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THE THESSALONIAN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AS A PROFESSIONAL VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION

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Among scholars of the NT there is a growing awareness of the importance of studies of early Christianity that take seriously local peculiarities. Exegetes recognize that NT texts must be read in the light of the social situation to which each was addressed if they are to be properly understood.¹ In this article we will attempt to do this by investigating the social makeup of the Thessalonian Christian community. Overall, we hope to show that the Thessalonian Christian community founded by Paul was similar in composition and structure to a professional voluntary association.²

I. The Thessalonians as Gentiles

According to Acts 17:1–9 Paul created the Thessalonian church from Jews and God-fearers whom he “stole away” from the synagogue at Thessalonica. Commentaries on 1 Thessalonians generally rely on this account for understanding how the Thessalonian Christian community was formed.³ However,

¹ E. A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century: Some Prolegomena to the Study of New Testament Ideas of Social Obligation* (London: Tyndale, 1960) 72; cf. J. S. Kloppenborg, “ΦΙΛΑΔΕΛΦΙΑ, ΘΕΟΔΙΔΑΚΤΟΣ and the Dioscuri: Rhetorical Engagement in 1 Thessalonians 4.9–12,” *NTS* 39 (1993) 267.

² This study is limited to an investigation of 1 Thessalonians, since the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians is disputed. For a summary of the debate, see R. Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety* (FFNT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 3–18; M. J. J. Menken, *2 Thessalonians* (New Testament Readings; London/New York: Routledge, 1994) 27–43; C. A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 17–28.

³ For example, J. Eadie, *Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians* (London: Macmillan, 1877) 12–13; G. Milligan, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes* (London: Macmillan, 1908) xxvi–xxx; J. E. Frame, *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912) 1–7; B. Rigaux, *Les épîtres aux Thessaloniens* (Ebib; Paris: Lecoffre, 1956) 3–11, 20; C. Masson, *Les Deux Épîtres de*

while there is no denying the connection of early Christianity to first-century Judaism generally, in the specific case of the Thessalonian Christian community,⁴ all the evidence suggests that if there were any Jews and “God-fearers” in the congregation their presence was small enough that their Jewish background does not seem to be a factor in the overall ethos of the congregation.⁵

The primary piece of evidence for the Gentile composition of the Thessalonian Christian community comes from 1 Thess 1:9, which indicates that prior to their conversion the Thessalonians had been involved in “worshipping idols,” an unlikely designation for Jews or God-fearers.⁶ Elsewhere in the letter Paul gives no special attention to Jewish persons or practices, including synagogue practices,⁷ and there is little use of the Hebrew Bible or the LXX.⁸

Saint Paul aux Thessaloniciens (Neuchâtel/Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1957) 5–6; F. Laub, “Paulus als Gemeindegründer (1 Thess.),” in *Kirche im Werden: Studien zum Thema Amt und Gemeinde im Neuen Testament* (ed. J. Hainz; Munich: Schönningh, 1976) 25; F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1982) xxi–xxviii; less so E. Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: Black, 1972) 2–7; T. Holtz, *Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher* (EKKNT 13; Zurich: Benziger, 1986) 9–10; Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 6–16. Also N. Hugédé, *Saint Paul et la Grèce* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1982) 67–90.

⁴ And also the Christian community at Philippi; see R. S. Ascough, “Voluntary Associations and Community Formation: Paul’s Macedonian Christian Communities in Context” (Ph.D. diss., University of St. Michael’s College, Toronto School of Theology, 1997) 100–103.

⁵ Despite a reliance on the Acts account of the origins of the Thessalonian Christian community, some commentators acknowledge the predominance of Gentiles in the congregation: Eadie, *Thessalonians*, 12–13; Frame, *Thessalonians*, 3–4; Rigaux, *Thessaloniciens*, 20; Best, *Thessalonians*, 5; Laub, “Gemeindegründer,” 18, 20; Bruce, *Thessalonians*, xxii–xxiii. See also E. von Dobschütz, *Die Thessalonicher-Briefe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1909) 11; A. Plummer, *A Commentary on St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Thessalonians* (London: Roxburghe, 1918) xvi; Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, 118–19; Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 85; D. Lührmann, “The Beginnings of the Church at Thessalonica,” in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (ed. D. L. Balch, W. A. Meeks, and E. Ferguson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 239; C. S. de Vos, *Church and Community Conflicts: The Relationships of the Thessalonian, Corinthian and Philippian Churches* (SBLDS 168; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999) 146–47.

⁶ Paul would not describe Jews (or God-fearers) as turning from idols to God; Plummer, *First Thessalonians*, 13; W. Neil, *The Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians* (MNTC; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1950) 27; Best, *Thessalonians*, 82; R. F. Collins, *Studies on the First Letter to the Thessalonians* (Louvain: Louvain University Press, 1984) 287; Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, 118–19; Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 85; D. J. Williams, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (New International Biblical Commentary 12; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992) 35. Holtz (*Thessalonicher*, 10) suggests that Paul is referring to the time before they became “God-fearers” and attached themselves to the synagogue, but this is an unlikely interpretation that relies on the account of Acts 17:1–4. Note also that if 2:14–16 is taken as authentic, then Paul’s distinction between the Thessalonians’ persecution by their “own countrymen” (ὕπὸ τῶν ἰδίων συμφυλετῶν) and the persecution of those in Judea by “the Jews” (ὕπὸ τῶν Ἰουδαίων) also suggests that the Thessalonians are not themselves Jewish (nor in conflict with a Jewish group).

⁷ See Best, *Thessalonians*, 5. 1 Thessalonians 2:13–16 indicates that the Thessalonian Christians imitated the Christian communities in Judea. This passage is thought by many, however, to be an interpolation into Paul’s letter. For details, see B. Pearson, “1 Thessalonians 2:13–16: A

The depiction in Acts 17:1–9 reflects one of the clear concerns of the writer of Acts—to show how closely tied Christianity is to Judaism. Thus, in Acts Paul always goes first to the Jews but is rejected so turns to the Gentiles. This is not the picture of Paul's missionary strategy that emerges from Paul's letters, however, where he clearly identifies himself as the "apostle to the Gentiles" (Rom 11:13).⁹

The primarily Gentile composition of the Thessalonian church is not surprising, given the Macedonian context. A review of ancient literature finds only one clear reference to Jews in Macedonia in the first century CE: Philo's record of a letter from Herod Agrippa (37–44 CE) to Caligula, which notes that most provinces in Rome's control include a Jewish population, listing among them Macedonia (*Leg. Gai.* 281–83). Agrippa's point, however, is to indicate how widespread Judaism has become. The comments are so general that Agrippa (or Philo in recreating the letter) may simply have affirmed a Macedonian Jewish community with little knowledge to the contrary.¹⁰

I. Levinskaya provides a more hopeful picture when she concludes that epigraphic evidence from Macedonia "supports the picture we can obtain from the book of Acts."¹¹ In reality, the epigraphical evidence is only slightly more informative, and Levinskaya is overly optimistic.¹² For the most part, evidence for a Jewish presence is from the third century CE or later.¹³ Thus, it is probable that the Thessalonian Christian community was made up of Gentiles.

Deutero-Pauline Interpolation," *HTR* 64 (1971) 79–94; R. F. Collins, "A propos the Integrity of I Thess," *ETL* 55 (1979) 67–106; E. J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians* (SacPag 11; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995) 17–19; H. Boers, "The Form-Critical Study of Paul's Letters: 1 Thessalonians as a Case Study," *NTS* 22 (1975) esp. 151–52.

⁸ See Plummer, *First Thessalonians*, xx–xxii; also R. F. Collins, *The Birth of the New Testament: The Origin and Development of the First Christian Generation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 105.

⁹ That Acts reflects Luke's theological and historical concerns rather than a reliable account of factual events has long been recognized; see E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971) 90–116, 505–14; G. Lüdemann, *Early Christianity According to the Traditions in Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987) 1–16, 184–88.

¹⁰ See Lührmann, "Beginnings," 239.

¹¹ I. Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in its Diaspora Setting* (Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting 5; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 195.

¹² For a detailed critique of Levinskaya and an analysis of the available epigraphic evidence, see Ascough, "Voluntary Associations," 178–89.

¹³ Despite this, large communities of Jews and God-fearers in Macedonia continue to be affirmed: J. B. Lightfoot, "The Church of Thessalonica," in *Biblical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1893) 242–45; J. Nehama, *Histoire des Israélites de Salonique 1: La Communauté* (Thessalonica: Molho, 1935) 31–44; E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135): A New English Version* (ed. G. Vermes, F. Millar, M. Black, and M. Goodman; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979) 3/1.65; F. Papazoglou, "Macedonia Under the Romans," in *Macedonia: 4000 Years of Greek History and Civilization* (ed. M. B. Sakellariou; Athens: Ekdotike Athenon S.A., 1988) 207. Acts seems to be the basis on which many scholars make the assumption that a substantial Jewish community existed at Thessalonica (and Philippi).

II. The Thessalonians as Manual Laborers

In 1 Thessalonians Paul is particularly concerned to establish his *ethos* in the *exordium* of the letter (1:2–2:12): “You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake” (1:5). This is elaborated in 2:1–12, where Paul notes his blameless moral conduct (2:3, 5–6, 9–10; cf. 4:1–7), his accountability toward God (2:5; cf. 4:1), and his encouragement and exhortation (2:7–8, 11–12; cf. 4:1, 18; 5:11).¹⁴ In the midst of this he emphasizes the nature of his ministry among the Thessalonians: Μνημονεύετε γάρ, ἀδελφοί, τὸν κόπον ἡμῶν καὶ τὸν μόχθον· νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας ἐργαζόμενοι πρὸς τὸ μὴ ἐπιβαρῆσαι τινα ὑμῶν ἐκηρύξαμεν εἰς ὑμᾶς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ θεοῦ (2:9). In using the verb ἐργάζομαι, Paul is clearly indicating manual labor.¹⁵ The combination of κόπος and μόχθος indicates that the labor was physically challenging. Used together, they suggest “fatigue and weariness, hardship and distress.”¹⁶ Paul does not underplay but in fact highlights his own manual labor in the midst of establishing his *ethos*. Later Paul encourages the Thessalonians to continue to live in a manner pleasing to God “as you learned from us” (4:1) and exhorts them to “work with your hands” (ἐργάζεσθαι ταῖς [ἰδίας]¹⁷ χερσὶν ὑμῶν [4:11]).¹⁸

Despite the generally negative attitude toward manual labor in antiquity,¹⁹ in 1 Thessalonians Paul’s language about work reflects a more positive attitude, a clear indication of where to locate the Thessalonians on the social map of antiquity. Paul’s central message in 1 Thessalonians is to reaffirm the Christians at Thessalonica that they are his “glory” and his “joy” (2:20). Throughout the letter Paul suggests that they share his own social level and are themselves

¹⁴ See G. Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography: Towards a New Understanding* (SBLDS 73; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985) 189–201, for a detailed examination.

¹⁵ LSJ, *s.v.*

¹⁶ Collins, *Birth*, 11. They also suggest that the labor continued for some time, certainly longer than the three-week stay indicated by Acts 17.

¹⁷ The word ἰδίας is omitted in a number of important manuscripts but included in others. The omission in the original would not much affect the meaning of the phrase.

¹⁸ In doing so he uses a phrase similar to that of 1 Cor 4:12, where he states that he worked with his own hands (ἐργαζόμενοι ταῖς ἰδίαις χερσίν). However, there is a difference in the two uses. In 1 Cor 4:12 Paul’s handwork is linked to his hardships as an apostle and serves as a contrast to the Corinthians’ claim to wisdom and riches. In 1 Thessalonians Paul is not contrasting the recipients with himself.

¹⁹ R. F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul’s Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 36; cf. S. R. Joshel, *Work, Identity, and Legal Status at Rome: A Study of the Occupational Inscriptions* (Norman/London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992) 63–69; P. Garnsey, “Non-slave Labour in the Roman World,” in *Non-slave labour in the Greco-Roman World* (ed. P. Garnsey; Cambridge Philological Society Sup. 6; Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1980) 35; R. MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1974) 138–41, esp. 114–16; R. M. Grant, *Early Christianity and Society: Seven Studies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) 81.

manual workers.²⁰ To be placed in such a low-ranking category as manual worker, if one occupied a higher rank, would represent not praise but denigration and dishonor—certainly it would be grounds to reject Paul and his message. In fact, it would represent a challenge to one's honor that could not go unanswered; Paul would not gain friends but would make enemies with such bold claims if they were being made among the elite. For Paul's rhetoric to work the Thessalonians must be among the lower-ranking persons of ancient society. That Paul does not disparage but rather commends work confirms that the Thessalonians are manual workers.²¹

Presumably Paul and the Thessalonians worked at the same trade, or at least trades within the same general area, thus facilitating contact between Paul and the Thessalonians. And it was while at work that Paul preached the gospel and presumably made his initial converts. Thus, the core of the Thessalonian community comprised handworkers who shared Paul's trade. Unfortunately, Paul does not state the nature of his manual labor in 1 Thessalonians or elsewhere. Acts 18:3, however, suggests that Paul was a *σκηνοποιός*.²² This word has a basic meaning of "tentmaker,"²³ but since tents were made primarily of leather, it could indicate that Paul was more generally a leather worker.²⁴ As an itinerant worker, Paul probably worked in one of the local shops at Thessalonica. Since Paul was there "night and day," presumably he would have used the opportunity to share his gospel message with fellow workers and customers, the former being the most likely candidates for proselytizing.²⁵ Such workers were probably already involved in some form of voluntary association.

²⁰ Those who also understand the Thessalonians to be manual workers include Rigaux, *Thessaloniciens*, 521; Best, *Thessalonians*, 176; Hock, *Social Context*, 42–47; W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 64–65; Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, 120–21; R. Russell, "The Idle in 2 Thess 3.6–12: An Eschatological or a Social Problem?" *NTS* 34 (1988) 111–12; G. Schöllgen, "Hausgemeinden, oikos-Ekklesiologie, und monarchischer Episcopat," *JAC* 31 (1988) 76; Kloppenborg, "ΦΙΛΑΔΕΛΦΙΑ," 267; J. Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) 117; L. Fatum, "Brotherhood in Christ: A Gender Hermeneutical Reading of 1 Thessalonians," in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (ed. H. Moxnes; London/New York: Routledge) 184; de Vos, *Community Conflicts*, 154. Contra J. M. Barclay, "Conflict in Thessalonica," *CBQ* 55 (1993) 519.

²¹ One could also point to Paul's other references to work within the letter: 1:3; 3:2, 5; 5:3, 12; see further Ascough, "Voluntary Associations," 78–81.

²² According to Lüdemann (*Early Christianity*, 198), Acts 18:2–3 and Paul's connection in Corinth with Aquila and Priscilla is "a singular and quite untendentious report" suggesting that the tradition of Paul the *σκηνοποιός* is fairly reliable.

²³ LSJ, s.v.

²⁴ Hock, *Social Context*, 20–21, 72. Cf. R. J. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology* 5 (2d ed.; Leiden: Brill, 1966) 58–66.

²⁵ See de Vos, *Community Conflicts*, 153 n. 110. On Paul's use of the workshop in his mission strategy, see further R. F. Hock, "The Workshop as a Social Setting for Paul's Missionary Preaching," *CBQ* 41 (1979) 438–43; also Collins, *Birth*, 13–14.

III. The Thessalonians as a Voluntary Association

Voluntary associations, groups of men and/or women who gathered together regularly as a result of some shared interest, were widespread throughout Greco-Roman antiquity.²⁶ There were two primary types of associations.²⁷ Religious associations organized themselves around the veneration of a particular deity or deities and attracted adherents from the various strata of society. Professional associations were more homogeneous, attracting members from within a single profession or related professions.²⁸

Unlike the paucity of evidence for synagogues, there is significant evidence for voluntary associations in Macedonia during the formative period of early Christianity.²⁹ Inscriptions concerning voluntary associations have been found ranging from Kalliani and Stobi in the south and north of the western part of the province respectively to Philippi and its surrounding villages in the eastern part of the province. The existence of voluntary associations is not limited to urban areas. Although most of the inscriptions come from cities (esp. Thessalonica, Philippi, and Edessa), there are a number of inscriptions from smaller villages, particularly those around Philippi (Reussilova, Proussotchani, Alistrati, Podgora, Kalambaki, Raktcha, and Selian). Most of the inscriptions date to the common era with a number from the first and early second century CE.³⁰

There is quite a diversity in terms of the function of each association, the deity worshiped, the name of either the association or the associates, and the

²⁶ For further details, see R. S. Ascough, *What Are They Saying About the Formation of Pauline Churches?* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1998) 74–79. For a more detailed overview, see J. S. Kloppenborg, “Collegia and *Thiasoi*: Issues in Function, Taxonomy and Membership,” in *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (ed. J. S. Kloppenborg and S. G. Wilson; London/New York: Routledge, 1996) 16–30; or T. Schmeller, *Hierarchie und Egalität: Eine sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchung paulinischer Gemeinden und griechisch-römischer Vereine* (SBS 162; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1995) 19–53. A survey of the use of associations in understanding Pauline Christian communities can be found in Ascough, *Formation of Pauline Churches*, 71–94.

²⁷ A third type, funerary associations, is often identified. However, Kloppenborg (“Collegia,” 20–22) has cogently argued that associations formed solely for the burial of members did not exist until the second century CE (from the time of Hadrian and beyond); cf. E. G. L. Ziebarth, *Das griechische Vereinswesen* (Wiesbaden: Martin Sändig, 1896) 17; F. Poland, *Geschichte des griechischen Vereinswesens* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1909) 56, 503–4; P. M. Fraser, *Rhodian Funerary Monuments* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977) 58–70. In fact, even at that time they were a “legal fiction,” a way of gaining legal recognition to meet as a group while another purpose (usually social) was the primary interest of the group. Nevertheless, many associations did include the proper burial of their members as one of their benefits (Kloppenborg, “Collegia,” 21).

²⁸ Kloppenborg, “Collegia,” 24.

²⁹ For details, see Ascough, “Voluntary Associations,” 297–308 and especially the seventy-five Macedonian voluntary association inscriptions transcribed and translated in Appendix I.

³⁰ Examples from Thessalonica include *Inscriptiones Graecae* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1924–) (= *IG*) 10/2, 67; 71; 72; 259; 68; 255; 58; 503; E. Voutiras, “Berufs- und Kultverein: Ein ΔΟΥΜΟΣ in Thessalonike,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 90 (1992) 87–96.

type of officials in the association. The members are generally from the lower ranks of society and in a number of cases are artisans and merchants.³¹ Since this is similar to the social location we suggested for the members of the Thessalonian Christian community, we are in a strong position to read 1 Thessalonians in light of the data from the voluntary associations to note similarities and differences between these Macedonian Christian communities and voluntary associations.

Officials and Their Titles

Within the Macedonian voluntary association inscriptions a number of different officials are attested, although there is no consistency in the terms used for these officials.³² Turning to 1 Thessalonians, we note that there is clearly some leadership in the Thessalonian Christian community. Paul makes reference to unnamed leaders by encouraging the Thessalonians εἰδέναι τοὺς κοπιῶντας ἐν ὑμῖν καὶ προϊσταμένους ὑμῶν ἐν κυρίῳ καὶ νουθετοῦντας ὑμᾶς καὶ ἡγεῖσθαι αὐτοὺς ὑπερεκπερισσοῦ ἐν ἀγάπῃ διὰ τὸ ἔργον αὐτῶν (5:12–13). Paul uses a general designation for such leaders as those who are “over” others (προΐστημι), indicating a group of persons who have a special function within the congregation.³³

³¹ An association of purple dyers is found at Thessalonica (IG 10/2, 291) and perhaps Philippi (P. Pilhofer, *Philippi: Die erste christliche Gemeinde Europas* [WUNT 87; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1995] 179–82). Also at Thessalonica is an association of yoke makers (C. H. R. Horsley, ed., *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity: A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Published in 1979* [New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity 4; North Ryde, Australia: Ancient History Documentary Research Centre and Macquarie University, 1987] 215 no. 17). Associations of donkey drivers are found at Beroea (A. M. Woodward, “Inscriptions From Macedonia,” *Annual of the British School at Athens* 18 [1911–12] 155 no. 22), coppersmiths at Amphipolis (*Sylloge inscriptionum graecarum* [3d ed.; Leipzig: Hirzel, 1915–24] [= SIG³] 1140), and silver-smiths at Kalambaki (A. Salač, “Inscriptions du Pangé de la region Drama-Cavalla et de Philippes,” *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 47 [1923] 78 no. 39). See further Ascough, “Voluntary Associations,” 301–5.

³² For example, ἀρχισυνάγωγος (IG 10/2, 288; 289), γραμματεὺς (IG 10/2, 288; 289), ἀρχιμαγαρεὺς (IG 102, 65), ἐπιμελητής (IG 10/2, 288), ἀρχων (IG 10/2, 58), ἀρχινακόρος (IG 10/2, 244; 220; 65; 220), ὑδροσκόπος (IG 10/2, 503), γαλακτηφόρος (IG 10/2, 65), κισταφορήσασαν (IG 10/2, 65). This diversity is typical for associations generally; see Kloppenborg, “Edwin Hatch,” 232.

³³ Rigaux, *Thessaloniciens*, 576–78; E. Best, “Bishops and Deacons: Philippians 1,1,” SE 4 (1968) 372; cf. Laub, “Gemeindegründer,” 33; J. Hainz, *Ekklesia: Strukturen paulinischer Gemeinde-Theologie und Gemeinde-Ordnung* (Biblische Untersuchungen 9; Regensburg: F. Pustet, 1972) 38–39. Wanamaker’s suggestion (*Thessalonians*, 193; also Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, 103) that they are patrons and exercise authority by virtue of their wealth is unlikely, as they are not named and thus not honored (unlike the other illustrations he uses). Further, such patronage is discouraged in 1 Thess 4:9–12. The designation ὁ προεστῶς can be used as a title, as is found in an inscription from an association (συμβίωσις) of male worshipers of the Dioscuri: ----- καὶ τῆ Διοσκουριτῶν συμ|βίωσει ἀνδρῶν, | προεστῶτος Τελεσφορίωνος, | γραμματεῦντος Ἀκλι-

Paul refers to one of the responsibilities of these leaders by using the cognate verb of κόπος. The noun occurs twice elsewhere in the letter, once for Paul's manual labor among the Thessalonians (2:9) and once for his work at the formative stages of the community (3:5). It is likely that the leaders at Thessalonica continued with both kinds of activity, manual labor alongside community members and the labor of community formation.³⁴ If so, the leaders of the Thessalonians are like the leaders of many voluntary associations. They are chosen from within the association itself and carry on with their everyday tasks as workers while having some authority in official meetings of the association. It reflects a willingness on Paul's part to allow his Christian communities to develop locally and without a preconceived notion of "church leadership" imposed on them.³⁵ That the leaders in the community are unnamed does not indicate that Paul does not know them so much as that the leadership positions might have rotated on a monthly or yearly basis, as was common in the associations. Paul leaves them unnamed so that the general exhortation will be applicable to any who are in a position of leadership.³⁶

Internal Relationships

Locating the Thessalonian Christian community in the context of the voluntary associations helps explain Paul's injunction that the Thessalonians *νοθευεῖτε τοὺς ἀτάκτους* (5:14).³⁷ Ἀτακτος and its cognates can have various meanings including "moral wrong-doing," "idleness from work," and "disorderliness."³⁸ Some commentators understand ἄτακτος in 1 Thess 5:14 to mean "lazy" or "idle" (that is, those who will not work) based on Paul's injunction in 4:11 and references to the idle in 2 Thess 3:6–11.³⁹ If this is the case, then it is clear that Paul is writing to those whom others in the group could reasonably expect to be working, namely, other workers. Thus, it fits well within the context of a workers' association, particularly those of the same trade (and perhaps even the same workshop) for whom the lack of a number of fellow workers

πιά[δ]ου (CIG 3540, Pergamum; E. E. Ellis, *Pauline Theology: Ministry and Society* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989] 135).

³⁴ Not simply "Christian" κόπος, as Hainz (*Ekklesia*, 43–44) seems to suggest.

³⁵ Laub, "Gemeindegründer," 32.

³⁶ See Laub, who points out that Paul does not address the leaders directly but addresses the entire community ("Gemeindegründer," 32–33); also Hainz, *Ekklesia*, 47.

³⁷ Paul also singles out the "fainthearted" and the "weak" as being in need of special attention.

³⁸ See LSJ, *s.v.*; MM (1914) 89; cf. C. Spicq, "Les Thessaloniens 'inquiets' étaient-ils des paresseux?" *Studia Theologica* 10 (1956) 1–8.

³⁹ Milligan, *Thessalonians*, 152–54; Frame, *Thessalonians*, 196–97; Neil, *Thessalonians*, 124; Best, *Thessalonians*, 230 (who seems uncertain); Bruce, *Thessalonians*, 122–23; Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 196–97; Williams, *Thessalonians*, 96–97.

would require increased output on their behalf and would certainly strain community relations.

A number of scholars, however, understand ἄτακτος to indicate undisciplined or disorderly actions or persons.⁴⁰ The word was used for “standing against the order or nature of God” and in military contexts of those who would not follow commands or who broke rank.⁴¹ The use in 1 Thessalonians suggests to some commentators that some of the Thessalonian Christians have given up working and are trespassing social boundaries because they perceive the parousia to be near.⁴² Robert Jewett suggests that they are “obstinate resisters of authority” and turns to 2 Thess 3:6–15 to suggest that they have also given up their occupations and are relying on other members of the congregation for support.⁴³ He is correct that “[t]here is no evidence in this passage that the motivation of their behavior was laziness,” a false inference, he suggests, from Paul’s own example of his self-sufficiency.⁴⁴ However, Jewett does not make a strong case that the ἄτακτοι are directly challenging the leadership of the Christian community, an inference based on military contexts.⁴⁵

In almost all of the interpretations of this passage the eschatological context of 1 Thess 5:1–11 determines for the interpreter whom Paul addresses as the ἄτακτοι in 1 Thess 5:14, although almost universally 2 Thessalonians is immediately introduced into the argument.⁴⁶ The context of 1 Thess 5:12–22, however, and the shift in 5:11 from the *probatio* to the *peroratio*, means that Paul’s preceding discussion of eschatology need not frame the discussion of the ἄτακτοι in 1 Thess 5:14.⁴⁷ In fact, 1 Thess 5:12–22 seems to be concerned with internal community relationships, and one cannot simply bracket out the ἄτακτοι as a separate problem. They are part of Paul’s concern that the mem-

⁴⁰ A. Plummer, *A Commentary on St. Paul’s Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* (London: Roxburghe, 1918) 94; Rigaux, *Thessaloniens*, 582–83; Marshall, *Thessalonians*, 150; Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, 104–5; Collins, *Birth*, 94; Richard, *Thessalonians*, 270. A close connection was often made between laziness and disorderliness, so the term might indicate both.

⁴¹ Plummer, *Second Thessalonians*, 94; Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, 104.

⁴² W. Marxsen, *Der erste Brief an der Thessalonicher* (Zürcher Bibelkommentare NT 11/1; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1979) 71; Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, 104–5.

⁴³ Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, 105.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ The best evidence comes from the reference in 5:12 to leaders who admonish the Thessalonians (νουθετοῦντας ὑμᾶς) and the injunction that the Thessalonians admonish (νουθετεῖτε) the ἄτακτοι in 5:14 (not mentioned by Jewett). However, this is tenuous at best, and Paul’s words in both verses need to be seen as directed to the congregation as a whole. The first reference need not indicate that the function of the leaders is to admonish the idle.

⁴⁶ See Richard, *Thessalonians*, 270. For a survey of the various positions, see Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, 135–47. Jewett himself assumes that apocalypticism is the dominant theme not only of the letter but within the congregation. However, this is based more on his reading of 2 Thessalonians, which he understands to be authentic.

⁴⁷ The same is true of 2 Thess 3:6–13.

bers of the community coexist well together, encourage one another (5:11, 14, including the leaders 5:12), are considerate of others (the “fainthearted,” “weak”), and worship God properly, in a context not of personal piety but of communal piety (5:16–22).

With this communal context in mind, we turn again to the voluntary associations.⁴⁸ A number of inscriptions show that the voluntary associations often struggled with the problem of disorderly behavior, so much so that legislation was introduced to limit it, and fines and/or corporal punishment were used to enforce the legislation. For example, the second-century CE rule of the Iobakchoi (*IG* 2² 1368; Athens) uses the verb ἀκοσμέω, a synonym of ἀτακτέω,⁴⁹ of those who disrupt a meeting:

If anyone begins a fight or if someone is found disorderly (εὐρεθῆ τις ἀκοσῶν), or if someone comes and sits in someone else’s seat or is insulting or abuses someone else . . . the one who committed the insult or the abuse shall pay to the association 25 drachmae and the one who was the cause of the fight shall pay the same 25 drachmae or not come to any more meetings of the Iobakchoi until he pays.” (lines 72–83)

In lines 136–46 ἀκοσμέω is used again in a similar context. Anyone who causes a disturbance at a meeting is indicated by an official through the touch of a θύρσοις and is signaled to leave the feast. Should one so designated refuse to leave, a special category of “bouncers” (ἵπποι) was in place to remove such persons physically, who then also became liable to the same punishment stipulated earlier for those who fight.

In the regulations of the mysteries of Andania (*IG* 5/1 1390 [96 BCE]) there is a section entitled “Concerning the Disorderly” (ἀκοσμοῦντων), which reads

⁴⁸ De Vos links the use of ἀτακτοί to voluntary associations (*Community Conflicts*, 157–73, esp. 166–68), but does so in terms of associations involved in civil disobedience as a response to repression, not in terms of internal disruptions within the group itself. However, the evidence for professional associations undertaking civil action is quite limited; see N. R. E. Fisher, “Roman Associations, Dinner Parties, and Clubs,” in *Civilization of the Ancient Mediterranean: Greece and Rome* (ed. M. Grant and R. Kitzinger; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1988) 1222; Kloppenborg, “Collegia,” 19–20.

⁴⁹ That ἀτακτέω and ἀκοσμέω can be used synonymously can be seen in Suidas’s *Lexicon* entry for ἀκοσμα, which lists simply “ἀπρεπή, ἀτακτα.” Plutarch uses the cognates synonymously in describing the universe, noting that there is nothing ἀτακτον οὐδ’ ἀκατακόσμητον (“unplaced or unorganized”) left over to crash into the existing worlds (*Def. Orac.* 424 A [LCL]). In describing one who must evidence repentance, Philo notes that a person must avoid “great gatherings” (τοὺς τῶν πολλῶν θιάσους) since “a crowd (ὄχλος) is another name for everything that is disorderly (ἀτακτον), indecorous (ἀκοσμον), discordant (πλημμελής), culpable (ὑπάτιον)” (*Praem. Poen.* 20 [LCL]). When writing of matter and its relationship to God, Origen refers at one point to matter being in a state of confusion and disorder (ἦν δὲ ἀτακτος ἢ ὕλη καὶ ἀκόσμητος, *Philocal.* 24.1), using the words as synonyms.

And whenever the sacrifices and mysteries are celebrated, let everyone keep silent and listen to the things announced. And let the officers flog the disobedient and those who live indecently and prevent them from (participating) in the mysteries. (lines 39–41)

Such inscriptions give some indication of the type of disturbances that could occur at a meeting (fighting, disruptions of order and ceremony, abuse of others), along with guidance on how to deal with such (fines and floggings).⁵⁰ We agree with Jewett and others that ἄτακτοι indicates that some in the Thessalonian Christian community are disorderly. However, this is not a challenge to the leadership from a “breakaway” group but involves disruptions and disturbances in the context of worship.⁵¹ Paul’s injunction “see that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all,” following his “be patient with them all” (including the ἄτακτοι) indicates that verbal admonishing should suffice to stem disorderliness, rather than fines and flogging.

In 1 Thess 4:11 Paul encourages the Thessalonians φιλοτιμεῖσθαι ἡσυχάζειν. In doing so he uses a term frequent in voluntary association inscriptions but he gives it a different nuance. The verb φιλοτιμέομαι and the cognate noun φιλοτιμία are often used in the voluntary association inscriptions in contexts not of “living quietly” but of competition between members. It is most often used for the competition and rivalry for honor within the group itself.⁵²

⁵⁰ See also *CIL* 14. 2112; *P.Mich.Teb.* 243; *P.Lond.* 2710. In Macedonia a gymnasiarchal law from Beroea (J. M. R. Cormack, “The Gymnasiarchal Law of Beroea,” in *Ancient Macedonia* 2 (ed. B. Laourdas and C. Makaronas; Institute for Balkan Studies 155; Thessalonica: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1977) 139–50) legislates against disobedient, unruly behavior using the word ἀτακτέω (cf. Horsley, *New Documents*, 104). From Amphipolis a fragment of a military code from ca. 200 BCE seems to refer to the need to control soldiers who are intent on looting (*Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 40 [1990] no. 524 frag. A, col. 2, lines. 1–3; cf. Spicq, “Thessaloniens,” 6 and nn. 2 and 3).

⁵¹ See Spicq, “Thessaloniens,” 11–12; B. Reicke, “Thessalonicherbriefe,” *RGZ* 6.851–53. B. Reicke also connects the ἄτακτοι to the associations, but does so in the context of their eschatological enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*), and particularly Paul’s reference to “drinking” in 1 Thess 5:7 (*Diakonie, Festfreude, und Zelos in Verbindung mit der altchristlichen Agapenfeier* [Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift 1951, 5; Uppsala: Lundequist; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1951] 242–43, 247). He moves quickly to emphasize that the ἄτακτοι were also lazy and living the “parasitic” life, drawing almost immediately upon 2 Thess 3:6–16 (pp. 243–44). He concludes, “dass die soziale Unordnung in Thessalonien ein Ausdruck der eschatologischen überspanntheit war, oder der Schwärmerei” (p. 245). Later in the same work Reicke details the community problems encountered in the associations (pp. 321–38), but does not tie it in explicitly to his earlier discussion of Paul’s Christian communities (“Zum Teil fällt das Licht rückwärts auf die oben behandelten paulinischen Briefe” [p. 338]).

⁵² See J. S. Kloppenborg, “Egalitarianism in the Myth and Rhetoric of Pauline Churches,” in *Reimagining Christian Origins: A Colloquium Honoring Burton L. Mack* (ed. E. A. Castelli and H. Taussig; Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996) 258. Φιλοτιμία can also be used to describe the benefaction itself; see *IG* 2², 1292 (Attica, third century BCE), where crowns are

The quest for honors was promoted as a means to encourage members to contribute more and more lavishly to the social practices of the association. For example, in *IG* 2² 1263 (Piraeus, 300 BCE) the secretary of an association is honored with the erection of a statue, “so that also the others shall be zealous for honor (φιλοτιμῶνται) among the members, knowing that they will receive thanks from the members deserving of benefaction.”⁵³ In the second century CE at Athens an association of male friends (ἔρανον σύναγον φίλοι ἄνδρες) proclaimed “let the association increase by zeal for honor” (αὐξανέτω δ[ὲ] ὁ ἔρανος ἐπὶ φιλοτειμίαις [*IG* 2² 1369]). For Paul, in contrast, the “quest for honor” is found in a community of mutual coexistence, not a life of competition with one another for honor.⁵⁴

Thus, although there are some similarities between the Thessalonian Christian community and the voluntary associations, Paul also reflects a desire for a community *ethos* different from that found in the associations. Yet it is still significant that Paul uses voluntary association language to produce this different community *ethos*. Paul uses association language self-consciously to encourage a different type of social control (without fines or floggings). This suggests that the Thessalonian Christian community shares the same discursive field as the associations and is best placed within that field. That is, despite these differences in community relationships, they are still analogous to the voluntary associations.

IV. Further Implications for Community Structure

The context of the voluntary associations raises an intriguing possibility concerning Paul's comments in 1 Thess 1:9b, where he conveys to the Thessalonians the report that he has heard about them from others; πῶς ἐπεστρέψατε πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ἀπὸ τῶν εἰδώλων δουλεῦειν θεῷ ζῶντι καὶ ἀληθινῷ.⁵⁵ Most interpreters of 1 Thessalonians seem to understand the second person plural in 1:9b as a reference to individual conversion experiences initiated by Paul's

awarded to the treasurer and secretary of the association of Sarapistai “so that there will be a rivalry among everyone to strive for honor” ([ἐ]φάμιλλον ἢ τὸ [εἰς αὐτοῦς φιλο[τ]ειῖσθαι]); cf. *IG* 2², 1314 (Piraeus, 213/212 BCE); 1315 (Piraeus, 211/210 BCE); *IG* 12/5, 606 (Ceos, third century BCE); IDelos 1519 (153/152 BCE).

⁵³ Ὅπως ἂν καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι φιλοτιμῶνται εἰς τοὺς θιασάτας, εἰδότας ὅτι χάριτας ἀπολήμνονται παρὰ τῶν θιασωτῶν ἀξίας τῶν εὐεργετημάτων (lines 27–31; cf. *IG* 2², 1271 [a *thiasos* of Piraeus, 298/297 BCE]; 1273.A [a θίασος in Piraeus, 222/221 BCE]; 1277 [a κοινόν in Athens, 278/277 BCE]; 1292 [a κοινόν in Athens, ca. 250 BCE]).

⁵⁴ *Contra* the usual understanding of 1 Thess 4:11 as referring to individuals who should not rely on the support of others in the church: Milligan, *Thessalonians*, 55; Frame, *Thessalonians*, 163; Plummer, *First Thessalonians*, 66; Neil, *Thessalonians*, 87–88; Best, *Thessalonians*, 177–78; Bruce, *Thessalonians*, 91–93; Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 164; Williams, *Thessalonians*, 78.

⁵⁵ Πῶς should be taken not as “how,” that is, as a description of the method of their becoming Christian, but as “that,” indicative of their having done so (Best, *Thessalonians*, 81–82).

preaching.⁵⁶ Ἐπιστρέφω literally means to “turn” or “turn back.” It can be used with an ethical sense of obligation to do something that one has been asked or required to do (which can be acted upon or ignored)⁵⁷ or in the religious sense of turning to a deity.⁵⁸ In the LXX it is found particularly in the phrase ἐπιστρέφειν . . . κύριον (θεόν). Although it is rare in Paul, he does use it for conversion experiences in 2 Cor 3:16 (turning to the Lord, a citation from Exod 34:34) and in Gal 4:9 (for Christians turning back to idols). The word ἐπιστρέφω “is a suitable word to express the change from one faith to another.”⁵⁹

Thus, it is possible that Paul is referring to the collective experience of an already formed group of Thessalonians.⁶⁰ If Paul did preach among workers of the same trade (as we have suggested), they were undoubtedly part of a professional association of “handworkers” of the same trade and were thus involved in “idoltrous” worship.⁶¹ Rather than envision a scenario in which a number of individuals were converted by Paul over time, a picture encouraged by the usual reading of Acts, we could imagine that over time Paul manages to persuade the members of the existing professional association to switch their allegiance from their patron deity or deities “to serve a living and true God.”⁶² In

⁵⁶ I found no instances in which this was explicitly expressed, but it was certainly implied in the comments of many exegetes, esp. P. Perkins, “1 Thessalonians and Hellenistic Religious Practices,” in *To Touch the Text: Biblical and Related Studies in Honor of Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J.* (ed. M. P. Horgan and P. J. Kobelski; New York: Crossroad, 1989) 325–34. Some, such as Williams (*Thessalonians*, 33, 35), suggest that a confirmation of the Acts account can be found here, thus indicating individual conversions. Holtz (*Thessalonicher*, 62) suggests that one can see behind 1:9 a mission sermon with an emphasis on monotheism like that in *Joseph and Aseneth*, a text that focuses on the conversion of an individual.

⁵⁷ See MM (1914) 246; cf. G. Bertram, “στρέφω, κτλ.,” *TDNT* 7.722–23.

⁵⁸ Bertram, “στρέφω,” 722–25; Richard, *Thessalonians*, 53.

⁵⁹ Best, *Thessalonians*, 82. For individual conversions, see, e.g., Acts 3:19; 11:21; 14:15; 15:19; 26:18. A collective conversion might be envisioned in Acts 9:35: “all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned (ἐπέστρεψαν) to the Lord.”

⁶⁰ Collins notes that in 1 Thess 1:6 [*sic*, for 1:7] Paul calls the Thessalonians an example (singular) to other churches, indicating that “[i]t is not the believing individuals as such who are cited as examples for the believers of the Grecian provinces, rather it is the belief of the church as such which is exemplary” (*Studies*, 295).

⁶¹ In antiquity the word does not always carry such a pejorative sense and was used often by Gentiles to describe that upon which they focused their worship as an “image” (LSJ, *s.v.*; MM [1914] 183; F. Büchsel, “εἶδωλον, κτλ.,” *TDNT* 2.375–77).

⁶² The transformation of an existing trade association at Thessalonica is suggested by Kloppenborg (“ΦΙΛΑΔΕΛΦΙΑ,” 276; cf. J. S. Kloppenborg, “Edwin Hatch, Churches and Collegia,” in *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 Press, 1993] 235), although he does not pursue this idea; cf. R. M. Evans, *Eschatology and Ethics: A Study of Thessalonica and Paul's Letters to the Thessalonians* (Th.D. diss., Basel University; reprint, Princeton, NJ: McMahan Printing Company, 1969) 89. Others who assume that the Thessalonians are a voluntary association include Fatum, “Brotherhood in Christ,” *passim*; B. D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical*

this case 1 Thess 1:9b would be better paraphrased “you all turned (collectively) to God from idols.”

The introduction of a new deity to a collective, family-based and/or guild-based association is attested in a few cases in antiquity (e.g., *SIG*³ 985; *IG* 10/2, 255). However, old allegiances die hard, and it would take some time for former patron deities to be replaced by a new deity, if ever, since in associations there would be no need for an exclusive switch—more than one deity could be worshiped. For this reason there is no clear example of a voluntary association converting to the worship of a new deity accompanied by the disregarding of earlier allegiances. That the Thessalonians have done so stands out as unique—perhaps this is the reason they have been noted among other believers and that they have become a paradigm for imitation (1 Thess 1:7–9).

We may also explain the lack of analogues in antiquity as a result of the aggressive missionary impulse of Pauline Christianity, with its monotheistic demands, being a unique feature in antiquity—other groups were not concerned with converting individuals or groups.⁶³ Groups that did undertake the worship of another god often broke away from earlier deities slowly, as they were not faced with the same monotheistic demands that Paul's Christianity brought with it. While it is true that the text does not indicate the turning of an entire group to the veneration of Jesus, neither does it indicate what is assumed by most—individual conversions. The possibility of a group “conversion” should not be discounted too quickly.

Another intriguing possibility arises from the suggestion that the Thessalonian Christian community was formed as a professional association of “handworkers,” perhaps tentmakers or leather-workers. If this were the case, we would expect that the group would be composed primarily of males, since women would not be members of an association of artisans in a trade dominated by males,⁶⁴ even if they worked in the same occupation.⁶⁵ Most inter-

Introduction to the Early Christian Writings (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 263 (although he also ties the community structure to the synagogue); de Vos, *Community Conflicts*, 164. De Vos suggests that “[t]o the average Thessalonian, the Christian community probably would have resembled a *thiasos*” (*Community Conflicts*, 153 n. 110), but he does not explore the details of the connections outside of civic disruptions by associations. He does allow for Kloppenborg's suggestion of a “converted trade *thiasos*.”

⁶³ M. Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); Scot McKnight, *A Light Among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); summarized in Ascoug, “Voluntary Associations,” 158–61.

⁶⁴ J.-P. Waltzing, *Étude Historique sur les corporations Professionnelles chez les Romains depuis les origines jusqu'à la chute de l'Empire d'Occident* (4 vols.; Mémoire couronné par l'Académie royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-Arts de Belgique; Louvain: Peeters, 1895–1900) 1.348; C. F. Whelan, “Amica Pauli: The Role of Phoebe in the Early Church,” *JSNT* 49 (1993) 75–76; Schmeller, *Hierarchie und Egalität*, 48; Kloppenborg, “Collegia,” 25.

⁶⁵ S. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New

preters do not read 1 Thessalonians this way, but rather see the group as including both men and women.⁶⁶

However, there are some indications in 1 Thessalonians that the community is made up primarily of men. Clearly, there is no indication of women in the community, and no advice is given to women, children, or families. Most telling, however, is Paul's command to each member of the community: εἰδέναι ἕκαστον ὑμῶν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι ἐν ἀγιασμῷ καὶ τιμῇ, μὴ ἐν πάθει ἐπιθυμίας καθάπερ καὶ τὰ ἔθνη τὰ μὴ εἰδότα τὸν θεόν, τὸ μὴ ὑπερβαίνειν καὶ πλεονεκτεῖν ἐν τῷ πράγματι τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ (4:4–6). This passage has created much difficulty for commentators. Any interpretation rests on the precise meaning of σκεῦος in the context of this passage.⁶⁷ Quite literally the word means “vessel, tool, utensil”⁶⁸ but is probably being used euphemistically by Paul. Three suggestions have been put forth: “wife,”⁶⁹ “body,”⁷⁰ and “male genitalia.”

This latter position is summarized by Wanamaker: “it seems better to understand σκεῦος as connoting the human body in its sexual aspect, that is, as

York: Dorset, 1975) 201. Women could serve as patrons of all-male guilds, although they did not participate in them (see Kloppenborg, “Collegia,” 25; Whelan, “Amica Pauli,” 76). Honorifics given to a woman patron by an association do not necessarily indicate that she is a member in the association (Waltzing, *Étude Historique*, 1.349).

⁶⁶ This is particularly obvious in newer works, which tend to translate ἀδελφός inclusively as “brothers and sisters”; see NRSV; Hainz, *Ekklesia*, 41 n. 5, 45; M. McGehee, “A Rejoinder to Two Recent Studies Dealing with 1 Thessalonians 4:4,” *CBQ* 51 (1989) 82–89; Richard, *Thessalonians*, 128, and passim; Lührmann, “Beginnings,” 247. I have little doubt that Paul elsewhere uses ἀδελφός inclusively and I support such translations; however, for the reasons given below ἀδελφός is better translated as “brothers” in 1 Thessalonians.

⁶⁷ Although this is not the only problem in the passage; see Collins, *Studies*, 299.

⁶⁸ LSJ, s.v.

⁶⁹ Reading “to take a wife for himself” (RSV). So Best, *Thessalonians*, 161–62; also Frame, *Thessalonians*, 149–50; C. Maurer, “σκεῦος,” *TDNT* 7.365–67; Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 228 n. 130; Collins, *Studies*, 313; O. L. Yarbrough, *Not Like the Gentiles: Marriage Rules in the Letters of Paul* (SBLDS 80; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985) 69–73; Holtz, *Thessalonicher*, 157–58; A. J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 51. See further those cited by Collins, *Studies*, 311–12. J. M. Bassler uses 1 Cor 7:36–38 as background and suggests that in 1 Thess 4:4 σκεῦος refers to a virgin and indicates that the Thessalonians should stay celibate, even if betrothed to another (“Σκεῦος: A Modest Proposal for Illuminating Paul's Use of Metaphor in 1 Thessalonians 4:4,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks* [ed. L. M. White and O. L. Yarbrough; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995] 61).

⁷⁰ Reading “to gain mastery over his body” (NEB; NIV). So Plummer, *First Thessalonians*, 59–60; M. Dibelius, *An die Thessalonicher I, II. An die Philipper* (HNT 11; 3d ed.; Tübingen: Mohr, 1937) 21; Neil, *Thessalonians*, 79–80; Rigaux, *Thessaloniens*, 504–6; L. Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 124; Marxsen, *Thessalonicher*, 60–61; Richard, *Thessalonians*, 198 (Morris, Marxsen, and Richard also note the suggestion of sexual control); McGehee, “Rejoinder,” 82–89. See also the list in Collins, *Studies*, 312.

a euphemism for the genitalia.⁷¹ This is how it is used as a translation for כַּל in the LXX of 1 Sam 21:5, where David assures the priest of Nob that “the young men’s vessels are holy” in response to a question about whether they have kept themselves from women.⁷² It is also attested in such uses in nonbiblical Greek.⁷³

The passage itself is clearly placed in the context of sexual misconduct, with Paul enclosing his words with references not only to ἀγιασμός (4:3, 7) but also to πορνεία (4:3) and ἀκαθαρσία (4:7), the latter two often used in contexts of sexual immorality.⁷⁴ Karl Paul Donfried places the text within the larger cultic context of Thessalonica:

All of this suggests that Paul is very deliberately dealing with a situation of grave immorality, not too dissimilar to the cultic temptations of Corinth. Thus, Paul’s severe warnings in this section, using the weightiest authorities he possibly can, is intended to distinguish the behavior of the Thessalonian Christians from their former heathen and pagan life which is still much alive in the various cults of the city.⁷⁵

The interpretation of σκευός as “genitalia” seems to be the one that best takes account of the textual data.⁷⁶ However, one cannot simply assume that although the pronouns used are masculine, the instruction to control (κτασθαι) the genitalia “would apply equally to women.”⁷⁷ The understanding of sexuality in antiquity seems to mitigate this. In the understanding of the ancients’ “ideology of sexual hierarchy,” it was assumed that “at the masculine end of the scale stood strength and control, at the feminine end weakness and vulnerability.”⁷⁸ As Dale Martin points out with respect to 1 Cor 7:36–38,

Paul’s exclusive address to the young man thus reveals his assumption of the male-female hierarchy of strength. He addresses the one who has power, the

⁷¹ Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 152. Cf. BAGD, s.v. So also J. M. Reese, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (NTM 16; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1979) 44; J. Whitton, “A Neglected Meaning for *skeuos* in 1 Thessalonians 4.4,” *NTS* 28 (1982) 142–43; Bruce, *Thessalonians*, 83; I. H. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 108–9; Williams, *Thessalonians*, 72 (cautiously), and especially K. P. Donfried, “The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence,” *NTS* 31 (1985) 341–42, and T. Elgvin, “To Master His Own Vessel: 1 Thess 4.4 in Light of New Qumran Evidence,” *NTS* 43 (1997) 604–19. *Contra* McGehee (“Rejoinder,” 82 n. 2), who suggests that this interpretation “has not been persuasive.”

⁷² See Bruce, *Thessalonians*, 83.

⁷³ See Maurer, “σκευός,” 359; BAGD, s.v.

⁷⁴ Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul*, 125; Donfried, “Cults of Thessalonica,” 341; cf. Fatum, “Brotherhood in Christ,” 189.

⁷⁵ Donfried, “Cults of Thessalonica,” 341–42.

⁷⁶ Yet it is clear that each of the options has problems; see Collins, *Studies*, 299, 314.

⁷⁷ Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 153.

⁷⁸ D. B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1995) 226–27.

man, and delegates to him the responsibility for doing what needs to be done in the woman's best interest (at least according to Paul's point of view). The weaker of the two, the woman, cannot be relied upon to make a decision for herself.⁷⁹

Women were assumed to be more easily consumed by desire and more willing to give in to it. Control in such situations rested with the male. Because of their own physiology, women lacked the ability to control their own sexual desires.⁸⁰ Thus, when Paul speaks of controlling the genitalia (*σκεῦος*), he would be addressing the males, who physiologically were thought to have the ability to do so.⁸¹

That the Thessalonian Christian community is primarily a group of males finds some support in a recent essay by Lone Fatum.⁸² Fatum begins by noting that both 1 Thessalonians and the audience to which it is addressed are "defined by androcentric values and social conventions and organized in terms of the patriarchal structures so characteristic of urban society in Graeco-Roman Antiquity."⁸³ She uses 1 Thess 4:3–8 to show how exclusively male is Paul's exhortation in the letter. Although she understands *σκεῦος* as "wife," she notes that "the power to interpret gender and to administer sexuality" was "generally accepted as a male prerogative."⁸⁴

Fatum draws back from arguing that the community was only males—"Historically we may assume, of course, as stated already, that women were among the converts in Thessalonica." She points to Acts 17:4 but immediately shows that one cannot rely on the veracity of the Acts account.⁸⁵ She reasons that women in the community are embedded in the lives of men such that when Paul addresses the Thessalonians "they are not among the brothers of Christ; individually they are not members of the new community." As such, they are "invisible in Christ" and "their socio-sexual presence among the brothers is, virtually, a non-presence."⁸⁶

If it is the case that the Thessalonian Christian community was primarily composed of males, then this particular community was atypical among Christian communities known from Paul's letters, such as those at Corinth, Philippi, and Rome.

⁷⁹ Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 227.

⁸⁰ See further the discussion in Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 219–28.

⁸¹ Dale Martin states: "With the Stoics, Paul shares the belief that the complete extirpation of desire is both possible and preferable, even within sexual relations in marriage" ("Paul Without Passion: On Paul's Rejection of Desire in Sex and Marriage," in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* [ed. H. Moxnes; London/New York: Routledge, 1997] 207).

⁸² Fatum, "Brotherhood in Christ," 183–97.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 192–93.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

V. Conclusion

In this article we have argued that the Thessalonian Christian community was similar to a professional voluntary association. To do so, we illustrated some of Paul's language in 1 Thessalonians by reference to the typicalities of association language. We saw that some of the community features of the Thessalonian Christian community find ready analogies in the voluntary associations. Overall, this helps us to understand better, and often in new ways, both Paul and his practices, and the practices and structure of the groups to which he writes. Although there is no single association inscription that has all the features of 1 Thessalonians (and thus no single association that is exactly the same), the comparative process reveals that on the social map of antiquity the type of group structure that the Thessalonians would have assumed, and the type of group that outsiders would have assumed that they were, was that of a voluntary association. That is, the Thessalonian Christians would *appear* to outsiders as a voluntary association and they would *function* internally as one. Paul's letters show that he is aware of associations and writes within this discursive field. Although he does not disapprove of the way the Macedonian Christian communities are formed, he attempts to make strategic adjustments to how they have configured themselves. In so doing his starting point is voluntary association language.