IN HIS MISSIONARY ENDEAVORS the Apostle Paul followed the policy of focusing on key urban areas. According to the Acts account he would typically go to a major metropolitan location, preach first in the Jewish synagogue in the city, then establish a church comprised of both Jews and Gentiles who responded to the gospel message. He anticipated that the Christian message would then spread through the city and beyond.

One such city was Thessalonica. Historians of the day disagree about the population of the city, for estimates run from 65,000 to 100,000. Whatever the exact figure, it was a large city for the first Christian century. In Acts 17:1-10 Luke told us of Paul’s first visit there, a visit that took place in approximately A.D. 51 during his second missionary journey. In his brief stay (three weeks? longer?) Paul planted a church and ministered to believers. When in Corinth some months later, he wrote the two letters to the church that are in our New Testament as First and Second Thessalonians.

If you had lived in Thessalonica in the first century, you would have been quite proud of your citizenship for a number of weighty reasons.

The View of the City Was Spectacular—from the upper part of Thessalonica, you could see Mount Olympus, the fabled home of the greater gods of the mythological Greek pantheon. Since the mountain is less than 50 miles away, on a clear day you could look across the azure blue waters of the Thermaic Gulf and see this site that was such an integral part of Greek religious culture. But Paul rightly perceived those Olympian gods to be mere idols, and in 1 Thessalonians 1:9 he rejoiced that the Thessalonian Christians had turned away from them.

The History of the City Was Illustrious—Prehistoric settlements in the area dated back to 2300 B.C. Thessalonica was at first a small village called Alia, but it was subsequently named Therma because of the thermal springs to the east and south of it. Cassander, one of the four key generals who had served under Alexander the Great, enlarged the city in 315 B.C., naming it Thessalonica after his wife, Thessalonike, the half-sister of Alexander. He formed the city by forcing 26 villages to unite, then he designated it his capital.

In 167 B.C., the city came under Roman control when Rome defeated Perseus, king of Macedonia. At that time the kingdom was divided into four districts with Thessalonica as capital of the second district. In 146 B.C. Macedonia was made a Roman province, and Thessalonica became the provincial capital. As the capital of Macedonia

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it was known as “The Metropolis of Macedonia,” literally, the “mother city” of the province.

The economic strength of the city was solidified in 130 B.C. when Rome constructed a roadway, the Via Egnatia, linking Thessalonica with the Adriatic Sea on the west and Neapolis on the east. The city supported Antony and Octavius in their conflict against the Triumvirs (ca. 42 B.C.) and thus received the status of a free city. As a result, Thessalonica was allowed to administer her own affairs guided by magistrates called politarchs. In writing of the “city authorities” (Acts 17:6, NASB), Luke actually used the term we transliterate “politarchs.”

However, the city’s privileged status was interrupted in A.D. 15 for a few years. The increasing prosperity of the region caused a protest against what the leadership of the city considered high taxation. This caused Tiberius to change Macedonia from a pro-consular province to an imperial province, that is, one under the direct control of Caesar. Yet this ultimately proved to be positive, for this gave the city intimate and immediate access to Rome. Claudius reversed this action in A.D. 44 by making Macedonia a senatorial province again.

The Location of the City Was Strategic—Ancient Thessalonica was located on the eastern coast of the province of Macedonia between the Balkan mountain range and the Greek peninsula. It was near the Axios and...
the Haliacmon Rivers, both major waterways. Although nearby Pella had been the capital chosen by Philip II, father of Alexander the Great, Cassander selected Thessalonica because of several favorable geographic features. Situated on the Thermaic Gulf, it offered protection from the dangerous southeast winds. In addition, the hills surrounding the city provided shelter from the north winds that blew in from central Europe.

The region surrounding Thessalonica was rich in natural resources. Located on the edge of the great central plain of Macedonia, the area had fertile soil and abundant rainfall. The mountains around the city were covered with timber, providing wood for houses and boats. The mild climate enabled the people to grow grain and fruit, but not Mediterranean crops like dates and olives. Fish filled the nearby lakes and rivers. Mines producing gold, silver, copper, iron, and lead dotted the surrounding area.

In the first century A.D., Thessalonica was the main seaport and naval base of Macedonia. As previously noted, the Via Egnatia, Rome's major road to its eastern provinces, ran along the northern outskirts of the city. As well, the main route from the Danube down to the Aegean Sea passed through Thessalonica, which means the city was situated at the junction of these two important thoroughfares.

The Religious Climate of the City Was Apparent—In the first century A.D. the worship of Dionysus and the mystery god Cabirus was quite popular in Thessalonica. It may be that Thessalonian worship of Dionysus absorbed the dismemberment/reconstitution element of the Egyptian Osiris cult and essentially identified the two gods.

Devotees of Zeus, Heracles, Apollo, Asclepius, Aphrodite, Demeter, Athene, Serapis, Isis, and the Dioskuri were also part of the religious life of the city.

Further, evidence of Thessalonian involvement with the imperial cult, that is, worship of rulers, is abundant. Even prior to the Roman period Alexander the Great had been accorded divine honors. These honors came because of supposed revelations received at the oracles at Delphi—oracles that affirmed his divinity. Inscriptions
even into the second and third centuries A.D. ascribe divine status to him and tell of a priesthood that served his cult in Thessalonica. Citizens worshiped Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar. Titles such as “god” and “son of god” are on inscriptions and on coins from the period. Coins struck in 27 B.C. and following years designated Julius Caesar as theos, “god.”

In 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8, Paul addressed the question of sexual purity, in verse 3 urging his readers to “abstain from sexual immorality” (NASB). We may wonder why Paul dealt with sexual sins here and in so many of his letters. In the Greco-Roman society of the first Christian century, personal purity was an unknown virtue. Prostitution, adultery, homosexuality, and related sins were commonplace. The religious heritage of the city, namely the worship of the Greco-Roman mythological gods and the Egyptian gods, contributed to this condition. Possibly the earlier name of the city, Therma, came “not from the hot springs but from the heat of an ecstatic Dionysus-cult with roots in the religion of the original Thracian-Phrygian inhabitants.”

The Church in the City Was Established—Knowing so much about the city makes us wish we knew more about the church in Thessalonica. Our only sources of information are Luke’s brief record of Paul’s activities and the two letters to the church. These do not know many details about the church, such as where they met, how many attended, or the names of the church leaders. We do know, however, that Paul considered the gathered believers at Thessalonica to be a model church (1:7). In a city of such beauty, one rich in history, and yet so enmeshed in pagan traditions—for Paul to acknowledge these believers’ devotion, vigor, and faithfulness serves as quite a testimony. May we likewise be found faithful.

5. Green, 2.
6. Ibid., 6.

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