

article on ἀπάντησις in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.⁴ Michael R. Crosby notes that Peterson's article drew on "citations from material from ancient Greek papyri, inscriptions and literature" to describe the custom(s) of "Hellenistic formal reception(s)."⁵ These studies led to Peterson's conclusion that in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 Paul has these custom(s) of Hellenistic formal reception(s) in view in describing the return of Christ. The list of books and commentaries that reference Peterson's articles (more or less directly) is impressively large⁶ and those that merely assert the "technical meaning" of ἀπάντησις as describing the formal welcome of a visiting dignitary, is equally large.⁷ Often there is only the confident assertion, as for instance, this from Anthony Hoekema, that "The word translated 'to meet' in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 (ἀπάντησις) is a technical term used in the days of the New Testament to describe a public welcome given by a city to a visiting dignitary. People would ordinarily leave the city to meet the distinguished visitor and then go back with him into the city."⁸ Likewise Barabra Rossing asserts, "Paul's description of 'meeting' the Lord in the air employs a very specific Greek word for greeting a visiting dignitary in ancient times: ἀπάντησις, a practice by which people went outside the city to greet the dignitary and then accompanied him into their city."⁹ Taking those who directly reference Peterson's work, the argument for the "technical meaning" of ἀπάντησις is most often bolstered by citing instances from ancient sources such as Cicero's description of Rome's welcome of

⁴ Erik Peterson, "ἀπάντησις," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 1, ed. by G. Kittel, trans by G. W. Bromiley, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, English ed. 1964, 380-81.

⁵ Michael R. Crosby, "Hellenistic Formal Receptions and Paul's use of APANTSIS in 1 Thessalonians 4:17," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 4:1994, 17 [15-34].

⁶ A mere representative sample of the list here includes: Ernest Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, London: Hendriksen Publishers, 1986, 199; D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995, 153n86; Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, New York: Doubleday, 2000; Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, 226; Anthony A. Hoekema, "Amillennialism," *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. by Robert G. Clouse, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1977, 183, 216n19; Wilhelm Mundle, "katantao," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol 1, ed. by Colin Brown, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967, English ed., 1975, 325.

⁷ E.g. Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973, 104; F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Waco: Word, 1982, 102-03; I. H. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983, 131; John Stott, *The Message of Thessalonians*, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1991, 104; Earl J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Colleville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1995, 246; G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2003, 140-41n; Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004, 176; Ben Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005, 119-20.

⁸ Hoekema, "Amillennialism," 183.

⁹ Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, 176.

Julius Caesar in 49 B.C.¹⁰ or Josephus's description of Vespasian's welcome as the new emperor in Rome after putting down the Jewish rebellion.¹¹

No "technical meaning" for the term ἀπάντησις in and of itself

Limitations of space prohibit a detailed analysis of these and the other instances of the so called "technical use" of ἀπάντησις to describe these events but it can be simply observed that the events themselves seem to dictate the "formal elements" and not the term ἀπάντησις by itself. In other words, we may simply ask if there are other uses of ἀπάντησις in settings other than these formal receptions that indicate a non-technical sense to the term. Indeed, Crosby notes,

A computer search of the literature written during the several centuries surrounding Paul's era using the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (TLG) produced 91 pages of citations of passages that employ forms of ἀπάντησις, ἀπάντησω, ὑπάντησις, and ὑαπάντησω. Yet only a minority of the uses of these terms describes formal receptions. For example, Philo Judaeus uses these words 27 times, but not once to describe the meeting of a dignitary. Similarly, Josephus employs them 92 times but only ten times in descriptions of formal receptions. In the LXX the noun ἀπάντησις is used frequently. . . Often it designates the hostile meeting of armies, although it also describes virtually any kind of meeting.¹²

In short, "Word use alone . . . does not decide the issue of whether or not people of Paul's day considered ἀπάντησις to be a technical term for the Hellenistic formal reception."¹³ Clearly, ἀπάντησις was used in the description of the formal meeting and greeting of a dignitary, but often it was used in contexts when such a formal meeting was *not* being indicated. Simply put, the word considered apart from a context, considered in and by itself, was not a *terminus technicus*. *Context*, not the term alone, determined whether the "meeting" carried any significance beyond a meeting between a group and an individual. (Actually, if there is a more "limited technical meaning" that would be it; that is, if the term

¹⁰ See Crosby, "Hellenistic Formal Receptions," 19.

¹¹ See, Green, "Thessalonians," 227.

¹² Crosby, "Hellenistic Formal Receptions," 20-21. This is true of the uses of the several forms of ἀπάντησις in the wider Greek literature as well; to take just one example of many, Pausanias (a second century Greek traveler and sometime historian) mentions in his *Descriptions of Greece*: Book 1, chapter 20, section 6 and encounter between Taxilus, a general of Mithridates and the Roman general Sulla: "the Roman general entrusted the siege of Athens to a portion of his army, and with the greater part of his forces advanced in person to meet [ἀπαντᾷ] Taxilus in Boeotia." <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text.jsp?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0159:book=1:chapter=20&highlight=a%29panta%3D%7C>, accessed November 26, 2008.

¹³ Crosby, "Hellenistic Formal Receptions," 20.

ἀπάντησις has anything like a “technical meaning” it seems to be used whenever a group met individual; but even that might be questioned.) Attaching any further connotations to the term, *in and of itself*, by virtue of its use in contexts describing those formal receptions, is simply unwarranted.

The “technical meaning” does not apply in 1 Thessalonians 4:17

Indeed, there are several scholars who have questioned this “full technical meaning.” That is, they simply deny that considered on its own ἀπάντησις has the specific technical connotations asserted for it by some, particularly in its use in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Interestingly, both Witherington¹⁴ and Stott¹⁵ cite F. F. Bruce in their explanation of the meaning of ἀπάντησις in 1 Thessalonians 4:17; Bruce writes, “When a dignitary paid an official visit (*parousia*) to a city in Hellenistic times, the action of the leading citizens in going out to meet him and escort him on the final stage of his journey was called the ἀπάντησις.”¹⁶) However, neither of these authors references this, also from Bruce, “But there is nothing in the word ἀπάντησις or in this context (in 1 Thessalonians 4) that demands this interpretation.”¹⁷ Thus, although Green confidently asserts, “there remains little doubt that this custom {i.e. of formal receptions} formed the background of this teaching”¹⁸ (in 1 Thessalonians 4) we must agree with Malherbe that to understand Paul’s use of ἀπάντησις as an allusion to the formal reception of a visiting dignitary is “improbable” on “a number of counts.”¹⁹ Crosby is clear, “Peterson . . . was incorrect in reading Hellenistic formal reception *into* 1 Thess 4:13-17. The text does not support his assertion that Paul’s use of ἀπάντησις in 4:17 brings with it the entire baggage of the custom of greeting dignitaries.”²⁰

¹⁴ Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 120.

¹⁵ Stott, *The Message of Thessalonians*, 104.

¹⁶ Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 102.

¹⁷ Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 103.

¹⁸ Green, “Thessalonians,” 228.

¹⁹ Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 277. The reader should not miss the point here: the juxtaposition of Bruce’s two comments and Malherbe’s comment belies Green’s assertion—in fact, there is very much doubt!

²⁰ Crosby, ““Hellenistic Formal Receptions,”” 31.

Likewise, Joseph Plevnik argues that Peterson's argument "is weak, since the expression ἀπάντησις or εἰς ἀπάντησις is neither limited to Hellenistic parousias nor does it always suggest a bringing in."²¹

So the term ἀπάντησις, considered on its own apart from a context of formal receptions, is *not* well attested as a technical term (at least in the full technical sense) and it *is* a matter of some sharp disagreement, to say the least, as to whether that presumed full technical meaning (even if it does exist) should be understood here in 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

The other uses of ἀπάντησις in the New Testament

Now, some of the advocates of the full technical meaning of ἀπάντησις have appealed to the other instances of ἀπάντησις in the New Testament to support their conclusions. There are only two such contexts: Matthew 25:6, 10 in the Parable of the Ten Virgins and in Acts 28:15 describing Paul's reception by the Christians in Rome. However, even a quick glance at these uses, and the arguments used to defend the technical meaning of ἀπάντησις, will reveal that the advocates of the technical meaning are engaging in some "special pleading." Neither the meeting in Acts 28:15 nor that of the bridesmaids and bridegroom in Matthew 25 have any of the "formal features" of the Hellenistic formal reception of a visiting dignitary.²² These uses again emphasize that it is context that determines the features of the meeting and whether or not one sees in that meeting the features of the so called "Hellenistic formal receptions." So while it is true that the Christians greeting Paul did not "change directions" and return to where Paul came from,²³ (he was after all on the way to Rome!) that in no way is a matter to be determined by the meaning of ἀπάντησις! It is clearly the context and the historical circumstances of the situation being described that determined the "direction" the parties traveled after their meeting. With respect to the use in Matthew 25, Rossing suggests that the term "meet" indicates the "bridegroom goes with the bridesmaids into the house from where they came, where everyone is

²¹ Joseph Plevnik, "1 Thessalonians 4:17: The Bringing in of the Lord or the Bringing in of the Faithful?," *Biblica* 80:4, 1999, 543 [537-46]

²² See below where I discuss the features of the Hellenistic formal reception compared to the context of 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

²³ So Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, 177.

waiting for him.”²⁴ But there is nothing in the text that indicates this. In fact, following the pattern of ancient wedding customs, the event pictured would probably be that of the bridegroom, returning to his father’s house, with his bride.²⁵ Far from describing the “formal reception of a dignitary” the “meeting” indicated in Matthew 25 is rather unique, even for the setting indicated by the parable—namely the pattern of wedding customs. In other words, the meeting between the bridegroom and the bridesmaids has some “odd features” that would not be regular or expected features of the typical wedding party meeting of the day. It happened at midnight, it was delayed for unspecified reasons and it happened suddenly, taking the bridesmaids by surprise when it did come. None of the features of the supposed “technical meaning” of ἀπάντησις fit this context; and it would be equally in error to suppose that any of these “odd features” of this meeting can be attached to the meaning of ἀπάντησις. In short, when ἀπάντησις is used in *any* context it is the description of the meeting itself, in these texts where the term appears, that tells us more about the meeting than the term ἀπάντησις, does by itself. It is clear that the use of the term *in context* in such passages as Acts 28 and Matthew 25 tells us way more about the nature of those meetings than any supposed technical uses or associations the term may or may not have had. In short, far from supporting the idea that the technical meaning of ἀπάντησις helps us understand the nature of these meetings, these examples tell us to pay close attention to the context.

But perhaps in examining the context of 1 Thessalonians we should be discovering that Paul is using instances of supposedly “imperial cult language,” “anti-imperial rhetoric” as Witherington suggests. I frankly find this sort of “scholarship” tiresome. If accepted it would mean that only those who are able to penetrate into the “deeper nuances” of the “deeper meaning” of Paul’s “loaded language” so as to pick up the “associations” (political, social, etc) of the terms, would be able to really know what he meant and/or what the Thessalonians would or would not have understood by the “deep, loaded,” nearly “coded” terms. After a close reading of the context in 1 Thessalonians 4 I find it a very

²⁴ Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, 176-77.

²⁵ See J. Julius Scott, Jr., *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995, 250.

dubious assertion to say, as Witherington does, that in his answer to the Thessalonians regarding “the fate of the Thessalonian Christian dead” (surely this *is the point of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17!*) Paul is really, on some deeper level which only Witherington, N.T. Wright, and other “scholars” will see, actually “busily deconstructing the extant pagan value system” and expressing his “opposition to Caesar” in an effort to subvert Caesar’s empire.” Witherington wants to see this “anti-imperial cult language,” “anti-imperial rhetoric” because it would support the idea that ἀπάντησις is also actually one of those “loaded” terms (loaded with the technical meaning of visiting dignitary—[Ha! Take that Caesar! Jesus is Our Coming Lord!]) which the Thessalonians would have instantly understood as “subversive.” I may be mistaken here but I really think I have drawn out Witherington’s point fairly, if simply—and I find it, again, dubious! I honestly do not see Paul trying to make “deep points” about “subverting the empire” by the use of “anti-imperial rhetoric,” in this context at least; nor is he busy “co-opting imperial rhetoric and applying it to Jesus.”²⁶ He’s just trying to comfort the believers concerning the one’s who have died—will they miss the “catching away” at the “coming of the Lord?” Paul says, “No, they definitely will not miss it; be comforted.” He doesn’t need—and I for one do not find—“deeply nuanced anti-imperial rhetoric” to say that!

We may conclude, therefore, since the term ἀπάντησις on its own, does *not* automatically indicate that Paul had the formal reception of a dignitary in mind we may *not* “as Green suggests “assume that the Thessalonians would have understood [on the basis of some purported technical meaning of ἀπάντησις] that the Lord would continue his *parousia* until he arrived at the final destination of the city or the earth.”²⁷

²⁶ All of this can be found in Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 120-22.

²⁷ Green, “Thessalonians,” 228.

The context of 1 Thessalonians 4 and Hellenistic formal receptions

In fact, as we turn our attention specifically to the context of 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 it will become clear that, even if there were a well recognized technical meaning of ἀπάντησις that included even the slightest indication of which direction the parties took after the meeting, that technical meaning simply would not fit the context. In his article on *Hellenistic Formal Receptions*, Michael R. Crosby²⁸ examines the features of the so-called Hellenistic Formal Receptions as these were identified by Peterson in the article previously cited. Some of these features are: decrees to make elaborate preparations; preparations for wearing festive clothing, garlands and wreaths; sacrifices were often prepared on offered as a part of the reception; loud acclamations would be a prominent part of the receiving crowd's behavior. Crosby describes these features with quotes from primary sources recounting these receptions. And then he summarizes the point I want to emphasize here: "All of the main elements of Hellenistic receptions found in ancient papyri, inscriptions and literature are missing from 1 Thess 4:15-17."²⁹ The context in 1 Thessalonians describes an event that is "sudden and unexpected"; certainly none of the elaborate preparations are indicated. The Thessalonians are not told be prepared with special garments or garlands. It is not the Thessalonians who take the initiative for the meeting. It is not the Thessalonians who are making noise but the shout, the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God. Crosby is dead on! There is no evidence of a formal reception in this context³⁰ so there is no way to determine the direction the parties take after the meeting based on such notions. Even if there were a technical meaning of ἀπάντησις, it would be, as noted earlier, a classic example of

²⁸ It should be noted that Crosby clearly has no sympathy for Dispensational Pre-tribulationism. He regards such teaching as "discredited," "naïve," "misguided," and "fanciful"—a doctrine he "detests"; Crosby, "'Hellenistic Formal Receptions,'" 32. He says he undertook the study of Peterson's aforementioned article to secure information to "steer Christians away from the escapist theology" of the rapture. However, to his credit, his studies indicated that any interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 which suggests that ἀπάντησις has this technical sense indicating a "formal reception of a dignitary" was simply not tenable, not true to the text.

²⁶ Crosby, "'Hellenistic Formal Receptions,'" 29.

²⁷ See Crosby's comment in text above at footnote 18; see also Plevnik, "1 Thessalonians 4:17: The Bringing in of the Lord," 543-44.

Carson’s fallacy of the “false assumptions about technical meaning” wherein, interpreters see the technical meaning of a term where it clearly (and the context here says it clearly) does not pertain.

On the other hand there are several features in the context which indicate that the “direction” the parties take after the “meeting” is *not* back into the city or to earth. For one thing, even Green notes (against his view of ἀπάντησις) that the term “caught up” (the term is ἀρπαγησόμεθα from ἀρπάζω) “means to take someone away by force . . . or to catch away to a celestial place.”³¹ To go on to suggest that “no other explanation is offered of the events after the meeting” as Green does³² and to suggest that we assume the parties continued on into the city (on the basis, again, of the technical meaning of ἀπάντησις) is simply faulty interpretation. As Plavnik argues, Peterson’s explanation of ἀπάντησις does not fit with “the being snatched up” nor does it fit with “the cloud motif” in the 1 Thessalonians 4 context: “In Peterson’s interpretation, the people’s going up on a cloud is equivalent to the citizen’s going out of the city, which is rather strained.”³³ The term ἀρπαγησόμεθα just does not fit the picture of a group of excited celebrants who take the initiative to go out to greet the “royal-dignitary arriving” but it does indicate a sudden, unexpected removal of the believers away from the earth. Furthermore, the meeting is left, literally, up in the air with only this to indicate what happens, what direction is next—“and so we shall always be with the Lord.” One can hardly miss the allusion to another instance of “cloudy removal from the earth”—I am thinking of Acts 1. In Acts 1:9, at the ascension of the Risen Christ, a “cloud” (the Shekinah perhaps) “received Him out of their sight” and in 1:11 the disciples are informed that He went to “heaven.” Admittedly, Paul does not *specify* that the destination is heaven, but he is explicit in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 that we shall “always be with the Lord” and the Lord went to heaven. Paul Benware offers this summary:

Clouds are also used figuratively in the Bible to refer to the presence and glory of God (e.g., Ex. 14:19-24; 16:10; 19:9, 16; 20:21; 40:34-38). It is best in this rapture passage to

³¹ Green, “Thessalonians,” 226.

³² Green, “Thessalonians,” 228.

³³ Plevnik, “1 Thessalonians 4:17: The Bringing in of the Lord,” 543.

understand the clouds as referring to the visible presence and glory of the Lord. At the rapture, it is the glorious Lord Jesus who appears and brings the saints into the presence of His glory.³⁴

One other point needs to be made regarding the context. It must be obvious that Paul's main concern is to answer the question of the Thessalonians concerning believers who have "fallen asleep." They were concerned about those who had died—would they miss the promise of the Blessed Hope? Paul makes it clear in verse 14: No! They will not miss out, for "God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep." Those who advocate the "formal reception of a dignitary view" will acknowledge that resurrection is a part of Paul's answer here, but it seems they ignore this detail—which clearly does *not* fit the pattern of the so called Hellenistic Formal Receptions. Yet, again, this, the answer to the question concerning the destiny of those who have "fallen asleep" in the Lord, is in many ways Paul's main reason for directing the Thessalonians to the truth of this prophetic event! The union of the living / translated saints with those whose souls are finally reunited with glorious resurrected bodies *is the main point* here (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:51-53) and Paul teaches it to produce comfort and hope; and that is the rapture!

Which Metaphor?

Finally, I would like to deal with a somewhat wider issue. One of the ways we can test the credibility of any particular interpretation of a text is to ask how this interpretation "fits" with respect to the interpretation of other related texts. Simply put we may ask, how does this interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17, which pictures Christ as the returning King, fit with other prophetic texts? Similarly, we may ask how does this text fit with other texts if one adopts the pre-tribulational interpretation?

Those who take the view that ἀπάντησις is a technical term that points to the custom of the formal reception of a visiting dignitary assume, of course, that Jesus Christ is that dignitary and thus that

³⁴ Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, Chicago: Moody, 2006, 212.

the coming indicated in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is therefore His “Second Coming.”³⁵ In this view the term *parousia* has reference to one coming (“since Paul did not predict two *parousias*”) and that “one event must encompass both the gathering of the church and final judgment.”³⁶ From here the advocates of this view contend that Paul goes directly in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 to speak of the same event, here designated “the Day of the Lord” and they often add to this argument by drawing supposed parallels between 1 Thessalonians 4:15-5:11 and Matthew 24:29-44, which clearly describes the post-tribulational *return* of Christ.

In response it may be pointed out that the term *parousia* is used in a number of passages in the New Testament: in a “general and not technical” way to describe simply someone “coming”—1 Cor 16:17 of “Stephanas and Fortunatus”; 2 Cor. 7:6, 7 of “Titus”; with reference to specific end times events such as the rapture—1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 2:19, and the bodily return of Christ to the earth—Matt. 24:3, 27, 37, 39.³⁷ A study of the New Testament uses of this term reveals that “*parousia*, lit. ‘a presence’ . . . denotes both the ‘arrival’ and the consequent ‘presence with.’” “In some passages the word gives prominence to the beginning of that period, the course of the period being implied, 1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:1; Jas 5:7-8; 2 Pet. 3:4. In some, the course is prominent, Matt. 24:3, 37; 1 Thess. 3:13; 1 John 2:28; in others the conclusion of the period, Matt. 24:27; 2 Thess. 2:8.”³⁸ In other words, the term can be used to describe the entire period of the Lord’s appearing or particular features or events that occur in the course of that appearing. So there is *one parousia* but it is not *one* dimensional and it does not occur all at *once*. Thus, while 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 certainly continues the general theme of the *parousia* it is also quite clear that Paul has begun an new topic. He even uses the typical transitional phrase *περὶ δὲ*, which indicates a new subject. Here in 5:1-11 Paul is stepping back and looking over not just the immediate occasion of the “catching up,” the “meeting in the air” but the

³⁵ See Martin, *I, 2 Thessalonians*, 154-55; Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 123-24.

³⁶ Martin, *I, 2 Thessalonians*, 154.

³⁷ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958, 156-57.

³⁸ W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, Nashville: 1985, 111.

wider picture of “the day of the Lord.” This phrase designates “the whole program of events, including the tribulation period, the second advent program and the entire millennial age.”³⁹ Paul is simply moving from the specific to the general, from a focus on one part of the whole end times program (the rapture) to the broader picture of “the times and the epochs.” There is no reason to think that 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 5:1-11 must be speaking of “precisely the same event”⁴⁰ or that taking 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 as referring to events after the catching up of 4:17 is an instance “special pleading.”⁴¹

However, there are some very strong reasons to think that what Paul is describing in 1 Thessalonians 4 and what, for instance, Jesus is referring to in Matthew 24 are very different events. As noted the advocates of the view that ἀπαύτησις is a technical term that points to the custom of the formal reception of a visiting dignitary often assume that 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 is a description of the “Second Coming.” This is a fairly common error. Paul Benware has analyzed the main passages dealing with the rapture (1 Thess. 4:13-17; 1 Cor. 15:51-53; John 14:1-3) and those dealing with the second coming (Joel 2:12-16; Zech. 14:1-5; Matt. 24:29-31; Rev. 19:11-21) and identified several contrasts that indicate the two events are indeed different.⁴²

The following chart conveys the key points:

³⁹ Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 174.

⁴⁰ For a more thorough discussion of the connection between 1 Thess. 4:13-18 and 5:1-11 see Robert L. Thomas, “1 Thessalonians,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 11, ed. by F. C. Gaebelein, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978, 280-82.

⁴¹ Witherington (*The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 123) argues that it is “special pleading”; but it is far from clear as to why. He himself concedes that the two passages describe “the rescue of believers” on the one hand, the “judgment of unbelievers” on the other (124). Unless he wants to suggest that some act of judgment occurred in connection with the “Hellenistic formal reception” (he would not, of course) then he must concede that the events of 5:1-11 come after those of 4:13-18. Again, Witherington’s problem here stems from not understanding the meaning of *parousia* which he takes in a rather flat “it’s all a one time event” sort of way.

⁴² Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 230-31

	The Rapture	The Second Coming
Place	The Lord comes in the air; returns to the Father's house.	The Lord descends to the Mount of Olives; remains on earth.
Purpose	The Lord comes to gather, unite and bless His church; glorified bodies.	The Lord comes to judge unbelievers, wrath; no glorified bodies.
Result	No mention of establishing a Kingdom; believers removed from earth.	The Lord comes to establish the kingdom; believers remain on earth.
Time	Imminent, any time!	After the Tribulation

So Benware concludes, these differences “do suggest we are looking at two separate events.”⁴³

On the other hand, those who take Paul as teaching the Pre-tribulational Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4 can tie this understanding to an impressive, wider (than the formal reception of a dignitary view), biblical New Testament metaphor that places it on a firmer footing when, as suggested earlier, one considers how the interpretation “fits” with other passages. That metaphor is that of the Church as the Bride of Christ, the Bridegroom. Robert L. Saucy writes, “One of the most beautiful images of the church is that of the bride of Christ.”⁴⁴ The metaphor appears prominently in Ephesians 5 where Paul “uses the union of Christ and His church to illustrate the relation of husband and wife (Eph 5:22-23).”⁴⁵ Understanding key aspects of this metaphor requires a knowledge of the ancient wedding customs with which the disciples and the early church would have been assuredly acquainted. Saucy describes the main features of these customs that are pertinent to understanding the main metaphor: he writes, “the Oriental practice of marriage . . . consisted of three stages. First came the betrothal, which was more than a promise of marriage. It was the very initiation of marriage, for the bride was legally considered a married woman from the time of betrothal.” After the betrothal, there would follow an indefinite time of preparation. This time was devoted to, on the man's part, preparation of the future home and on the woman's part, preparation of herself for the new role she was intended to fulfill. At an

⁴³ Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 231.

⁴⁴ Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, Chicago: Moody, 1972, 44.

⁴⁵ Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, 45.

undesigned time, would come “the retrieval” when “the actual marriage took place. On that day the bridegroom and his friends went to the home of the bride and then, in company with the bride and her friends, the festal company proceeded to their future home.”⁴⁶ When the couple arrived at their future home there would be a more formal ceremony of presentation and often “it was a friend of the bridegroom who made the presentation” of the bride to the groom.⁴⁷ Then would follow a marriage supper and time of celebration.

It is that simple outline, I suggest, that forms the background to understand the significance of the several passages that teach the rapture of the church, including 1 Thessalonians 4. The first passage in the New Testament revealing the rapture of the church is found in John 14:1-3 recorded in the very words of the Bridegroom Himself, is a promise to fulfill the tasks of the bridegroom in *preparation*, and a promise in anticipation of the time of *retrieval*. “The church is presently the betrothed bride of Christ (2 Cor 11:2).”⁴⁸ The text noted earlier, Ephesians 5, indicates that the Bride, the church is to be active as well, fulfilling her part in the period of *preparation* (cf. Revelation 19:7b). Then follows of course the actual *retrieval* and this is obviously what 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 is all about. “Following the analogy of the Oriental practice, the church as the bride now awaits the coming of Christ to take her to Himself (again alluding to John 14:3). The Apostle Paul speaks of this day” in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.⁴⁹ Finally, the *retrieval* leads to the *presentation*; only in this case “Christ presents His own bride to Himself. (cf. Eph 5:27) He and no other presents the bride, and He and no other receives her to Himself.”⁵⁰ After the *presentation*, there follows the *marriage supper*, which is of course indicated in Revelation 19:7-9.

⁴⁶ Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, 45; See J. Julius Scott, Jr., *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995, 250.

⁴⁷ Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, 48.

⁴⁸ Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, 48.

⁴⁹ Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, 48.

⁵⁰ Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, 48.

The fact that we can “fit” 1 Thessalonians 4 into this wider, biblical metaphor of Christ and His Bride does not prove the pre-tribulational rapture, but it does offer a more satisfying and biblically consistent picture of the prophetic event in view in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 than the dubious opinion of the formal reception of a dignitary view.