LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

THE DOCTRINE OF THE RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH

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Table of Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................................. 3

Where Did the Idea of the Rapture Originate? ........................................................................ 3

What is the Rapture? ................................................................................................................ 4

The Pretribulation View of the Rapture .................................................................................. 6

The Midtribulation View of the Rapture ................................................................................. 10

The Posttribulation View of the Rapture ............................................................................... 10

Rapture and Resurrection ...................................................................................................... 11

A Rapture From the Earth, To the Earth .............................................................................. 12

Conclusions ............................................................................................................................. 14

Bibliography ............................................................................................................................. 15
Introduction

The rapture of the church is a highly debated topic in evangelical circles today. The debate consists of several points of view. There are some who teach that the rapture will precede the time of tribulation that is promised in the Bible. They are generally referred to as pretribulationists for this reason. The other less common views are known as midtribulation and posttribulation based upon when the person expects Jesus to come and rapture His church from the earth as either the middle or end of the tribulation respectively.¹ The insistence of reckoning the timing of the rapture by the tribulation leads to theological problems and is not necessary, because the timing of the rapture is far less important than the significance of the rapture itself. The Scripture passages that are commonly understood to explain the rapture are full of allusions to common Jewish ideas and themes and will be examined in that light for better understanding. This paper will deal primarily with the pretribulation view as the majority view of most evangelicals and show how it fails to encompass a full historical, literal understanding of the doctrine of the rapture and what impact this has on theology as a whole. This paper will show that the pretribulation view of the rapture has errors that can lead to problems in other areas of theology and will show another way to look at this issue.

Where Did the Idea of the Rapture Originate?

The word itself originates from the Latin translation of the book of 1 Thessalonians, where the Latin word *rapio* was used for the phrase rendered as “caught up” in English in verse seventeen. For this reason it is accurate to say that the word “rapture” does not appear in the original text of the Bible itself. According to Elwell, the doctrine of the rapture was an historical

church doctrine that wasn't defined in any great detail until the nineteenth century. At that time, the pretribulation rapture view was developed and inculcated in modern theology through the work of John Nelson Darby, the Scofield Reference Bible, and several prominent seminaries. This does not mean that the idea of a rapture is incompatible with Scripture. Even though the term “rapture” is based on a single reference (and a Latin word) in 1 Thessalonians, the idea of a rapture of God's people is present in many places throughout Scripture. However, the full implication of the term rapture is a debate all by itself. Michael Williams believes that the doctrine of the rapture introduces elements of Gnosticism back into the Christian faith and obscures the promised resurrection. It is unlikely that all who teach the rapture of the church would view the doctrine as a doorway to Gnosticism, but it is also possible that Williams has a valid point. His views will be examined in detail as critical reflections of the rapture doctrine later.

**What is the Rapture?**

Since the origin for the term rapture comes from 1 Thessalonians 4:17, it would be good to look at the context verses fifteen through seventeen in detail:

> 15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. (1 Thessalonians 4:15-18, all Scripture quotations are NKJV unless otherwise noted.)

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2 Ibid., 983.
3 A complete listing of passages that may discuss the rapture is dependent largely upon the viewpoint, but a good cross section would be passages in chapters 2, 4 and 5 of 1 Thessalonians as well as 2 Thessalonians 2, the gospel accounts of Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 where Jesus speaks to His disciples about the last days, other passages that refer to a final gathering of God's people are also included by some scholars.
Paul is writing to the Thessalonian church about the return of the Lord and it appears that the Thessalonian believers were deeply interested in this topic, since he returns to this theme in his second letter to them as well. The Greek word that is translated by the phrase “caught up” is ἠφαρπάζω, which denotes a forceful snatching or taking away. It is rendered “caught up” in this instance because of Paul's imagery of Christ's coming in the clouds. It is used by Paul in this same sense when he speaks of a man who is caught up to heaven in a vision in 2 Corinthians 12. The emphasis of the passage however is not the direction or location of the snatching away, but the final destination in the presence of Jesus Christ.⁵ Paul stresses that from this point on the believer will be with Jesus forever. A quick perusal of other passages with this terminology, shows that Paul is using this allusion to connect the rapture with the coming of Jesus Christ that He himself predicted.⁶ Whiting's analysis displays a common problem with most interpretations of Paul's writings, particularly those that address the issues of the rapture and resurrection and the last days, when he discusses the connection of the rapture passage in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. He connects the passage from 1 Thessalonians with the mention of the resurrection at “the last trump” in 1 Corinthians 15:52. Whiting overlooks Paul's Jewish upbringing and nature and assumes a Roman allusion is in view in this passage related to the calling of Roman troops to break camp.⁷ There is a Jewish understanding and practice of a “last trump” as well and it should be considered in light of Paul's theological training as a Pharisee and self-identification as a Pharisee and a Jew throughout his writings.⁸ This will be examined in greater detail later.

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⁶ The passages in view here are Matthew 24:30; 26:64; Mark 13:26 and 14:62; Luke 21:27; and possibly the account in Acts 1:9-11 which all use the same language of Christ coming in the clouds.
⁸ Brad H. Young, Paul the Jewish Theologian (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 1-5.
Nevertheless, for the duration of this paper, the rapture refers to the idea that believers will be “caught up” in the clouds to be with the Lord as stated in 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

The Pretribulation View of the Rapture

The predominant view among most evangelicals is the pretribulation view of the rapture. As noted earlier in this writing, Elwell cites the spreading of this view from the early nineteenth century onward through the main spheres of evangelical thought. This view has several main features: an imminent view of the rapture itself, a literal view of the millennial reign of Christ, a literal view of the tribulation outlined in Revelation and Daniel as a seven year period which the church will not be subject to, and a two-stage return of Christ. This view is almost unanimous among those who hold a dispensational view of Scripture and God's plan.\(^9\)

The immanency of the rapture is a key component of the pretribulation view of the rapture if not the key feature. This is the view that the rapture can take place at any time with no preconditions that need to be met before its occurrence.\(^10\) The imminence view bolsters its case on repeated statements in Scripture that “no man knows the day or the hour” as explained by Whiting.\(^11\) The words are spoken by Jesus to his disciples in response to questions about the last days, which is an established Jewish paradigm. Jesus' response could be taken in another way if Jewish customs are considered however.

Jesus used many marriage themed parables and sayings when speaking about the coming of the Kingdom of God, such as the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25 that contains one of His statements about not knowing “the day or the hour.” The custom in Jesus' day was for a groom to enter a formal arrangement with his bride signified by a written

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agreement called a ketubah. The groom would then go to prepare the home that he and his wife would share. This imagery is present in John 14:1-3 in particular, yet this passage is used by Wayne Brindle as part of his argument supporting the view of an immanant return. He says that both pretribulationists and posttribulationists alike agree that John 14:3 refers to the return of Jesus to rapture the church, and he argues that this passage indicates the taking away of believers to heaven. If this passage is understood as a groom talking to his bride, then it simply means the groom would go and make the preparations needed and then wait until his father stated that the preparations were completed before he would return for his bride. This is a possible explanation for Jesus' statement that only His father knows when He will return; He is speaking in the context of a Jewish groom preparing for a wedding. This imagery is prevalent in the Scripture in Revelation in particular as well. This interpretation still leaves room for the idea of an imminent return, but other passages call it into question. The most obvious is the handling of Paul's words to the Thessalonians in chapter five of his first epistle, immediately after the lone direct reference to the rapture.

There is a additional explanation for the repeated use of the phrase “no man knows the day or the hour.” It is likely a reference to Rosh Hashanah, due to the timing of that feast. Rosh Hashanah is the one feast on the Jewish calendar that is celebrated at the beginning of a month, which means it is determined by the sighting of a new moon. In biblical times, this meant that no one knew the day the Feast would begin until the moon was sighted and the word went out to the people. This meant that the feast was celebrated over two days treated as a single day. The feast was sometimes referred to the day when no man knew the hour or the day or as the “hidden

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12 Brindle, "Biblical evidence for the imminence of the rapture." 140-142.
day.” The feast is also celebrated with the blowing of a shofar or trumpet 100 times, with the final blast that is referred to as the “last trump.” All of this imagery is present in Paul's writings in 1 Thessalonians and in 1 Corinthians as well. It is hard to imagine that a Pharisee writing these things would not have these specific holidays in mind.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-4 contains some interesting statements that contradict the idea that no one will know when Jesus is coming to gather His own as mentioned in chapter four:

1 But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. 2 For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. 3 For when they say, “Peace and safety!” then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. 4 But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. 

Paul states plainly that he doesn't need to go over the information about times and seasons, because they already know from his earlier teaching. Although the image of the thief in the night is used here in verse two, in verse four it is stated plainly that this image does not encompass the believers in Thessalonica. Jesus also indicates an ability to be informed about His return in the gospels. He compares understanding the signs He gives for His coming to understanding that summer is near based on the trees.

Taken together, this is a problem for the imminence view of the rapture; the possibility that the rapture could occur on a predetermined day of God's calendar which is not a total secret. The idea behind this is derived from the fact that Jesus earthly ministry is seen as a literal fulfillment of God's feasts as celebrated by the Israelite nation. The gospel writers make a lot of references to the feasts themselves and John makes a point of showing Jesus as the literal fulfillment of the Jewish feasts.

15 Luke 21:29-31
Passover lamb. Several details of the crucifixion account in John seem to be purposeful in identifying Jesus as the Passover lamb. John is the only gospel writer who specifies that the sponge Jesus drank was placed on a hyssop stalk, which would refer to the events of Exodus 12 since hyssop was used to sprinkle the blood of the paschal lamb. John also places Jesus death on the cross in such a way that it chronologically coincides with the actual day of sacrifice of the Passover lambs in the Temple. The gospel of Mark gives extra detail to show that Jesus died at the same hour as the time of the evening sacrifice. Many Messianic Jews and others see a literal fulfillment of the spring feasts in Jesus' life on earth and therefore expect a literal fulfillment of the fall feasts for His return trip. With apparent allusions to Rosh Hashanah in Paul's writings and Jesus' words, there is a strong possibility that they are right. These scholars take the Bible on literal terms as well, but see a different paradigm at work than the dispensational paradigm followed by most pretribulation rapture scholars. The two viewpoints are polar opposites of each other and both cannot be right. Millard Erickson notes that there are difficulties in the imminence view that cannot be easily answered and notes the parables of Matthew 25 along with others. Because the imminence view does not adequately explain the passages that state God's people should be aware of the times and the signs of Jesus' return in a literal sense as they do everything else; it is the view of this writer that the pretribulation view of the rapture has some problems tied specifically to the area of imminence.

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17 In Mark 15:33-37 the time of Jesus' death is given as the ninth hour, which would coincide with the evening sacrifice time and the likely finishing of the Passover lambs being sacrificed in the Temple.

18 There are several Messianic resources available that teach this perspective. El Shaddai Ministries or First Fruits of Zion would be two examples.

The Midtribulation View of the Rapture

The midtribulation view of the rapture holds that the church will go through part of the time of tribulation promise in Daniel and Revelation, but will be raptured out of it before the Great Tribulation that is spoken of by Christ in the gospels. Most proponents of this view hold that the church will be taken about about the halfway point, which is assumed to be three and one-half years into the tribulation. This view of course does not believe in the imminence of the rapture, but it holds much in common with the pretribulation view. It also promotes a literal seven year tribulation and a literal millennial reign of Christ on the earth. This view also expects a two-stage return of Christ, since He will come once in the middle of the tribulation for His church and then again at the end of the tribulation for the start of His millennial reign. This view draws two main lines of support. One is the argument against a secret immanent rapture of the church and the other is the repeated mention of a midpoint in the tribulation accounts in Daniel also in Revelation. While the views of midtribulationists do not contradict Scripture in any discernible way, there is very little actual direct support either. This leaves too many unanswered questions still to ask which cannot be handled in the scope of this paper.

The Posttribulation View of the Rapture

The posttribulation view is a response to the problem of a two-fold return of Christ that is present in both the pretribulation and midtribulation views. The posttribulation view exists and argues according to Elwell as a response to the pretribulation view particularly. The view attempts to address the difficulty of the two-fold return of Christ by focusing on a single return of Christ to begin the millennial reign after the tribulation. The main focus of the argument in

21 Ibid., 985.
favor of the posttribulation view is that the second coming of Christ is seen as a very public event that will be visible to all according to Scripture. The posttribulation view is much less rigid and according to Elwell, it has several schools of thought within its sphere.\textsuperscript{22} It is not the purpose of this paper to delve into detail regarding the view, but it is instructive to mention its similarities with other rapture views.

\textbf{Rapture and Resurrection}

Lost in all of the debate over the timing of the rapture is the meaning of the doctrine itself and its companion doctrine in Scripture, the resurrection of the dead. Michael Williams writes that the doctrine of the rapture ultimately results in a focus on removal from this world to heaven with a consequent negative view on the physical existence on earth. The resurrection view instead emphasizes the view that this earth will be redeemed and remade along with those who will inhabit it after the resurrection of the dead.\textsuperscript{23} This is an entirely different view that any of the traditional teachings regarding the rapture. Williams points out just how different it is and what the difference means in terms of theology:

\begin{quote}
Understanding the future as resurrection gives us a very different picture of things. Instead of the Christian's hope being a separation from the earth, temporality, and bodiliness, the Christian's hope is God's promise to renew or restore all things. Salvation is not a release from earthliness, physicality, or earthly concern. Rather, it is a reconstitution within earthly existence. And further, it is a reconstitution or renewal that looks forward to the redemption of creation itself.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

In his view, the rapture changes the focus of God's plan from the redemption of the world to an escape from its boundaries. This can be seen in the rapture images in popular series like Left Behind or even the bumper stickers that indicate a vehicle will be empty in case of rapture.\textsuperscript{25} He

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{23} Williams, "Rapture of Resurrection," 11. \\
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 21.
\end{flushright}
writes that an undue amount of attention is placed on heaven as the ultimate hope and goal of the believer which is contradictory to Scripture. There is much in Scripture regarding the hope of resurrection, but little to speak of regarding a home in heaven.\textsuperscript{26} In fact, heaven is pictured as coming down to earth in the book of Revelation. There is a dichotomy between eternal life in heaven as a spiritual being or a resurrection life on earth in a spiritual body with a literal world of difference between the two. The first is much more akin to the Gnostic beliefs that the first century New Testament writers and the early church fathers worked so hard to combat. It is a triumph of Greek philosophy, that espouses an immortal soul, over Hebraic philosophy, that teaches God will restore the physical body in resurrection. Ultimately the teaching and theology about the rapture works to consign the resurrection to an interesting side note that must happen before the rapture, but its importance and the meaning of the resurrection itself are downplayed. Williams further notes that this is a sign of “soteriological self-centeredness.”\textsuperscript{27} He shows that talk of rapture and escaping this fleshly prison is distinctly Platonic, Greek and Gnostic type of talk that is rarely considered as such by modern day evangelicals.\textsuperscript{28} The problem is that Williams identifies a major problem with rapture doctrine without giving any kind of solution to it. The good news is that a possible biblical solution exists that can incorporates both the idea of the rapture that Paul speaks of with the resurrection that both the Old and New Testaments promise.

\textbf{A Rapture From the Earth, To the Earth}

What many may not realize is that the Jewish rabbis taught not only about a resurrection, but also about a rapture as well. In commentary on Deuteronomy 30:3, the Jews have created a picture very much like the rapture of 1 Thessalonians 4:17:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 22.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 23.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 32.
\end{itemize}
A further [lesson] may be learned [from the unusual form of the verb which expresses “to bring back the exiles”]: The day on which Israel’s exiles will be gathered is so monumental and [this ingathering] will be such a difficult [procedure, as it were], that it is as though God Himself must literally take each individual Jew with His very hands, [taking him] out of his place [in exile].

In fact, the idea of an ingathering of the Jews from the nations of the world is very prominent in dispensational theology, but a connection to the rapture is nonexistent. The Old Testament speaks of this gathering of the God's chosen people in Isaiah 11:12 and Jeremiah 23:3-11 and it suggests the idea that the Gentiles will be a part of this gathering in Isaiah 54:3; 56:8; and 60:4-5. Perhaps the most stunning example in the Old Testament comes from Ezekiel 37:11-14:

11 Then He said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, ‘Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!’ 12 Therefore prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. 13 Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. 14 I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it,” says the LORD.”

These verses tie both the resurrection and the “rapture” of Israel together in a single event.

Matthew 24:31 shows that Jesus spoke of the gathering of God's elect, which His disciples would have presumed to mean Israelites at the time, when teaching His disciples about the last days. This also introduces a new twist on the parallel passages in Matthew 24:37-41 and Luke 17:26-37 that are thought to portray the rapture of the church. Williams writes that those taken in this story are not taken to deliverance but to judgment based on the mention of the Noahic flood, but there may be more specific information on this judgment based on Luke's version. In verse 37 of Luke 17, the disciples ask where the people will be taken. Jesus replies, “where there is a

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30 Williams, "Rapture of Resurrection," 25.
dead body, there the vultures gather.” (NIV) This brings to mind the image used for the marriage feast of the Lamb in Revelation 19:17-18. It is intriguing to think that Jesus may have been alluding to this very image. If so, the rapture is either a gathering of God's people to the final battle or perhaps a gathering of the wicked to their final destruction as Williams view mentioned earlier and the possibility exists that both could occur. The Bible doesn't give a vast amount of detail regarding the rapture itself, so it could well cover both events in some way.

**Conclusions**

The predominant view in evangelical churches of a pretribulation rapture is a reflection of the mindset of Western Christianity. It is a Christianity that does not wish to suffer hardship or pain and projects that desire into God's plan for His church. The view of the Bible is that God's people will go through tough times and the truth of today is that much of the church in the world is already in a time of tribulation that the churches of the “West” do not see or realize. The pretribulation rapture fails to handle the current tribulation of the church and does not deal well with the possibility of a non imminent rapture that might fall on a specific day in God's calendar in the same way that Jesus' death did. This writer was raised and taught the dispensational pretribulation theology and believed it for many years, but the difficulties encountered in intense study of the doctrine in more recent years have left the impression that it does not fit the historical and contextual meanings of the Scriptures that God has given to His people regarding the final days. It lends to a theology that avers suffering and pain rather than a theology that confronts pain and suffering as part of creation as it is now, but not as it will be. This paper shows another way to look at God's redemptive plan in history, including the end of days.
Bibliography


