

Redescribing the Thessalonians’ ‘Mission’ in Light of Graeco-Roman Associations*

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1 Thessalonians 1.2–10 is generally understood to be making reference to the Thessalonians participating in missionary activity in which they proclaim the salvific message of Christ. Read this way, the text presumes that the Thessalonians have evangelized areas even before the Paul party arrived. That a newly constituted group of artisans would undertake such an aggressive program seems unlikely. The rhetoric of the passage is better understood in light of the practice of associations in proclaiming honours for their gods and their founders and benefactors, the news about which spread via networks of traders, artisans, and other travelers throughout the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia.

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In the thanksgiving section of 1 Thessalonians (1.2–10), the writers of the letter—Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy—assure the Christ ἐκκλησία members that they are the persistent focus of prayer and remembrance. The writers draw attention to the group’s faith, hope, and love (1.3), recalling the manner in which the gospel (εὐαγγέλιον) came to the people of this bustling commercial port city (1.5). In the latter part of the thanksgiving, the writers note their reception by those that would form the core of the Thessalonian Christ group:

And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution (θλίψις) you received the word (δεξάμενοι τὸν λόγον) with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example (τύπον) to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome (εἴσοδος) we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the

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dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming. (1 Thess 1.6-10, NRSV)

Clearly, the writers are pleased that the Thessalonians have been proactive in spreading news of some sort as a result of their encounter with the Paul party.¹

There is a clear trend among commentators in understanding the text as referring to the Thessalonians participating in some form of missionary activity. While most scholars recognize the text is ambiguous as to the nature of that activity, they assume that it primarily, if not exclusively, involves the proclamation of the salvific message that the Thessalonians themselves heard from Paul (cf. 1 Thess 2.1-12). The model of behaviour underlying this understanding seems to be based on the narrative description of the work of individuals or groups of individuals described in the book of Acts. Nowhere in Acts, however, do we have an entire Christ group such as that at Thessalonike engaging in such recruitment activities. Rather, representatives are dispatched to do so, but rarely from non-Judean-based groups. It is likewise difficult to find exemplars of group 'missionary' activities in the Graeco-Roman world.

The current paradigm for understanding 1 Thess 1.6-10 fails to engage fully the reality of life in the Graeco-Roman world and is limited by perceptions garnered through the narrative worlds of the Gospels and Acts along with modern experiences of missionary movements. In order to re-describe the context and rectify the current paradigm we need to understand what the Thessalonians themselves imagined they were doing by contextualizing their frame of reference for hearing the writers' words. In light of typical practices of ancient associations, the Thessalonian Christ group's activities referred to in 1 Thess 1.6-10 can be understood as proclaiming honours for their founders/benefactors alongside praise for their deity. News about these honourifics then spread through networks of traders, artisans, and other travelers throughout the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia. Such reports included information about the Paul party and about the God they proclaimed, but cannot be categorized as 'missionizing' in the modern sense of having recruitment as the primary aim of the proclamation.

1. Thessalonians as a 'Missionary' Group

A number of recent commentators interpret 1 Thess 1.2-10 as reflecting active proclamation of the message of salvation through the death and

¹ Although often reference is made simply to 'Paul' as if he worked alone at Thessalonike and was the sole writer of the letter, this is patently not the case. The other common referent is 'the missionaries', a term I am deliberately attempting to avoid for reasons that I hope will become clear. Thus, I will refer to the group that arrived in Thessalonike and established the ἐκκλησία there as the 'Paul party', singling out Paul as their leader, but not as sole proprietor of the message.

resurrection of Jesus. Malherbe, for example, interprets the phrase 'work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope' (1.3) as using 'traditional terms' referencing 'the Thessalonians' preaching'.² Verse 8 builds on this 'because he wishes to say something further about the Thessalonians' faith that caused them to preach (v. 3) and made them an example to other believers (v. 7)'.³ Malherbe's rationale for understanding the words as references to preaching is stated up front: 'prudence dictates that the focus be on the context in which they are used. The context here (1.2-10) deals with the preaching and reception of the word, and the three terms stressing the effort of the Thessalonians describe the strenuousness with which they preach.'⁴ The argument is, however, circular, since the later verses are only linked to preaching through Malherbe's particular interpretation of v. 3. That is, v. 3 cannot be understood as referring to preaching on the basis of an interpretation of vv. 8-9 being references to preaching on the basis of v. 3!

Other commentators similarly interpret the text as referring to missionary activity. Frame cannot imagine that the Thessalonian believers are not involved in oral proclamation and recruitment to Christ groups, although in his comments on vv. 8-9 he leaves somewhat obscure whether the Thessalonians themselves are witnesses or whether that role falls to their appointees.⁵ Best notes that despite the Thessalonians' tribulations, their acceptance of the gospel message was accompanied by joy as they set about to 'encourage believers in other areas and also encourage outsiders to become believers'.⁶ Without much elaboration, Bruce assumes verbal proclamation on the part of the Thessalonians.⁷ Laub notes the Paul party's role as a model for the Thessalonians activity.⁸ Richard

2 A. J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation and Commentary* (AB 32B; New York and London: Doubleday, 2000) 117.

3 Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, 117.

4 Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, 108.

5 J. E. Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (ICC; Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1912) 76.

6 E. Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (BNTC; London: A. & C. Black, 1972) 80.

7 F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (WBC 45; Waco, TX: Word, 1982) 15-16.

8 F. Laub, 'Paulus als Gemeindegürnder (1 Thess)', *Kirche im Werden: Studien zum Thema Amt und Gemeinde im Neuen Testament* (ed. J. Hainz; Munich/Paderborn/Vienna: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1976) 31. Others who understand this text as referring to the Thessalonians undertaking missionary proclamation, both at home and abroad, include B. Henneken, *Verkündigung und Prophetie im Ersten Thessalonicherbrief: Ein Beitrag zur Theologie des Wortes Gottes* (SBS 29; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1969) 63; R. T. Etcheverría, 'La misión en Tesalonica (1 Tes 1, 1-2, 16)', *Salmanticensis* 32 (1985) 279; G. D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009) 43-4; J. Lambrecht, 'A Call to Witness by All: Evangelisation in 1 Thessalonians', *Theologie in Kontext* (ed. J. H. Roberts et al.; Johannesburg: Orion, 1991) 324-5; R. L. Plummer, *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission: Did the Apostle Paul Expect the Early Christian Communities to Evangelize?* (Paternoster Biblical Monographs; Milton

merges his emphasis on the Thessalonian community's reputation as the content and the missionary practice of proclamation when he notes 'the Thessalonian community was an example or model *in missionary terms* to others on the Greek mainland'.⁹ He then clarifies that 'in missionary terms' indicates that Paul's gospel message of salvation came to the Thessalonians first 'and then from that dynamic community rang out loudly to all parts of Greece'.¹⁰

Perhaps the most pervasively cited argument in this regard comes from an article by James Ware, who contends that 1 Thess 1.5-8 points to the Thessalonians not only receiving the message from Paul but actively communicating it to others.¹¹ When the writers refer to the Thessalonians as a τύπος to believers in Macedonia and Achaia, they are signaling that the Christ group imitated the Paul party's evangelistic efforts. Ware claims, 'Paul regarded the Thessalonians' successful imitation of him as bound up in their participation with him in the extension of the gospel'.¹² Ware has to admit, however, that the grammar does not easily lend itself to the Thessalonians actively spreading the word, noting that it only allows for them as the word's point of departure.¹³ Yet despite his reading of v. 8, Ware easily slides into the conclusion that the Thessalonian believers imitated Paul by the active communication of the gospel, although he does note that they may not have undertaken such in quite the same way as Paul.¹⁴ Thus, he insists that the Thessalonians were a 'missionary congregation' spreading an idea, but concedes that we have no means of knowing the nature of their evangelizing.

Dickson has recently engaged Ware's arguments in detail, pointing to five problematic aspects. Most convincing among them is Dickson's close reading of how the Thessalonians function as a τύπος: 'The γόρ, therefore, explains the *means* by which the Thessalonians became a τύπος throughout Macedonia and Achaia, not the manner in which they did'.¹⁵ He adds that the Thessalonians are singled out as agents of the 'word of the Lord', for which one would expect the writers to note δι'

Keynes: Paternoster, 2006) 59–64; B. Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2006) 73.

9 E. J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians* (SP 11; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995) 70, my emphasis.

10 Richard, *Thessalonians*, 71.

11 J. Ware, 'The Thessalonians as a Missionary Congregation: 1 Thessalonians 1,5-8', *ZNW* 83 (1992) 127.

12 Ware, 'Missionary Congregation', 128.

13 Ware, 'Missionary Congregation', 128.

14 Ware, 'Missionary Congregation', 130.

15 J. P. Dickson, *Mission-Commitment in Ancient Judaism and in the Pauline Communities: The Shape, Extent and Background of Early Christian Mission* (WUNT 2/159; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) 97, his emphasis.

ὕμῶν ('through you') or ὑφ' ὑμῶν ('by you') rather than ἀφ' ὑμῶν ('from you').¹⁶ Their emphasis clearly lies with the initial visit of the Paul party to the Thessalonians, which is the substance of news that has spread among Christ groups in Macedonia and Achaia ('all the believers', 1 Thess 1.7) rather than among non-believers.¹⁷ The Thessalonians' reception of the Paul party and their message 'thunders forth' throughout the regions.¹⁸

Dickson correctly concludes that 1 Thess 1.8 does not reflect an active missionary congregation: 'Paul's point throughout 1.6-10 is simply to encourage the Thessalonians in the knowledge that their faithful response to the powerful apostolic gospel has been reported throughout Macedonia, Achaia and beyond, and that as a result they have become an example to all the believers of those regions'.¹⁹ Dickson is rather vague, however, on the details of how this took place, resorting to the passive 'has been reported'. This is also the case with Reinmuth, who is clear that the Thessalonians themselves were not involved in missionary work but is vague on the nature of his presumed 'rege Austausch unter den jungen Gemeinden' that contributed to the promulgation of the Thessalonian Christ group's reputation.²⁰ Coulot likewise suggests that the Thessalonians are not likely to have undertaken evangelism, per se, as this was a difficult endeavor, by Paul's own admission.²¹ Rather, it is news of their 'journey of faith' that has gone out along with a report about their reception of the Paul party. Coulot does not, however, indicate how this might have taken place. All of this begs the question: how and by whom did 'news' spread and of what nature was the 'news'? Data from similar small groups from that time provide insight into what this might be.

2. Associations 'Sounding Forth'

There is not any single, uniform description that encompasses all associations during the Graeco-Roman period. They varied in their size and composition as much as in their rituals and the deities they worshipped. The manifestation of a Dionysos group in one locale might bear some similarities to

16 Dickson, *Mission-Commitment*, 97.

17 Dickson, *Mission-Commitment*, 99.

18 Dickson, *Mission-Commitment*, 102.

19 Dickson, *Mission-Commitment*, 103. So also Paul Bowers, 'Church and Mission in Paul', *JSNT* 44 (1991) 99.

20 E. Reinmuth, 'Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher', *Die Briefe an die Philipper, Thessalonicher und an Philemon* (N. Walter, E. Reinmuth, and P. Lampe; NTD 8/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998) 121; cf. T. Holtz, *Die erste Brief an die Thessalonicher* (EKK 13; Zürich: Benziger and Neukirchener, 3d ed. 1998) 52, esp. n. 138.

21 C. Coulot, 'Les Thessaloniciens accueillent l'évangile. Un premier bilan (1Th 1,2-10)', *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique* 112 (2011) 38-9.

an Isis group in a distant Roman province, and yet differ in significant aspects from a second Dionysos group in its home city. Yet for all this differentiation, such groups are classed together, since they manifest similar patterns of behaviour and social organization.²² Three decades ago associations were summarily discounted as a viable analogue for understanding groups of Christ believers (and other Judean groups) in the first few centuries of the Common Era. Yet, through recent work on a vast array of association inscriptions, papyri, and literary texts, along with archaeological building remains, data from Graeco-Roman associations are now well recognized as an analogy for understanding how Christ groups were founded and organized.²³ I have argued the case elsewhere for the Thessalonike Christ group having a number of affinities with associations and build on those arguments here to suggest yet another link between the Thessalonike Christ group and the practices of associations in antiquity.²⁴ Exploring how associations ‘sounded forth’ about their deities, their founders, and themselves can help us better understand the referents to which the Thessalonians themselves might look when they hear the words of 1 Thess 1.2-10.

22 For general descriptions of associations see P. A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 25–87.

23 On Christ groups and associations see particularly J. S. Kloppenborg, ‘Edwin Hatch, Churches and Collegia’, *Origins and Method: Towards a New Understanding of Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Honour of John C. Hurd* (ed. B. H. McLean; JSNTSup 86; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993) 212–38; R. S. Ascoug, ‘Voluntary Associations and the Formation of Pauline Churches: Addressing the Objections’, *Vereine, Synagogen und Gemeinden im kaiserzeitlichen Kleinasien* (ed. A. Gutsfeld and D.-A. Koch; STAC 25; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 149–83; P. A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities* (New York and London: Continuum/T&T Clark, 2009) esp. 25–46. Wayne Meeks has retracted his earlier suggestion that the associations are not a useful analogy for understanding early Christ groups (‘Taking Stock and Moving On’, *After the First Urban Christians: The Social-Scientific Study of Pauline Christianity Twenty-five Years Later* [ed. T. D. Still and D. G. Horrell; London and New York: T&T Clark, 2009] 141).

24 See particularly R. S. Ascoug, ‘The Thessalonian Christian Community as a Professional Voluntary Association’, *JBL* 19 (2000) 311–28; Ascoug, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations: The Social Context of Philippians and 1 Thessalonians* (WUNT 2/161; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) 162–90; Ascoug, ‘Of Memories and Meals: Greco-Roman Associations and the Early Jesus-group at Thessalonikē’, *From Roman to Early Christian Thessalonikē: Studies in Religion and Archaeology* (ed. L. Nasrallah, C. Bakirtzis, and S. J. Friesen; HTS 64; Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University, 2010) 49–72; Ascoug, ‘A Question of Death: Paul’s Community Building Language in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18’, *JBL* 123 (2004) 509–30; Ascoug, ‘Paul’s “Apocalypticism” and the Jesus-Associations at Thessalonica and Corinth’, *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians* (ed. R. Cameron and M. P. Miller; ECL 5; Atlanta: Scholars, 2011) 151–86; cf. J. K. Hardin, ‘Decrees and Drachmas at Thessalonica: An Illegal Assembly in Jason’s House (Acts 17.1–10a)’, *NTS* 52 (2006) 29–49.

2.1. *Honouring Deities*

Many decrees, regulations, honours, and dedications set up by associations draw attention to the patron deity or deities of the group. Some do so explicitly by invoking the deity directly, particularly in the opening lines of the inscription, as does an association of initiates at Thessalonike: 'For the good fortune of Zeus Dionysos Gongylos' (AGRW 50, I CE) or the dedication to 'Highest God' (*Theos Hypsistos*) by a Thessalonian association of banqueters (AGRW 51, late I CE).²⁵ Other associations are broader in their openings by referencing Tyche—e.g. 'to good fortune'—or more generally 'gods'.²⁶ Slightly less direct is the inclusion of a relief of the deity, as is the case of Anubis in the inscribed honourifics granted to a benefactor by sacred object bearers at Thessalonike (AGRW 47, I BCE–I CE). The incorporation of a deity's name into the group self-designation also conveys the allegiance of members, such as *Asklepiastai* (GRA I 54), *Dionysiastai* (GRA I 33, 36, 58), *Bakchoi* (AGRW 7, 65, 80, 193, 218), *Aphrodisiasts* (AGRW 258), or *Sarapiastai* (GRA I 26, 27) (this is also the case, one might add, in the designation 'Christian'). In many cases, an epithet is added to the name of the deity; for example, Aphrodite Ourania ('Heavenly', AGRW 85), Artemis Kalliste ('Most Beautiful', GRA I 24), Zeus Hypsistos ('Highest', AGRW 36, 38, 45, 110, 295), Dionysos Kathegemon ('the Leader', AGRW 115, 116, 148, 251, 327). Such are the means whereby the patron deity is proclaimed and honoured by association members.

In 1 Thess 1.9–10, the writers note the reports about how the Thessalonians 'turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming'. Although this does not make explicit claims about the Thessalonians' core beliefs, it suggests that their change of allegiance from one or more deities to an exclusive commitment to the 'living and true' God of Jesus forms part of the message that is spreading about them. Also announced is the power of this God to bring about wrath on earth, and to provide escape for those who align themselves with this deity. As with the associations noted above, the Thessalonians are likely to have been keen to show to their new God

25 Inscriptions and papyri are referenced by their entry number in two new collections of association texts. AGRW = R. S. Ascough, P. A. Harland and J. S. Kloppenborg, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2012) and GRA I = J. S. Kloppenborg and R. S. Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary*. Vol. 1, *Attica, Central Greece, Macedonia, Thrace* (BZNV 181; Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2011). The Greek and Latin texts and select translations are also available online at <http://philipharland.com/greco-roman-associations>.

26 The invocation 'ΘΕΟΙ' is particularly frequent in Athenian inscriptions (see AGRW 2, 10, 12, 18, 20, 21) and indicates that the matter related in the following inscribed text has been discussed after the proper religious rites had been completed; see Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations*, 28.

expressions of their devotion, and as such would narrate to themselves and to others the story of how they came to know of this God (through the agency of the Paul party) and why they chose to appropriate this God above all others.

Whether or not the language the writers use here is that of the Thessalonians themselves is quite a different issue. Commentators have noted the clearly Jewish monotheistic expressions in this statement, while recognizing that a 'turning from idols' hardly presupposes a predominantly Jewish community.²⁷ At the very least, the framing of this statement has been influenced by the Paul party and as such may not fully reflect how the Thessalonians themselves would convey the narrative of their change of allegiance. This is not to suggest that it is antithetical to their convictions of monotheism or of a coming apocalyptic conflagration; both are presumed for the audience at various points throughout the rest of the letter. Nevertheless, in this statement the situation (including the reports of it) is refracted through the lens of the letter writers and may well reflect their attempt to help the Thessalonians shape their narrative into the broader Jewish monotheistic framework.²⁸

Thus, while the Thessalonians' recognition of the one God who stands over and above all other gods (1.9-10) is an important aspect of what is being announced about them, too often the discussion of the Thessalonians' 'missionizing' ends with the assumption that this theological conviction is the sole basis of any proclamation and that all other details feed into attempts to evangelize and recruit new believers. It is this latter assumption that proves problematic in light of the association data, for the associations did not limit proclamations to narratives and honours for deities but extended beyond to include honours for founders and benefactors along with praise for the association itself. There is evidence in 1 Thessalonians that such is also the case with the Christ group. In this regard, public pronouncements serve as a mechanism for self-promotion and claims of preeminence, a by-product of which may well be evangelism and recruitment, but such is not the primary aim.²⁹

27 Fee, *Thessalonians*, 48–9; Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associations*, 202.

28 Some commentators have suggested that the expressions in 1.9-10 come from a pre-Pauline creedal formulation of some sort; see Best, *Thessalonians*, 81-7. Others find that this is not at all clear; see the discussion in Holtz, *Thessalonicher*, 54-64; Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 84-6; Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, 118-19, all of whom find arguments for some kind of creedal formulation behind the text to be weak, while Fee sees the issue as not particularly relevant to understanding the text (*Thessalonians*, 50).

29 Such claims for preeminence, rather than attempts to recruit new members, are more likely to draw negative responses from other groups at Thessalonike, which might lie behind the *thlipsis* the Thessalonians are experiencing. In 1.10, the promise to Christ-adherents is two-fold: salvation from wrath, but also wrath on those not 'inside' the group (Fee, *Thessalonians*, 50). The Thessalonians cannot have missed the implications here that whoever is behind the *thlipsis* is destined to suffer the wrath of God.

2.2. *Honouring Founders*

The writers of 1 Thessalonians note that the Thessalonian Christ group knows 'what we became among you for you' (οἶδατε οἷοι ἐγενήθημεν [ἐν] ὑμῖν δι' ὑμῶς, 1.5b). Despite this knowledge, however, the writers provide details in ch. 2 of 'what kind of entrance' (ὁποῖον εἴσοδον, 1.9a) the Paul party had among the Thessalonians. These details make it abundantly clear that Paul and the others were foundational in establishing the group of Christ believers—they worked alongside them in a trade while they proclaimed the message that caused them to turn from idols to God (2.9; 1.9b).

Among associations, group dynamics are such that founders and benefactors are duly recognized for their work with the group, often through the dedication of honorary inscriptions. For example, in Argos, Peloponnessos, during the Roman period, an association of leather-dressers (σπατοληασταί) set up a monument for their founder and hero Marcus Antonius Aristokrates son of Anaxion (*AGRW* 24). In Lindos on the island of Rhodes, a group devoted to the Dioskouri gods, Kastor and Pollux, took their name from their founder, Philokrates: the κοινόν of Philokrateian Dioskouriasts. They dedicated a statue to the gods on behalf of another man who has served them well, noting 'his piety, goodwill, and benefaction towards them' (*AGRW* 252; 93 BCE). On the same island, in the town of Rhodes, a list of contest victories is followed by a list of the names of the male and female benefactors of the κοινόν of immigrants from cities in Asia Minor, Alexandria (Egypt or Asia Minor), Antioch (Syria or Asia Minor), and Amphipolis (Thracia). Among them the first named is the founder: 'Nikasion of Kyzikos to whom the right of residency was granted, founder of the association' (*AGRW* 257, early II BCE).³⁰

In Thessalonike itself, an association of 'sport-lovers' (συνήθεις φιλοπαικτόρων) set up an honorary dedication for a man, although the reason for doing so is not clear (*AGRW* 53, c. 100–150 CE). Their self-designation, however, embeds a name: 'The members of the association around Lucius Rusticilius Agathopous' (οἱ περὶ Λ. Ῥουστεικείλιον Αγαθόποδαν συνήθεις). The use of οἱ περὶ with the accusative suggests Lucius is the founder and/or organizer of the association.³¹

Other associations honour founders of meeting places, such as the small association of a dozen 'sacred object-bearers (ἱεραφόροι) and fellow-banqueters (συνκλίται)' affiliated with the Egyptian gods in Thessalonike, who honour Aulus Papius Chilon for establishing an οἶκος (*AGRW* 47, I BCE–I CE). A decree of the

30 See also *AGRW* 285 (Kanopus [Nile Delta, Lower Egypt], 29/28 BCE); *AGRW* 310 (Lanuvium [Campania, Italy], 136 CE).

31 P. M. Nigdelis, 'Voluntary Associations in Roman Thessalonikē: In Search of Identity and Support in a Cosmopolitan Society', *Early Christian Thessalonikē* (ed. Nasrallah, Bakirtzis, and Friesen) 28.

Dionysiasts of Piraeus recognizes a benefactor upon his death by honouring him with a statue in the temple (*AGRW* 21; 176/5 BCE). Dionysios is commended for displaying

in many things the goodwill that he had and continued to have toward all who brought the synod (σύννοδος) together for the god. Also, when he was asked he was always the cause of some good thing, both for individuals and for the common good, being a benefactor (φιλόανθρωπος) at all times.

Among these good things was the provision of a sacrificial site for the members, who also take the designation ὀργεῶνες or ‘sacrificing associates’. A record of all the things that Dionysios has done for the association is ‘registered in the archives for all time’, including his funding of a statue of Dionysos erected in the temple ‘in accordance with the oracle of the god’. Such were his benefactions, that the honours are decreed to continue to his children (with, of course, the expectation that they will continue the family munificence!).

The regulations for an association devoted to the god Men Tyrannos (*AGRW* 22; Laurion [Attica], late II or early III CE) are recorded twice, with the second version expanding upon the first. The initial inscription opened with ‘Xanthos the Lycian consecrated the sanctuary of Men—the god having chosen him’ which was elaborated in the opening of version two to include an epithet of the deity and the servile status of the founder: ‘Xanthos the Lycian slave of Gaius Orbius, consecrated the sanctuary of Men Tyrannos—the god having chosen him’. The founder of this cult group, Xanthos, is an immigrant from the region of Lycia, south of Phrygia. Both versions of the inscription preserve the rights of Xanthos to govern the sacrifices and limit the right of appointment to him alone and ensure he retains direct control over the group and its activities.

Xanthos’s concern to retain control over the group he founded differs from the Paul party’s less direct guidance of his groups, although calls for imitation elsewhere might suggest a somewhat heavy-handed presence (1 Cor 4.16; 11.1; cf. Eph 5.1; 2 Thess 3.7, 9). Xanthos retains the right to appoint leaders in his absence, a practice not fully clear from the authentic Pauline letters but certainly affirmed in the Pastoral Epistles. That there are persons exercising leadership within the Thessalonian group is nevertheless clear from the writers’ instructions to respect and esteem ‘those laboring among you’ (1 Thess 5.12-13). Finally, we can note the reference to the deity ‘having chosen’ Xanthos (αἰρετίσαντος τοῦ θεοῦ). The writers use a similar metaphor in reference to the Thessalonians—‘we know your calling’ (εἰδότες τὴν ἐκλογὴν ὑμῶν, 1.4). Although the object of the selection differs—the founder in the inscription, membership in the epistle—the sentiment is similar. The group is formed by the will of the deity rather than on human terms alone.

2.3. *Promoting Reputation and Growth*

Concern for enhancing the reputation of an association ripples throughout the data. Associations set up inscriptions to draw attention to themselves, noting in elaborate language the achievements of their founders, patrons, and leaders with hopes of inspiring other members to undertake actions that would likewise enhance the association's reputation and perhaps even attract new members. Such dedications draw attention to what has been done for the group and what, in return, the group has done for the individuals or members. The association might record the manner in which they were founded and benefacted or their own role in recognizing such deeds. Sometimes both are noted. For example, a late first-century BCE inscription from Athens records a decree of the *Soteriastai* for their founder, Diodoros son of Sokrates (*GRA* I 48; 37/6 or 36/5 BCE), who has been 'well disposed' to the κοινόν, acting in a beneficial manner in both word and deed (καὶ λόγῳ καὶ ἔργῳ, line 9). He not only shared responsibility for the initial gathering and created the σύνοδος, he also served as its treasurer and then priest. The 60-member association resolves unanimously to recognize Diodoros's 'zeal' by crowning him annually with an olive wreath and proclaiming that 'the κοινόν of the Soterastai crowns Diodoros in accordance with this decision' (lines 37-39). Next is noted the decision by the association to proclaim these resolutions in a more permanent fashion by inscribing them on a stele to be set up in the sacred enclosure. The overarching goal of these resolutions is stated towards the end: 'so that when these things have been completed, all members might be zealous to enhance the σύνοδος, seeing that its founder obtained a fitting token of good will and memorial' (lines 39-43).³²

Not unlike this inscription concerning Diodorus, the writers of 1 Thessalonians comment, 'our εὐαγγέλιον came to you not only in word (λόγος) but also in power (δύναμις), and in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction' (1 Thess 1.5).³³ While this is taken to indicate what the writers have observed about the Thessalonians, it may be recalling the manner in which the Thessalonians themselves have reported the visitors' time among them, a report noted in 1.9. The view

32 In a second-century BCE inscription from Delos members resolve to honour a benefactor in order to prompt future benefactions and engender admiration and competition from outsiders, who will likewise seek to benefact the association (*AGRW* 223; 153/152 BCE). See also *AGRW* 255 (Rhodes, II BCE); *AGRW* 98 (Bithynia, late Hellenistic or early imperial period); *AGRW* 8 (Liopesi [Attica], II BCE). For examples of association inscriptions from Athens and Piraeus, both in Achaia, recognizing the φιλοτιμία ('zeal', 'ambition') of members see *GRA* I 2, 5, 9, 12, 15, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 25, 27, 28, 29, 32, 35, 37, 39, 45; *AGRW* 7.

33 Alongside the role of the Holy Spirit, the writers draw attention to 'power' and 'conviction' (1.5), suggesting that the writers' understanding of 'mission' (to use the modern term) is not at all restricted to verbal proclamation of the message *about* Christ—it also entails embodiment. In the case of the Thessalonians, they are embodying it by carrying out the usual practices of associations in honouring founders/patrons—*viz.* Paul and company—but in so doing, they draw attention to Paul's God and Paul's message.

that the Thessalonians are dispatching ‘missionaries’ who precede the Paul party and proclaim a complex theological message which they themselves have only just heard and barely had time to absorb, seems rather fanciful. The wider context of association behaviour suggests it is more likely that the Thessalonians have been proclaiming in their city the role the Paul party played in establishing the group. As a major transportation hub, this news would not spread by virtue of the overwhelming theological power of the message. Rather, the merchants, artisans, sailors, and others that move through the Thessalonians’ inter-connected networks would hear and talk about the honours being proclaimed for a party of travellers who offer escape from a coming conflagration in exchange for allegiance to a new deity (1.10).

2.4. *Narrating Reception*

In recounting their time among the Thessalonians, the letter writers note, ‘So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us’ (2.8). The use of a correlative construction here ‘is not so much contrasting the proclamation of the gospel over against the sharing of his own life with the Thessalonians... Rather, the emphasis lies with the latter half of the verse and especially focuses on Paul’s heavy personal investment and sacrificial living while he was among the Thessalonians.’³⁴ This, it seems, is the content of the news that is spreading through the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia, as the writers have already noted that ‘people in those regions report about us what kind of entrance (εἴσοδος) we had among you’ (1.9). The frequent references to their time among the Thessalonians in the first three chapters, and particularly formulations ‘concerning his εἴσοδος and its effect upon the readers make it unmistakable that his εἴσοδος and the readers’ faith is a, if not *the*, main concern of Paul’s in the first part of the epistle’.³⁵ Once again we can turn to the association data to discover how groups at that time portrayed the impact that individuals had on their group.³⁶

34 T. J. Burke, ‘The Holy Spirit as the Controlling Dynamic in Paul’s Role as Missionary to the Thessalonians’, *Paul as Missionary: Identity, Activity, Theology, and Practice* (ed. T. J. Burke and B. S. Rosner; LNTS 420. London and New York: T&T Clark, 2011) 145-6.

35 S. Kim, ‘Paul’s Entry (εἴσοδος) and the Thessalonians’ Faith (1 Thessalonians 1-3)’, *NTS* 51 (2005) 523, his emphasis. Although Paul only uses εἴσοδος twice in 1 Thessalonians (and in no other letter), he directly connects his success among them to this ‘entrance’.

36 Winter draws on the εἴσοδος conventions of orators to explain the background of Paul’s self-presentation in 1 Thess 2, arguing that Paul is denying that he embodied the vices usually associated with sophists while at the same time claiming virtues for himself (B. W. Winter, ‘The Entries and Ethics of the Orators and Paul [1 Thessalonians 2.1-12]’, *TynB* 44 [1993] 57-64; see also C. vom Brocke, *Thessaloniki—Stadt des Kassander und Gemeinde des Paulus* [WUNT 2/125; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001] 143-51). Winter rightly links the spread of Paul’s reputation noted in 1.8-9a to the Thessalonians honouring Paul, but his examples

An association of ship owners and merchants in second-century BCE Athens recorded the approach they made to the Athenian Council requesting permission to erect a statue of a man who served as the city official in charge of welcoming visitors (*AGRW* 5; 112/111 BCE). Not only does the text indicate a close relationship between this association, comprised mostly of foreigners, and a city official and the city Council, it also demonstrates the high regard for hospitality. Such hospitality would go well beyond making the association members feel welcome; it would involve helping them establish network connections in both the social and, especially, business arenas.³⁷

Berytian immigrants on Delos record in a lengthy inscription the honours bestowed on a Roman banker named Marcus Minatius, who contributed generously to the operations of the association (κοινόν) as a whole and to individual members therein (*AGRW* 224; post-153/152 BCE). He is granted a statue, a portrait, and an annual day-long festival, including a banquet at which he is seated in the place of honour. Along with his financial contributions, the inscription notes his hospitality: 'he also invited all of us to the sacrifice, which he prepared for the gods to be accomplished for the σύνοδος, and he invited us to the banquet'. Furthermore, he promised to continue in the same hospitable fashion towards the group, for which they will continue to honour him. Their motivation for doing so (aside from the obvious insurance that he will indeed continue as a benefactor) is to demonstrate that the association 'may appear to be honoring good men, never neglecting any opportunity to return favor'. The honours cannot be altered for all time, on pain of death, a clear encouragement to others who might emulate the honouree and benefact the association (lines 53-69).

The well-known story of the foundation of a household Sarapis association in Opus, Macedonia, illustrates how a deity and its emissary might be received (*AGRW* 52; Thessalonike, I-II CE copy of I BCE text). While sleeping in a shrine (οἶκος), Xenainetos is visited in a dream by Sarapis and commanded to deliver a letter that has miraculously appeared under his pillow. Upon returning to Opus, he takes the letter to his political rival, Eurynomos, who, upon reading the letter, establishes an association devoted to Sarapis and Isis, who are received among the gods in the household of Sosinike. The inscribed text seems to come from a later time, as it presumes a couple of generations of female leadership in

involve citizens of cities honouring orators for speeches they delivered. The writers of 1 Thessalonians, however, place emphasis on the Paul party's conduct among a small group of co-workers rather than words delivered in public. In this regard, the honours bestowed by small associations seem the better analogy than civic honours for understanding how the Thessalonians acted to promote the Paul party's εἴσοδος.

37 As B. Bollmann notes, informal networking was probably a primary concern of associations (*Römische Vereinhäuser: Untersuchungen zu den Scholae der römischen Berufs-, Kult- und Augustalen-Kollegien in Italien* [Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1998] 38).

the association and a more developed administrative structure. What stands out, however, is the initial entrance of the gods into the household of Sosinike, which the inscription makes clear was preceded by 'hospitality' funded by Eurynomos.

Returning to 1 Thessalonians, we note that despite having 'no need to say anything' about the type of 'entrance' (εἴσοδος) of the Paul party among the Thessalonians (1.8), the writers nevertheless narrate their version of events. They begin by stating that the Thessalonians already know about their εἴσοδος (2.1), although their insistence makes one wonder whether the Thessalonians would indeed agree with the writers' version. Nevertheless, by their own admission, the writers are happy with the way events unfolded. They note that they 'proclaimed' the gospel message, but did not ask for anything in return in the form of money (2.5) or honours (2.6). They 'shared themselves' with the Thessalonians (2.8) by working alongside them as artisans, keeping the same hours and undertaking the same labour (2.9), all the while maintaining paternal oversight (2.11).³⁸

After summarizing their time among the Thessalonians, the writers note, 'For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy!' (2.19-20). This serves as a contrast (or reciprocation) of the Thessalonians' boasting about the Paul party. They will note later in the letter that they have heard through Timothy that the Thessalonians 'always remember us kindly and long to see us' (3.6). As Kim notes, 'Paul connects the Thessalonians' faith (the successful outcome of his mission) with their happy memory of and positive disposition toward him (an expression of their appreciation of his εἴσοδος)'.³⁹ Again, this kindly remembrance resonates with the honours we have seen in association inscriptions.

2.5. *Public Proclamations*

In most of the above examples, associations inscribed on a rather impermeable medium the honours they bestow upon their founders and benefactors. These inscriptions functioned in a similar fashion to modern-day billboards, attracting attention to the association as well as to the honoree. Although many, if not most, of those passing by could not or would not read the inscription, for those paying attention the association's existence, affiliation with deities, and bestowing of honours would be expounded. Perhaps as insurance against movement of the inscription to another, less conspicuous location, some associations inscribed very clearly on the stone itself where it was to be placed: e.g., in temples (*AGRW* 7, 16, 20, 21, 39, 123, 221; *GRA* I 21, 28, 48), outside sanctuary enclosures (*GRA* I 27, 29, 33), below or beside statues (*AGRW* 138, 168, 170, 188, 243, 247, 248, 284, 287; *GRA* I 32), on altars (*AGRW* 139, 164, 165, 198), on

38 Although the authenticity of the next few verses is disputed, we can note that they recount how the Thessalonians received the message through action (2.13), manifest in their imitation of believers elsewhere (2.14).

39 Kim, 'Paul's Entry', 522.

monuments and graves (*AGRW* 125, 160, 235, 240, 325), and within civic buildings and spaces (*AGRW* 6, 139, 298, 306).

Proclaiming the honours granted was an important supplement to the erection of such monuments. For example, the Dionysiac Worldwide Performers (τεχνῖται) honour a man who benefacted a number of their associations (*AGRW* 184; Nysa [Ionia/Caria], c. 142 CE). The Ephesian association votes 'to honor him publicly with a gold crown in services and libations during the contest'. They also decree that during each meeting 'they will make a public announcement and honor him'. Furthermore, they ensure that the honours are not only proclaimed at home but also abroad by voting that copies of the decree be sent to the benefactor's home city of Nysa and that copies of the inscription be sent by an 'embassy of elders' to the Emperor and to the association (σύνοδος) of *technitai* at Rome, who also benefited from the largess of the honouree. Slightly earlier, a decree from the same type of association, this time in Galatia, records a vote bestowing honours upon a benefactor of the *technitai* who put on the competitions and for whom a statue will be set up in 'the most noticeable place in the metropolis', another in the theater, and a third in the city of Neapolis (*AGRW* 212; 128 CE). All of this is done to 'display the greatness of the man and the proper thanksgiving of the σύνοδος to the greatest emperor Caesar Trajan Hadrian Augustus and the greatest governor Trebius Sergianus'.⁴⁰

Proclamations functioned to make known to non-members both the deity that was the focus of the association's devotion alongside the commitment of the membership of the group not only to that deity but also to one another. Together, inscriptions and proclamations functioned in part as a recruitment strategy, since advertising the benefits of membership such as financial help granted to members through loans or gifts (e.g. *AGRW* 9, 243, 281, 304) could attract new members.⁴¹ The announcement of honours on benefactors would serve to entice new patrons, who might be convinced to make financial donations to the association.

40 See also *GRA* I 24 (Athens, 236/5 BCE); *GRA* I 29 (Piraeus, 211/10 BCE); *AGRW* 251 (Lindos, Rhodes, c. 125–100 BCE). Associations did not limit their public demonstrations to the erection of inscriptions and proclaiming of honours, however. Some associations also took part in processions; see, for example, *AGRW* 18 (Piraeus, 240/239 BCE).

41 For evidence that associations were involved in recruitment see R. S. Ascough, "A Place to Stand, a Place to Grow": Architectural and Epigraphic Evidence for Expansion in Graeco-Roman Associations', *Identity and Interaction in the Ancient Mediterranean: Jews, Christians and Others: Festschrift for Stephen G. Wilson* (ed. Z. A. Crook and P. A. Harland; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007) 76–98. For some indication of their recruitment rhetoric in which they promoted their own group as more desirable in terms of membership see R. S. Ascough, 'Defining Community-Ethos in Light of the "Other": Recruitment Rhetoric among Graeco-Roman Religious Groups', *Annali di storia dell'esegesi* 24 (2007) 59–75. For examples of inscriptions addressing issues of adding new members see *AGRW* 3, 6, 41, 310.

3. Redescribing the Thessalonian ‘Mission’

The association data illuminate the context within which news from and about the Thessalonian Christ group spread: inscriptions abound recording honours for patron deities and for founders and benefactors, alongside public proclamations of such. This challenges some assumptions that are often made in the discussion of 1 Thess 1.2-10. Commentators seem to ground their understanding of the text by consciously or, more often, unconsciously, drawing on the depiction in the book of Acts in which Paul and his colleagues declaim the message of Christ. Placed alongside the Gospel portrayals of Jesus’ disciples hearing Jesus and immediately dropping everything, including their livelihood, in order to go out and preach from town to town, it seems missionaries were the norm. Whatever the historicity of these depictions, they reflect actions that are hardly sustainable for most people. While it is true that philosophers lived such a lifestyle, and thus are an interesting analogy for some early Christ-believing individuals such as Paul, one can hardly think of the hand-working artisans in Thessalonica quickly turning into philosophical preachers—they would lack both training and resources.

In the text of 1 Thessalonians there is little that would suggest that this is the scenario that the letter writers imagine. In 1.8 ἐξηγήομαι does not suggest that the Thessalonians immediately undertook their own missionary work; it suggests ‘little more than that the report of their faith went forth’.⁴² In addition, ‘the phrase “from you” is not to be taken as a form of “agency”—as though the Thessalonian believers themselves had preceded Paul in proclaiming Christ elsewhere—but in its ordinary sense of “the point from which something begins”’.⁴³ The bulk of the Thessalonians do not preach; they are the source of the reports, the content of which is to be found in vv. 9-10.⁴⁴ The emphasis in this text lies on the *actions* of the Thessalonians: hospitality (‘what kind of entrance’), cult (‘turned to God from idols’), and ‘waiting’ (for Jesus’ return). Indeed, that the content of the reports would focus not predominantly on the message of salvation but on the proclamation of what the Thessalonian group has done makes sense in the context of the discursive strategies of associations in the Graeco-Roman world.

This is not to deny that the Thessalonians were linking their honouring of the original messengers with some announcement of the arrival of God into their midst, that is, the message that the Paul party brought to Thessalonike. Certainly the phrase ὁ λόγος τοῦ κυρίου (‘word of the Lord’, 1.8) has some

42 C. A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids and Carlisle: Eerdmans, 1990) 83. Although a similar sentiment occurs in Rom 1.8, it is more clearly tied to the act of oral proclamation (ἡ πίστις ὑμῶν καταγγέλλεται ἐν ὄλῳ τῷ κόσμῳ).

43 Fee, *Thessalonians*, 43.

44 Fee, *Thessalonians*, 44.

indication of message content.⁴⁵ The primary focus, however, is on actions, either the manner in which the λόγος was brought (accompanied by power, the Holy Spirit, and conviction; 1.5) or the manner in which it was received (with affliction and joy; 1.6b). In vv. 4–6a the clause 'we know your election' is the main point. The evidentiary basis of 'knowing' comes from two types of data, as indicated by ὅτι: the manner in which the gospel 'came' (ἐγενήθη) (1.5) and that the Thessalonians became (ἐγενήθητε) imitators of the messengers (1.6a) in their behaviour.

The emphasis on actions is also indicated in the Thessalonians becoming a τύπος ('example') for other believers (1.7). The word is singular because the writers indicate the experience of the community as a whole rather than as separate individuals within the group.⁴⁶ Had the Thessalonians commissioned 'missionaries', one might expect that they would be acknowledged in some manner in the letter. Many commentators simply assume the 'imitation' referred to in v. 6 is referencing preaching and missionary work, since this is what Paul is most remembered for in the Christian tradition. Yet oral proclamation and subsequent teaching are only part of the activities for which Paul and his companions would have been known at Thessalonike. Working daily with their hands was another model activity, as would be their cult observances—or, more precisely, their failure to participate in regular cult to the gods and (presumably) their insistence on resting from work on one day of the week. Hence, the writers can note 'you know what we became (ἐγενήθημεν) among you for you' (1.5b).

The report that is spreading through the regions concerning the Thessalonians' 'faith' (1.8) is the distribution of the news *about the Thessalonians* not their preaching of (Paul's) good news. This 'faith' element would include a report of the divine agency in establishing this new cult among them, but the emphasis is on their actions: their hospitality, their rituals, and their *waiting* for God to act (cf. the 'hope' of 1.3). All three aspects of v. 3 are community based, not outreach based. The letter writers are referencing the Thessalonians' manual labour (cf. 2.9) rather than any missionary preaching on the part of the Thessalonians; it is their communal care for one another that motivates them.⁴⁷ On the few occasions elsewhere that Paul's letters note εὐαγγέλιον ὑμῶν, the emphasis is oral proclamation (Rom 16.25; 2 Cor 4.3–5; cf. 2 Thess 2.14; Rom 2.16). In the case of 1 Thess 1.5, however, this oral element is much subdued, almost subsumed by the quick succession of modifications—not only orally, but in power, in the Spirit, and with conviction (1.5). In 1 Thess 1.9, the letter writers note

45 Understanding the phrase here as an objective genitive that references the message about what Christ is doing for the Thessalonians rather than a subjective genitive indicating a message originating with Christ himself (Fee, *Thessalonians*, 43–4).

46 Wannamaker, *Thessalonians*, 82.

47 Fee, *Thessalonians*, 26.

that the content of the reports circulating in the wider region are ‘about us’ (περὶ ἡμῶν) and about the activities of Thessalonians; they do not reference the salvific work of Christ. The end of v. 5 and beginning of v. 6 likewise place the emphasis squarely on Paul and his companions rather than the content of their message.⁴⁸

3.1. *Networking*

Having demonstrated that proclaiming honorifics for deities, founders, and patrons is rather typical association behaviour, and having argued that the text of 1 Thess 1.2-10 places emphasis on the behaviour of the Thessalonians rather than their beliefs, we are now in a position to suggest an alternative explication of the situation, one that better fits with patterns of behaviour in antiquity.⁴⁹ Once the Thessalonian Christ group had formed in the city, they would continue to come into daily contact with others, either through social or, more likely, business contacts. Small merchants played key roles in the spread of commerce in the circum-Mediterranean.⁵⁰ As artisan (leather?) workers⁵¹ the Thessalonian Christ followers would have had frequent contact with a wide swath of traders using the land and sea routes for dispersing goods. Moreover, Thessalonike was a focal point on the Via Egnatia, the major East–West artery that ‘facilitated and renewed commercial activities, encouraged cultural interactions, became a venue of imperial propaganda, and ultimately, contributed to the reshaping of the human and natural landscape’.⁵² It is along this road network, and the sea networks (Thessalonike to Kenchreae in particular), that reports of the Thessalonian Christ group’s honouring of their founders and their deity would travel.

48 Other than indications of travel plans (1 Cor 16.5; 2 Cor 1.16; 2.13; 7.5; 1 Tim 1.3), Paul’s only references to believers in Macedonia highlight their financial contributions, not their preaching or their morality (2 Cor 8.1-7; 9.1-5; 11.9; Rom 15.26), suggesting that it is for internal community behaviours that the Thessalonians are known at Corinth and elsewhere.

49 Despite their otherwise rather idiosyncratic reading of the text, B. J. Malina and J. J. Plich are likely correct to limit the audience in Macedonia and Achaia to ‘members of Christ groups who are attuned to the gossip network following Paul’s activity. The information is ingroup information that ingroup members share, as opposed to outgroups who know little, if anything, about the honorable behavior of the Thessalonian Christ group members’ (*Social-Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006] 38).

50 D. Rathbone, ‘Merchant Networks in the Greek World: The Impact of Rome’, *Greek and Roman Networks in the Mediterranean* (ed. I. Malkin, C. Constantakopoulou, and K. Panagopoulou; London and New York: Routledge, 2009) 299-10.

51 See Ascoug, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations*, 169-76; R. F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul’s Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1980) 42-7.

52 Y. Lolos, ‘Via Egnatia After Egnatius: Imperial Policy and Inter-regional Contacts’, *Greek and Roman Networks* (ed. Malkin, Constantakopoulou, and Panagopoulou) 277. For a broader description but with a focus on Thessalonike see vom Brocke, *Thessaloniki*, 108-12, who presents good evidence for the routes in which the ‘word of the Lord’ ‘sounded forth’ from Thessalonike but gives no indication as to the content or the means.

We need not assume that the travellers 'preached' nor even proclaimed the gospel message widely, but only that they related their observations of the Thessalonians' behaviour to other groups and persons with whom they were networked. As they moved through the existing networks, travellers would speak about the recognition that a particular (and peculiar?) small group in Thessalonike was bestowing upon some recent visitors who founded their association, or at least reframed the group's focus towards a new deity. As we have seen, such reporting was expected and promoted by associations. Since Paul worked among the artisan class, such would be his first point of contact in each new city. We should not mistake the letter writers' hyperbole concerning the reports spreading 'in all places' (ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ, 1.8) as indicating anything more than 'everywhere that we happened to go'. That is, it can seem to the Paul party that 'everyone' is talking about them, but that simply reflects the particular network circuits within which they traveled.

Recent work in network analysis supports this scenario. Networks of people, goods, and ideas in the circum-Mediterranean were web-like, spreading out in multiple directions, with persons travelling not only back and forth along one path, but diverting through other paths as well. Yet the movement is not random or chaotic—a 'structural environment' is created, and it is through these paths 'that information and ideas, resources and services can be transmitted through groups'.⁵³ The interactions do not generally occur among complete strangers but take place because of some relationship, whether remote or close. For example, in our imagined scenario the 'network' for transference of information would take place when one merchant speaks with a supplier, or another merchant, or a ship captain, or perhaps through friends and social contacts, including those forged through membership in associations.⁵⁴ As noted, physical networks on the land and sea facilitated such contacts.

53 I. Malkin, C. Constantakopoulou, and K. Panagopoulou, 'Introduction', *Greek and Roman Networks* (ed. Malkin, Constantakopoulou, and Panagopoulou) 4.

54 Cf. Malkin, Constantakopoulou, and Panagopoulou, 'Introduction', 6. V. Gabrielsen demonstrates that network theory is applicable to non-public associations in the Greek world, particularly during Hellenistic times ('Brotherhoods of Faith and Provident Planning: The Non-public Associations of the Greek World', *Greek and Roman Networks* [ed. Malkin, Constantakopoulou, and Panagopoulou] 176-203). A. Bendlin demonstrates that a large number of the aristocratic and non-aristocratic male population of Roman society was part of *collegia*, *sodalitates*, or other communities, which had their own 'internal public space' (innere Öffentlichkeit) that provided for alternative political, social and religious networking to the networks forged in public spaces ('Gemeinschaft, Öffentlichkeit und Identität: Forschungsgeschichtliche Anmerkungen zu den Mustern sozialer Ordnung in Rom', *Religiöse Vereine in der römischen Antike: Untersuchungen zu Organisation, Ritual und Raumordnung* [ed. U. Egelhaaf-Gaiser and A. Schäfer; STAC 13; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. 2002] 28-34). Networks of associations of Dionysos artists eventually forged translocal connections that transcended local civic boundaries, as can be seen in their issuing of their own

Those who travel along these networked paths would presumably include some of the Thessalonian Christ believers themselves, but would not be limited to such, and these would likely not make up the bulk of the travellers. Those who hear these reports—the αὐτοὶ of 1.9—include (but are not necessarily limited to) those who have responded positively to the subsequent message brought to them by the Paul party (namely, the ‘believers’ mentioned in 1.7). The writers do not claim that such people became believers through the witness of the Thessalonians themselves, only that those who (now) believe had heard of the proclamations and the actions of the Thessalonian Christ group prior to the visit of the Paul party. The Paul party had ‘no need to speak about *the Thessalonians*’ ‘faith in God’ (ἡ πίστις ὑμῶν ἢ πρὸς τὸν θεόν, 1.8), a very different claim than that the Paul party had no need to proclaim the salvific message of God through Christ.

4. Conclusion

Association inscriptions and papyri indicate that many groups publicly proclaimed their accolades for honourees, sometimes on a regular basis. In general, however, association declarations of honours began verbally and were only later more formally ratified through group processes and subsequently recorded on more permanent media. These texts, however, are meant to record the primary means by which honours are conveyed publicly, namely, through proclamations. As far as we know, the first-generation Thessalonian Christ group did not erect any inscriptions. Nevertheless, the thanksgiving section of 1 Thessalonians includes details that suggest that Thessalonians were similar in their actions to other associations.

At first, members of the Thessalonian Christ group talked among themselves and with friends, family, and business associates about how their group came to be formed. This included both the actions of the visitors and the responses of the group members, along with the divine guidance of the process. These conversations reflected their developing narrative of group formation. Even as these conversations continued, however, the pattern from other associations along with details in 1 Thess 1.2-10 suggests that the Thessalonians began more public proclamations of honours for God and for those who founded their group (the Paul party). These proclamations advertise the benefits of group membership and as such can serve as a recruitment mechanism, but this is not the only, nor even the primary, reason for the proclamations, which typically focus on the overall reputation of the group.

coinage that they used within their own network (S. Psoma, ‘Profitable Networks: Coinages, *Panegyris* and Dionysiac Artists’, *Greek and Roman Networks* [ed. Malkin, Constantakopoulou, and Panagopoulou] 230-48).

Those who heard the stories about the Thessalonians' actions and the proclamations of honours for God and founders included merchants who traveled along the trade networks of the region, a large group that would include native Thessalonians as well as persons from throughout the Roman empire. In traveling to other places these merchants had considerable time to talk with one another about events in recently visited locales, conversations that would continue with their contacts in each new city they visited. Thus, the 'reports' referred to by the letter writers (1.9) may be little more than what could be deemed 'gossip'. There is no reason to suppose these groups of travellers did not include some Christ believers from Thessalonike itself, but the latter's primary purpose in travel was business rather than evangelism.

The initial public oral declamations within Thessalonike are likely among the reasons the Thessalonians seem to have drawn the ire of other groups in the city itself—the *θλιψις* to which the letter writers refer. It need not have been caused by theological debates alone but could just as easily be grounded in competition for preeminence with other groups.⁵⁵ Neither would the Thessalonians be 'surprised'⁵⁶ that groups elsewhere in the province and beyond had heard of their reputation—they would more likely be pleased, for such is the aim of group proclamation. The letter writers affirm that what the Thessalonians are doing locally is indeed effective.

If one were to ask the Thessalonians whether they were doing something new or different, I suspect they would answer in the negative—they are doing what associations do: proclaiming honours for their patrons and their God. On the one hand, the letter writers are pleased about the manner the Thessalonians are celebrating the coming of the Paul party to Thessalonike. On the other hand, the writers also clearly articulate their own spurning of glory, suggesting that unlike so many association founders and benefactors, they did not request that they be recognized publicly for their work on behalf of the Thessalonians (οὔτε ζητοῦντες ἐξ ἀνθρώπων δόξαν οὔτε ἀφ' ὑμῶν οὔτε ἀπ' ἄλλων, 1 Thess 2.6).

Given patterns of recruitment rhetoric, it is likely that other groups and individuals are impressed by reports about the honours that the Thessalonians have bestowed upon their God and upon Paul and the others. The modern commentary emphasis on the oral proclamation of a message of divine intervention, rather than the embodiment of that message in the practical outworking of a particular group misconstrues the Graeco-Roman context within which small Christ groups

55 Cf. R. S. Ascough, 'The Completion of a Religious Duty: The Background of 2 Cor 8.1-15', *NTS* 42 (1996) 584-99; P. A. Harland, 'Spheres of Contention, Claims of Pre-Eminence: Rivalries among Associations in Sardis and Smyrna', *Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success in Sardis and Smyrna* (ed. R. S. Ascough; ESCJ 14; Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University, 2005) 53-63.

56 So Frame, *Thessalonians*, 84.

formed. Data from the associations help us better understand how the work of the gods (such as Christ) would stand alongside the work of individuals (such as Paul) and the actions of an association (such as the Thessalonian ἐκκλησία) to embody the full message (εὐαγγέλιον) of the group. Understanding networks among merchants and associations as the avenue for dissemination of news about the actions and proclamations of the Thessalonians fits better with the behavioural patterns of groups in antiquity than does presuming that the Thessalonian hand-workers quickly became evangelistic preachers in the manner of later Church missionary movements.