

# How to Live Well: Mimetic Ethics and Civic Education in Graeco-Roman Antiquity and Early Christianity<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Mimesis played a crucial role in moral and civic education in Graeco-Roman antiquity. From classical Greek drama to Aristotle to the Graeco-Roman rhetorical traditions, mimetic ethics focuses on how personal example and imitation shaped people's behaviour and character. Extended contact with the Graeco-Roman traditions led early Christianity to adopt the concept of mimesis in the overlapping spheres of family and education. Discipleship and citizenship intersect in that Christians are called to be good disciples or 'citizens' in God's society. This study explores the Johannine, Pauline, and Petrine traditions and proposes that the mechanism of personal example and imitation regulates the ethical-political life of early Christians and instructs them to live well in both the church and society.

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## 1. The Issue, Thesis, and Prolegomena

Life is a precious gift of indeterminate length, so we might as well seek to live well. Many pursue the good life in atomistic and hedonistic ways, but in antiquity the moral quest for the good life was set in a social-political framework, as this study will demonstrate. In Graeco-Roman antiquity, the main ethical quest was how to live well in the context of the Greek *polis* or Roman society. In terms of normative ethics, 'How to live well?' and 'What is the good life?' are questions that virtue ethics addresses. Virtue ethics stresses the character of a moral agent rather than duty to rules (deontology), the

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outcomes of actions (consequentialism) or social context (pragmatic ethics) as a driving force for ethical behaviour.

This study provides an ethical–political reading of how to live well as Christians and citizens. Alan Storkey notes an emerging consensus today that ‘religion and politics do not mix’, leading to a ‘Christian political vacuum’ where the political thought of many Christians is secular.<sup>2</sup> At first sight, the New Testament seems uninterested in politics and society, instead prioritising theology, the kingdom of God, and the church. However, most Christians recognise that although the kingdom of God is not *from* this world, it nevertheless exists *in* it. Besides, humans are social beings and organise themselves in societies. ‘Society’ refers to a community, nation, or organised group of people with common traditions, interests, beliefs, and practices, and ‘politics’ refers to the government of civic life in society. Early Christians were organised in small communities called ‘churches’, collectively representing the kingdom or government of God as the divine society. This is relatively uncontroversial. As Richard Bauckham asserts, ‘It is in the public, political world that Christians are to witness for the sake of God’s kingdom.’<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Mark Cartledge states ‘The church is always connected to the society in which it is located’ and he emphasises that a commitment to the common good does not weaken the church’s obligation to communicate the gospel.<sup>4</sup> Yet, as Graham Cray notes, many Christians find it difficult to integrate discipleship and citizenship.<sup>5</sup>

This study examines what goes to the heart of the ethical–political life of early Christianity. Our thesis is that the mechanism of personal example and imitation regulates the ethical–political life of early Christians and instructs them to live well, first in the church but also in society. In other words, the argument is that mimetic ethics facilitates moral and civic education in early Christianity. As a subset of virtue ethics, mimetic ethics explores how personal example and imitation shape people’s behaviour and character. The aim is moral development in that a person imitates someone in order to become a

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2. Alan Storkey, *Jesus and Politics: Confronting the Powers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 8–9.

3. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 161, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511819858>.

4. Mark J. Cartledge, *The Holy Spirit and Public Life: Empowering Ecclesial Praxis* (London: Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2022), 62, 222 (quotation from p. 62). See also Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011).

5. Graham Cray, *Disciples and Citizens: A Vision for Distinctive Living* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007), 9.

better person and live well. In Graeco-Roman antiquity, as I will demonstrate, mimesis in relation to ethics often occurred in the overlapping areas of family and education, where imitation of suitable examples assisted citizens to live well in the Greek *polis* or Roman society. Since early Christian communities were embedded in the Graeco-Roman world, we will examine whether mimesis in early Christianity served to facilitate moral–civic education. We will explore what we can learn from the ancient Greeks and Romans on how to live well, and how early Christians assimilated mimesis into their ethical thinking and practices. Broadly speaking, our study addresses the relationship between discipleship and citizenship, between the church and society.

I must explain the decision to explore the Graeco-Roman traditions rather than Jewish ones, when early Christianity was centred on the person and teachings of a Jew from Nazareth. The reason is that although the Old Testament contains traces of imitation, the idea is not developed. One can think of Genesis 1:26-27, where humankind is created in the image of God, Leviticus 19:2, where God commands the Israelites to be holy because he is holy, or Deuteronomy 10:18-19, which says that the Israelites should show practical love to the ‘immigrant’, just as God does. More generally, Israel was urged ‘to walk in the way of the Lord’ and ‘to follow after YHWH’. While there are hints of imitation, it would probably go too far to claim that the Old Testament spoke of imitating God as a distinct ethical model.<sup>6</sup> The most we can say is that the Old Testament contains *seeds* of imitation, and when Greek culture began to influence Jewish thought (a phenomenon called Hellenisation), these seeds came to fruition. In the first century, the Graeco-Roman concept of imitation seems to have found its way into the New Testament. Hence, without denying the Jewishness of early Christianity, I contend that the origins of the New Testament concept of mimesis are found in the Graeco-Roman traditions rather than the Old Testament.

We will first explore Graeco-Roman antiquity (section 2) and then examine select early Christian authors – John, Paul, and Peter – who employ the idea of mimetic ethics in their writings to instruct early Christians on how to live well (section 3).

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6. See also the nuanced discussion in John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 50–54.

## 2. Mimetic Ethics and Civic Education in Graeco-Roman Antiquity

In Graeco-Roman antiquity, the most important moral issue was how to live well and achieve εὐδαιμονία ('wellbeing', 'happiness', 'flourishing').<sup>7</sup> Εὐδαιμονία is the ultimate moral good people pursue over a lifetime in accordance with virtue (a quality of moral excellence). While there were different schools of philosophy, ancient Greek and Roman ethical traditions were essentially *eudaimonistic* in orientation, in that they focused on how to live the good and virtuous life and achieve εὐδαιμονία.<sup>8</sup> The broader context was the Greek *polis* or Roman society, so the primary concern was an ethical-political one – how to live well as a citizen.<sup>9</sup> Storkey asserts that in both Greek and Roman societies, politics was the religion and the ultimate framework for a society: 'The state, the rule, defined the whole society and required worship.'<sup>10</sup>

In his *Politics* 1274b–1275a, Aristotle defines a *polis* (πόλις) as 'a collection of citizens' and a citizen (πολίτης) as someone who has 'the right to participate in judicial functions and in office'. In ancient Greece, citizenship was mainly inherited (only very rarely was it awarded for some extraordinary service to society), whereas Roman citizenship was more readily bestowed (though not indiscriminately).<sup>11</sup> In the Greek *polis* and Roman society, the basic social unit was the οἶκος or *familia* ('household'), with the male κύριος or *paterfamilias* as the head of the household. Since the family functioned as a microcosm of the *polis*, the spheres of family and civic education often overlapped. I contend that mimesis was a crucial mechanism in civic education where the imitation of suitable exemplars, especially from one's family, aided people in how to live well in the Greek *polis* or Roman society. We will now explore the role of mimesis

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7. See, for example, Julia Annas, 'Ancient Eudaimonism and Modern Morality', in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Ethics*, ed. Christopher Bobonich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 265–269, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107284258.015>.

8. See also Wayne A. Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 46.

9. Everett Ferguson considers the Roman empire 'a collection of cities' in *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 39.

10. Storkey, *Jesus and Politics*, 123–125 (quotation from p. 123). The Greek city-state was the model for societies in the ancient world: 'the polis, and its goddess in the acropolis, defined the society and its members. Athena personified the city-state, and in worshipping her, the citizen was engaging in a political act' (Storkey, *Jesus and Politics*, 123).

11. Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 20, 59–60; Stephen Kershaw, *A Brief History of Classical Civilization* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2010), 111–112, 311.

in civic education from classical Greek drama to Aristotle to the Graeco-Roman rhetorical traditions.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.1 Ancient Greek Theatre

In Greek antiquity, philosophy, theatre, poetry, music, and the other arts were inextricably linked to daily life, with all its religious, political, and ethical dimensions.<sup>13</sup> Regarding the dynamics of classic Attic tragedy in the fifth century, Martha Nussbaum explains that at religious festivals (especially in honour of Dionysus), the entire city gathered to watch and rate the performance of several dramas. Dramas in ancient Greek theatre were assessed on their ethical and political content, and the spectators were actively involved in deliberation through strong emotional responses.<sup>14</sup> Ancient drama exemplified the moral religious-political dilemmas facing the citizens of the *polis* and hence could be considered part of the people's civic education.

Political philosopher Ferenc Hörcher expands on the connection between Athenian drama and civic education:

Dramas, and in particular tragedies helped to articulate the city's political expectations from the citizens ... Theatre was regarded by the Athenian elite as a complex educational kit, which secured an emotional-intellectual experience through which the members of the audience learnt to reflect properly on the political challenges of their city.<sup>15</sup>

Drawing on Aristotle's *Poetics* 1449b, Hörcher explains that Greek drama imitated or represented contemporaneous events with actors personifying protagonists as they played out the story in front of an audience that responded emotionally and intellectually.<sup>16</sup> Through the medium of mimetic drama,

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12. English translations of Graeco-Roman excerpts are taken from the Loeb Classical Library, unless indicated otherwise. Translations of texts from the New Testament are the author's own.

13. Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Philosophy and Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy*, ed. David Sedley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 212, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521772850.009>.

14. Nussbaum, 'Philosophy', 216–217.

15. Ferenc Hörcher, 'Dramatic Mimesis and Civic Education in Aristotle, Cicero and Renaissance Humanism', *Aisthesis* 10 (2017): 88, <https://doi.org/10.13128/Aisthesis-20906>.

16. Hörcher, 'Mimesis', 88–89. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449b24–27 (Halliwell) reads 'Tragedy, then, is mimesis [μίμησις] of an action which is elevated, complete, and of magnitude; in language embellished by distinct forms in its sections; employing the mode of enactment, not narrative; and through pity and fear accomplishing the catharsis of such emotion'.

Athenian citizens learnt about civic life, how to behave as virtuous citizens, and what mistakes to avoid.<sup>17</sup> Classical Athenian drama, therefore, was not only about entertainment but was used in service of civic education.<sup>18</sup> We now turn to Aristotle, whose *Nicomachean Ethics* was arguably the most important ethical treatise in antiquity.

## 2.2 Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

At the start of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains that achieving εὐδαιμονία, the highest moral good, is the subject of political science – the ultimate science that studies the overall good of the city and the individual (*Nic. eth.* 1094). At the end, he asserts that the education of young people should occur in a community that is regulated by the right legislation, which is the product of political science (*Nic. eth.* 1179–1181). Hence, for Aristotle, ethics and politics are inextricably linked because the issue of how to live well is played out in the context of the *polis*.<sup>19</sup>

Aristotle asserts that a person achieves εὐδαιμονία by practising the virtues over a lifetime – a process of learning that he calls ‘habituation’ (*Nic. eth.* 1095–1099, 1103a–1104a). For example, among those learning to play the harp there can be good and bad harpists, depending on the teacher (*Nic. eth.* 1103b). Similarly, one must have good role models to perform the right activities or correct habituation. Hence, for Aristotle, imitation plays a role in education, where good role models facilitate the practice of the virtues, thus achieving εὐδαιμονία.

Like his teacher Plato, Aristotle is concerned with controlling and limiting the role models available to youth because one becomes what one sees and hears (*Politics* 1336ab).<sup>20</sup> However, he does not share Plato’s scepticism about the role of mimesis in civic education and readily recognises the prominent role of mimesis in education: ‘From childhood, it is innate for people to imitate (μιμεῖσθαι), and in this people are different from other living beings, that they are most capable of imitation (μιμητικός) and learn their first lessons through imitation (μίμησις)’ (*Poetics* 1448b.5–9, my translation). At the same time,

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17. Hörcher, ‘Mimesis’, 91.

18. For the religious, political, and moral aspects of fifth-century Greek tragedy, see further Jacqueline de Romilly, *A Short History of Greek Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 47–89; Ian C. Storey and Arlene Allan, *A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 51–70.

19. See also de Romilly, *History*, 158–161.

20. Hallvard Fossheim, ‘Mimesis in Aristotle’s Ethics’, in *Making Sense of Aristotle: Essays in Poetics*, ed. Øivind Andersen and Jon Haarberg (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001), 82.

Aristotle is critical of indiscriminate imitation; he writes '[t]he fact is that [the proud] try to imitate the great-souled man without being really like him, and only copy him in what they can, reproducing his contempt for others but not his virtuous conduct' (*Nic. eth.* 1124b (Rackham)). So, for Aristotle, mimesis plays a vital role in the civic education of young citizens.

### 2.3 Graeco-Roman Rhetoric

We will now turn to the Graeco-Roman rhetorical traditions because their moral discourses are instructive about how mimetic ethics worked. As Wayne Meeks explains, in ancient society, especially in the context of the *polis*, disputes were settled by argument, so the Greeks and Romans valued and cultivated the skills of oratory and rhetoric.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Jacqueline de Romilly observes that while Attic tragedy (and old comedy) in the fifth century was tied to Athenian politics, from the fourth century on, politics became more the interest of Attic oratory.<sup>22</sup> Since mimesis plays a prominent role in rhetorical education, we will select a few prominent ancient orators and examine their moral discourses. While we admittedly focus on the intellectual elite, Meeks notes that common people had ready access to professional orators and their moral discourses as they often spoke in public spaces.<sup>23</sup>

We will start with Isocrates, a prominent orator and educator in classical Athens and a contemporary of Plato. Isocrates was an example for Cicero, who in turn influenced Seneca and Quintilian, so we can expect a degree of continuity in their understanding of mimetic ethics. I will seek to show that Graeco-Roman orators understood mimetic ethics to be crucial for moral and civic education.

#### 2.3.1 Isocrates (436–338 BCE)

Isocrates was the first to employ mimesis as an educational method for acquiring oratorical skills. In his polemical speech *Against the Sophists* 16–18, Isocrates outlines his pedagogical principles, stating that to become a good orator one requires (besides the necessary aptitude) much study, practice, and a creative mind. In the educational process, the teacher must not only explain

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21. Meeks, *Moral World*, 20, 40–41.

22. De Romilly, *History*, 89.

23. Meeks, *Moral World*, 63. In addition, others have noted a much broader mimetic ethos in Graeco-Roman civic life: e.g. Benjamin Fiore, 'Paul, Exemplification, and Imitation', in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, ed. J. Paul Sampley (New York: Trinity Press International, 2003), 228–237; James R. Harrison, *Paul and the Ancient Celebrity Circuit: The Cross and Moral Transformation*, WUNT 430 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 226–247, <https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-157019-3>.

the principles of oration with great precision but also present himself as an example of oratory for his students to imitate. In his speech *To Nicocles*, he writes:

Make it your practice to talk of things that are good and honourable, that your thoughts may through habit come to be like your words. Whatever seems to you upon careful thought to be the best course, put this into effect. If there are men whose reputations you envy, imitate (μιμοῦ) their deeds. (Isocrates, *Nic.* 2.38 (Norlin))

The best examples for imitation, however, are to be found among one's family. In his famous discourse *Evagoras*, Isocrates presents the late king Evagoras as a model ruler to Evagoras's son Nicocles for contemplation, study, and imitation in order to achieve moral progress:

For we exhort young men to the study of philosophy by praising others in order that they, emulating (ζηλοῦντες) those who are eulogized, may desire to adopt the same pursuits, but I appeal to you and yours, using as examples not aliens, but members of your own family ... It is in your power not to fail in this: for if you persevere in the study of philosophy and make as great progress as heretofore, you will soon become the man it is fitting you should be. (Isocrates, *Evag.* 77,81 (van Hook))

Isocrates stresses that Nicocles should also seek to be an example for others:

Do not think that while all other people should live with sobriety, kings may live with license; on the contrary, let your own self-control stand as an example to the rest, realizing that the manners of the whole state are copied (ὁμοιοῦται) from its rulers. (Isocrates, *Nic.* 2.31 (Norlin))

Isocrates thus situates mimetic education in the context of the *polis*, in that mimesis proves to be instrumental for educating young princes for civic life.<sup>24</sup> We will now turn to the Roman era.<sup>25</sup>

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24. For Isocrates's programme of mimetic education in the context of the *polis*, see further Yun Lee Too, *Rhetoric of Identity in Isocrates: Text, Power, Pedagogy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 184–199; Robert Hariman, 'Civic Education, Classical Imitation, and Democratic Polity', in *Isocrates and Civic Education*, ed. Takis Poulakos and David Depew (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 217–234, <https://doi.org/10.7560/702196-011>.

25. While I focus on the Roman rhetorical traditions, Rebecca Langlands explores the genre of Roman *exempla* as a basis for imitation in *Exemplary Ethics in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139629164>.



### 2.3.2 Cicero (106–43 BCE)

Cicero was an orator, philosopher, and statesman whose concept of rhetorical learning through mimesis was also in service of civic education.<sup>26</sup> The theme of imitation occurs frequently in *De Officiis*, a three-volume treatise to instruct his son Marcus. Cicero's advice to those who aspire to greatness in public life is to select suitable examples for imitation and to associate with them in order to become like them. Here is an excerpt:

The best recommendation, then, that a young man can have to popular esteem proceeds from self-restraint, filial affection, and devotion to kinsfolk. Next to that, young men win recognition most easily and most favourably, if they attach themselves to men who are at once wise and renowned as well as patriotic counsellors in public affairs. And if they associate constantly with such men, they inspire in the public the expectation that they will be like them, seeing that they have themselves selected them for imitation. (Cicero, *Off.* 2.46 (Miller))

Regarding the selection of people worthy of imitation, Cicero exhorts young people, especially those of noble birth, to imitate the example of honourable statesmen who have gone before in order to attain honour, dignity, and praise:

Accordingly let us imitate men like our Bruti, Camilli, Ahalae, Decii, Curii, Fabricii, Maximi, Scipiones, Lentuli, Aemilii, and countless others, who firmly established this State, whom, indeed, I reckon among the company and number of the Immortal Gods. (Cicero, *Sest.* 143 (Gardner))

### 2.3.3 Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE)

Seneca was a Stoic philosopher and statesman. In *Epistle* 6 of his collection of moral letters to Lucilius, the procurator of Sicily during Nero's reign, Seneca urges him to associate with appropriate role models:

Cleanthes could not have been the express image of Zeno, if he had merely heard his lectures; he shared in his life, saw into his hidden purposes, and watched him to see whether he lived according to his own rules. Plato, Aristotle, and the whole throng of sages who were destined to go each his different way, derived more benefit from the character than from the words of Socrates. It was not the classroom of Epicurus, but living together under the same roof, that made great men of Metrodorus, Hermarchus, and Polyaeus. (Seneca, *Ep.* 6.6 (Gummere))

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26. See Hörcher, 'Mimesis', 91–93; Harrison, *Paul*, 229–230.

While Seneca acknowledges the value of historic examples, he recommends living examples because their lives can be readily observed.<sup>27</sup> As Liz Gloyn explains, for Seneca, those close to us are particularly effective educational models and hence the family (as a microcosm of the state) offers a better source of *exempla* for moral behaviour than historical figures.<sup>28</sup>

#### 2.3.4 Quintilian (35–100 CE)

Quintilian, an educator and orator, produced the *Institutio Oratoria*, a twelve-volume textbook on the theory and practice of rhetoric. His aim is to outline the civic education of the perfect orator:

The man who can really play his part as a citizen, who is fit for the management of public and private business, and who can guide cities by his counsel, give them a firm basis by his laws, and put them right by his judgements, is surely no other than our orator. (Quintilian, *Inst.* 1.pr.10 (Russell))

Like Seneca, he notes that personal example is crucial in education and much more powerful than just instruction:

However, while a stock of words may be acquired [by reading and hearing orators], we should not read or listen solely for the sake of the words. For in the same sources are to be found examples of everything we teach, examples which are in fact more powerful than those found in the textbooks ... because the orator demonstrates what the teacher only prescribed. (Quintilian, *Inst.* 10.1.15 (Russell))

Quintilian stresses the need for discernment and improvement in mimetic education:

Everything in this field of study therefore needs to be subjected to the most careful judgement. First, whom should we imitate? Many people have developed a longing to be like the worst and most decadent speakers. Secondly, what is it in our chosen authors that we should prepare ourselves to reproduce? Even great authorities have some blemishes, which are criticized both by the learned and by the authors themselves in their mutual recriminations. If only the imitators of good qualities improved

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27. See also Roland G. Mayer, 'Roman Historical *Exempla* in Seneca', in *Seneca: Oxford Readings in Classical Studies*, ed. John G. Fitch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 302–303.

28. Liz Gloyn, *The Ethics of the Family in Seneca* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 10, 203, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316535820>.

on them as much as the imitators of bad qualities exaggerate these!  
(Quintilian, *Inst.* 10.2.14-15 (Russell))

## 2.4 Conclusion

From ancient Athenian drama where the audience learnt how to live as virtuous citizens to the writings of Aristotle and Graeco-Roman orators who saw example and imitation as key to becoming virtuous citizens and achieving εὐδαιμονία, our examination of Graeco-Roman antiquity shows that mimetic ethics was crucial for moral and civic education. Young people were encouraged to select good role models and discern what aspects to imitate, often in line with their own character and talents. Hence, mimesis was seen as instrumental in shaping young people's character and conduct, enabling them to live well in society.

## 3. Mimetic Ethics and Civic Education in Early Christianity

Scholars like Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder, and Peter Leithart make a convincing case for the idea of the church as a Christian *polis*.<sup>29</sup> This should not surprise us, since the term ἐκκλησία, 'church', also refers to the political assemblies of citizens in Greek cities.<sup>30</sup> According to George van Kooten, Paul views 'the Christian ἐκκλησία as an alternative organization existing alongside the civic ἐκκλησίαι of the Greek cities, which continued to be important in the Roman period'.<sup>31</sup>

We must also point out that early Christians used political language for the written Jesus traditions. The term 'gospel' (εὐαγγέλιον) means 'good news', and in Jesus's time it was used to announce, for example, the birth of an heir to the emperor or an emperor's ascent to the throne. Hence, when early Christians called their accounts of Jesus's life εὐαγγέλιον, this was a public,

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29. Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpj7fv0>; John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992); John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); Peter J. Leithart, *On Earth as in Heaven: Theopolis Fundamentals* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2022).

30. Meeks, *Moral World*, 20; Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 41.

31. George H. van Kooten, "Εκκλησία τοῦ Θεοῦ: The "Church of God" and the Civic Assemblies (ἐκκλησίαι) of the Greek Cities in the Roman Empire: A Response to Paul Trebilco and Richard A. Horsley", *NTS* 58 (2012): 547, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002868851200015X>. Michael J. Gorman calls the Christian community 'political' in that it is an alternative way of being in the world (*Participating in Christ: Explorations in Paul's Theology and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 245).

political, and polemical proclamation of Jesus as the Davidic king over against other kings (e.g. Herod) and rulers (e.g. Augustus, Nero, Domitian).<sup>32</sup> Likewise, the Pauline phrase ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’ implies an exclusive allegiance to Jesus in contrast to loyalty to Caesar.<sup>33</sup> While early Christians, seeking to implement the government of God, adopted and promoted an alternative way of life to that in Graeco-Roman society, they did not withdraw from society. Bruce Winter has made a convincing case that the early church taught a ‘civic consciousness’ to direct Christian behaviour in public life (πολιτεία) and *contribute* to society.<sup>34</sup>

Extended contact with the Graeco-Roman traditions meant that early Christianity adopted (and adapted) the concept of mimesis in the overlapping spheres of family and education where it became almost exclusively an ethical concept.<sup>35</sup> Discipleship and citizenship overlapped and Christians were called to be good disciples or ‘citizens’ in God’s society. My position is that early Christian ethics aimed at living well within God’s family or society and that such life was characterised by mimesis. I will also explore whether their mimetic ethics governed relationships with outsiders. As we cannot deal with all references to imitation in the New Testament, we will focus on John, Paul, and Peter, who have most to say about mimetic ethics.<sup>36</sup>

### 3.1 Johannine Christianity

In John’s worldview, people do not know God and live in darkness (John 1:10,18; 3:19-20; 8:47,55; 17:25; 1 John 3:1). However, to live well is to know the Father and Son and share in their divine life or ζωή (John 17:3). We learn from John’s stated purpose for writing that ζωή is the ultimate good people should pursue for nothing but its own sake (John 20:31; 1 John 5:13). This suggests that ζωή is the closest Johannine equivalent to εὐδαιμονία.<sup>37</sup> I will seek to demonstrate

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32. For the wide-ranging political implications of Jesus’s teaching about the government of God over all of life, see Storkey, *Jesus and Politics*, 111–192.

33. For Paul’s counter-imperial theology, see N. T. Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives* (London: SPCK, 2005), 59–79; Christoph Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire: Paul’s Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 35–101.

34. Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 2–3.

35. See, for example, Cornelis Bennema, ‘A Shared (Graeco-Roman) Model of Mimesis in John and Paul?’, *JSNT* 43 (2020): 173–193, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X20961252>.

36. In the Synoptics, ‘following Jesus’ does not mean imitation, but it can lead to imitating him. For a detailed study of early Christian mimesis, see Cornelis Bennema, *Mimesis in Early Christianity: A Study of Example and Imitation as a Religious-Ethical Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming 2024).

37. For a more detailed account, see Cornelis Bennema, ‘A Model of Johannine Ethics’, *SCE* 35 (2022): 435–438, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09539468221092712>.

that, for John, mimesis goes to the heart of the Christian life in God's family or society.

### 3.1.1 *Citizenship in the Johannine Society*

The idea of the Christian community as a political entity is also evident in John. The Johannine letters presume a Johannine church or community, and while the term 'church' does occur – but only in 3 John – the Johannine writings primarily use family language to present a divine community with common ends, interests, and beliefs.<sup>38</sup> 'Family' or 'household' – John uses the terms οἶκος and οἰκία – is a social construct, describing the basic social unit in ancient cultures.<sup>39</sup> So, by extension, the 'family of God' denotes the basic unit of the divine society in the Johannine writings.

The nucleus of the divine family or society consists of God the Father and Jesus the Son, and like Greek and Roman citizenship, citizenship in the Johannine society is not granted to everyone. One becomes a citizen of the divine society through a special birth when one professes allegiance (John uses the term πιστεύειν) to the heir of the *paterfamilias* (John 1:12-13; 3:5).<sup>40</sup> The new birth bestows a new identity – believers become children of God (τέκνα θεοῦ in John 1:12; 1 John 3:1-2) and siblings of Jesus (ἀδελφοί in John 20:17) – and this new identity should result in new behaviour. In other words, when people enter and live in God's society, their character and conduct are being shaped by the moral beliefs, values, and norms of the divine family. If politics refers to the government of society or more simply to people's activities and relations in society, then we can politicise the Christian term 'discipleship' as referring to citizenship in God's society.

### 3.1.2 *Mimetic Ethics in the Johannine Society*

In this section, I will argue that this 'citizenship' in the divine society is primarily regulated by mimesis where the Father sets the example for the Son and the Son in turn sets the example for appropriate family behaviour for his followers to adopt through imitation.

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38. Other images of the church in John include the shepherd and the flock (10:1-18), the vine and its branches (15:1-17), the bridegroom and 'bride' (2:1-11; 3:29; 4:5-7).

39. In John, οἶκος/οἰκία can refer to a physical building ('house'; 2:16; 11:31) or a social construct ('household'; 4:53; 8:35; 14:2).

40. For the idea that πιστεύειν, besides a cognitive assent to truth propositions about Jesus, refers to allegiance to Jesus, see Christopher Seglenieks, 'The Meaning of πιστεύω in the Gospel of John', in *The Future of Gospels and Acts Research*, ed. Peter G. Bolt (Sydney: SCD Press, 2021), 233–253.

The Johannine writings present mimesis as a concept that finds expression at the junction of family and education. In the divine family where believers live, personal example and imitation are important in shaping moral behaviour, and Jesus is the main example of ethical living for his followers. The episode that illustrates this best is the footwashing in John 13 where Jesus exhorts his disciples to imitate him in serving one another in loving humility: 'For I gave you an example (ὑπόδειγμα), that just as (καθώς) I have done to you, you also (καί) should do' (13:15).<sup>41</sup> Further on in John 13, Jesus provides another example of ethical living for his disciples to imitate, when he expands the love command in 13:34a as a mimetic imperative in 13:34b, 'just as (καθώς) I have loved you, you also (καί) should love one another'. This indicates that the love command is not given in a vacuum but is based on a precedent, such as the footwashing where the disciples have observed and experienced Jesus's love for them. In the words of 13:15, Jesus's love for his disciples is the ὑπόδειγμα for their love for one another.

John does not use the typical language of the Graeco-Roman mimetic traditions – the lexeme μιμεῖσθαι ('to imitate'). Instead, he employs his own mimetic language in which the comparative conjunction καθώς (either on its own or with the correlative καί or οὕτως) communicates the concept of mimesis most often.<sup>42</sup> In his Gospel John uses his characteristic mimetic καθώς language with reference to obedience (15:10),<sup>43</sup> unity (17:11,21-22),<sup>44</sup> existence (17:14,16),<sup>45</sup> and mission (17:18; 20:21).<sup>46</sup> In his first letter, John even creates new forms of mimesis, often employing his distinctive καθώς language and urging his readers to behave like Jesus (1 John 2:6), to be like Jesus (1 John 3:2), to be pure (1 John 3:3), to be right(eous) like Jesus (1 John 3:7), and to lay

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41. Lisa P. Stephenson applies Yoder's thesis that the church should function as a *polis*, highlighting footwashing as another practice that is still observed in churches today. 'Getting Our Feet Wet: The Politics of Footwashing', *JPT* 23 (2014): 154–170, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004317475\\_011](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004317475_011).

42. See Cornelis Bennema, *Mimesis in the Johannine Literature: A Study in Johannine Ethics*, LNTS 498 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 58–62, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567678409>.

43. Jesus's obedience to the Father (and abiding in his love) is the example for the disciples (they should obey Jesus and abide in his love).

44. This refers to imitating a state of being or 'existential mimesis': the indwelling of believers by the Father and Son is patterned on the intimate relationship of the Father and Son.

45. Believers 'imitate' or mirror Jesus's existence in that they are no longer 'of' the world because they have become 'of' God (1:13; 3:5).

46. This denotes implied existential imitation: the disciples' state of being sent into the world by Jesus imitates Jesus's state of being sent into the world by God.

down one's life like Jesus did (1 John 3:16).<sup>47</sup> The goal of mimesis in antiquity was for the imitator to become like the exemplar. Hence, believers imitate Jesus in serving one another, loving one another, being one, and so on, in order to *become* people characterised by service, love, and unity. In sum, a pattern emerges of civic education through mimesis where Jesus demonstrates ethical living in God's society and his followers can then (and therefore) imitate him.

Jesus's method of teaching by example is modelled on the relationship with his Father. In John 5:19-20, Jesus says that he does nothing apart from what he sees the Father do. Other passages mention specific activities where Jesus imitates the Father, such as to give life (John 5:21,26), to speak (John 12:49-50; see also 8:26; 15:15), to love (John 15:9), and to send (John 17:18; 20:21). Crucially, the Son does not act independently or on his own initiative; rather, the Father provides the example for the Son to follow. In imitating the Father, the Son shows his followers how the divine society functions so that they can 'observe' and emulate proper citizenship. Hence, we see a mimetic chain regarding the ethical life in the divine society: the Father sets the example for the Son, and in turn the Son sets the example for his followers. Since divine family behaviour is modelled to believers primarily through mimesis, we infer that mimesis is instrumental in moral and civic education in the divine society.

### 3.1.3 Johannine Ethics and Outsiders

Plato advocates in Books 4–6 of his *Republic* that the best form of government is not democracy but a philosophical aristocracy or monarchy. Likewise, Johannine Christianity presents Jesus's lordship or reign as the best form of government in God's society. Many scholars view the Johannine community as sectarian and non-political, but the Johannine literature does not present the divine family as detached from geopolitical realities. In his dialogue with Pilate, Jesus's claim in John 18:36 that his kingdom is not from this world (οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου) is profoundly political; although the divine society does not originate from this world, it nevertheless operates *in* it. Jesus's kingship has geopolitical ramifications because allegiance to king Jesus excludes allegiance to the Roman emperor, as 'the Jews' shrewdly point out to Pilate when they corner him (John 19:12).<sup>48</sup>

47. While John's characteristic καθὼς occurs in 1 John 2:6; 3:3,7, mimesis is indicated by ὅμοιος in 1 John 3:2 and a singular καί in 1 John 3:16.

48. The triumphal entry into Jerusalem is also political in that the people welcomed Jesus as the Davidic warrior messiah (John 12:13 quotes Ps 118:25-26 and adds 'the king of Israel'). Jesus, however, acts out the promise of Zech 9:9, a king who is gentle and rides on a young donkey rather than a war horse (see also Zech 9:10 mentioning the destruction of Israel's war tools). Warren Carter states that Jesus's action also challenges

This begs the question of whether John's mimetic ethics would also regulate life between Christians and their non-Christian neighbours. I contend that John does not endorse the idea of being a good citizen in this world (an idea that is more found in the writings of Paul and Peter) because his writings present a narrative world where the realm above and the realm below are incompatible. John's dualistic worldview prevents one from seeking to be a good citizen of both worlds. Instead, he promotes good citizenship in God's society and urges people to relocate *from* the world to God's alternative society. John views the world as dark and evil, and his ethics is *not* about transforming or contributing to the world, but about life *within* the believing community – not in a narrow sectarian sense but to draw people from the world into God's world. The mimetic imperative to love fellow Christians, for example, is a public testimony (John 13:35), arguably to win people over. Likewise, the evangelistic purpose of the Johannine writings (John 20:31; 1 John 5:13) will be achieved more readily if Christians demonstrate a lifestyle that is attractive to outsiders.

In sum, Johannine ethics provides family education for good citizenship in God's society. Just as there was a prevalent mimetic ethos in Graeco-Roman society, so also the Johannine writings depict a mimetic ethos in the divine society. Mimesis is central to civic education in the divine family – John presents a mimetic chain where the Father sets the example for Jesus, who in turn sets the example for believers to imitate. While John's mimetic ethics is expected to attract outsiders to God's society, this is largely implied.

### 3.2 Pauline Christianity

The goal of Paul's ministry was not simply to preach the gospel everywhere he went nor to plant mixed churches across the Roman Empire but to bring about the moral formation of believers. His ambition was to present believers as 'blameless'<sup>49</sup> at the parousia (1 Thess 3:13; 1 Cor 1:8; Phil 1:10; Col 1:22; Eph

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the triumphant returns of Roman emperors/generals to Rome after a victorious military campaign in *Jesus and the Empire of God: Reading the Gospels in the Roman Empire* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021), 128–133. Additional political ideas are found in 11:47–53 (the decision of the chief priests to kill Jesus is politically motivated) and 20:28 (Thomas's exclamation, 'my Lord and my God' counters the claim of Roman emperors to be the son of god). Laura J. Hunt explores John's political language, arguing that Jesus as βασιλεύς refers to his being 'emperor' over against the Roman emperor in *Jesus Caesar: A Roman Reading of the Johannine Trial Narrative*, WUNT 2/506 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-157527-3>.

49. Paul uses different terms (ἄμεμπτος, ἀνέγκλητος, ἀπρόσκοπος and ἄμωμος) for the idea of 'blameless'.



1:4).<sup>50</sup> For Paul, to live well is to know Christ (in his death and resurrection, e.g. Rom 6:4-5; Gal 2:20; Phil 3:10) and to be blameless, the closest Pauline equivalent to εὐδαιμονία. So how did Paul seek to achieve this? I suggest that Paul used the concept of personal example and imitation to teach proper moral behaviour in the church as God's society.<sup>51</sup> Most of Paul's converts came from pagan backgrounds and did not know Christian norms and values but were able to learn about the Christian life by observing Paul and imitating him, just as Paul imitated Christ (see 1 Cor 11:1). For our purposes, we will look at 1-2 Thessalonians, Paul's early letters, and at Philippians, a late Pauline letter.<sup>52</sup>

### 3.2.1 *Mimetic Ethics in 1-2 Thessalonians*

The Thessalonian correspondence contains half of the Pauline instances of the lexeme μιμεῖσθαι, 'to imitate' (1 Thess 1:6; 2:14; 2 Thess 3:7, 9) and a quarter of the references to τύπος, 'example, pattern' (1 Thess 1:7; 2 Thess 3:9), so these early letters are instructive for understanding the place of imitation and example in Pauline thought.<sup>53</sup> Paul's chief concern is to instruct the Thessalonians on how to live in a manner worthy of God (τὸ περιπατεῖν ὑμᾶς ἀξίως τοῦ θεοῦ; 1 Thess 2:12) in view of persecution and the parousia (1 Thess 1:9-10; 3:13; 4:1), and his strategy involves the use of example and imitation.

In 1 Thess 1:6 we read that the Thessalonians had become imitators of Paul but scholars are divided on what led them to being described as such. Some claim that it is the Thessalonians' steadfast and joyful endurance of suffering on account of their faith (1:6b),<sup>54</sup> but others contend that it is the adoption of

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50. I will consider both the undisputed and disputed Pauline letters as representing the Pauline tradition and call attention to issues only when these two epistolary groups present different concepts of imitation.

51. For the church as a household association in the *polis*, see Meeks, *Moral World*, 108-123.

52. The disputed authorship of 2 Thessalonians does not affect our study as both letters present a unified concept of example and imitation. See Cornelis Bennema, 'Paul's Paraenetic Strategy of Example and Imitation in 1-2 Thessalonians', *ETL* 98 (2022): 219, 235-236, <https://doi.org/10.2143/ETL.98.2.3290789>.

53. The other Pauline instances of the lexeme μιμεῖσθαι are found in 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Phil 3:17; Eph 5:1, and further instances of τύπος occur in Rom 5:14; 6:17; 1 Cor 10:6; Phil 3:17; 1 Tim 4:12; Titus 2:7. It must also be noted that eight out of eleven occurrences of μιμεῖσθαι in the New Testament appear in the Pauline corpus.

54. Willis Peter de Boer, *The Imitation of Paul: An Exegetical Study* (Kampen: Kok, 1962), 124; Philippe Nicolet, 'Le concept d'imitation de l'apôtre dans la correspondance paulinienne', in *Paul, une théologie en construction*, ed. Andreas Dettwiler, Jean-Daniel Kaestli, and Daniel Marguerat (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2004), 399; Hajnalka Ravasz, *Aspekte der Seelsorge in den paulinischen Gemeinden: Eine exegetische Untersuchung anhand*

Paul's general lifestyle (1:5b).<sup>55</sup> I have argued elsewhere that 1:5b provides the example for imitation, whereas 1:6b mentions the starting point of imitation.<sup>56</sup> I take the aorist participle δεξάμενοι in 1:6b to mean that the Thessalonians became imitators of Paul (and his team) *after* they had accepted the word amidst persecution. In 1:5b, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the way he and his team lived for their sake (δι' ὑμᾶς). This suggests that the Thessalonians had been able to observe Paul and his team during their visit to Thessalonica. Although Paul does not provide details of his lifestyle in 1:5b, he does so in 2:1-12. The content of imitation mentioned in 1:6a, therefore, is not found in 1:6b but in 1:5b and is elaborated in 2:1-12 when Paul alludes to his past visit and the lifestyle he has modelled for them.

The Thessalonians not only imitated the example of Paul but, in turn, became an example for other believers throughout Macedonia and Achaia of living out the gospel amidst persecution (1 Thess 1:7). Hence, there is a mimetic chain from Paul (and the Lord) to the Thessalonian Christians to other Christians across Greece.<sup>57</sup> When we turn to 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9, we learn that some Thessalonian Christians had failed to imitate a particular aspect of Paul's lived example, namely to work for a living and not to depend on others (see 1 Thess 2:9; 4:11). So, Paul urges those Thessalonians to imitate him and work for a living. In sum, mimetic ethics is crucial to Paul's strategy for the moral formation of the Thessalonian church.

### 3.2.2 Mimetic Ethics in Philippians

Paul states the central case of this letter in 1:27: 'live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ' (ἀξίως τοῦ εὐαγγελίου τοῦ Χριστοῦ πολιτεύεσθε). His strategy for promoting a gospel lifestyle among the Philippian Christians involves mimetic ethics. Paul first presents Christ as the supreme example for imitation in 2:5-11, but he also presents himself and others as models for imitation.<sup>58</sup>

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des 1. *Thessalonicherbriefes*, WUNT 2/443 (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 47-48, <https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-155431-5>.

55. Jo-Ann A. Brant, 'The Place of *Mimēsis* in Paul's Thought', *SR* 22 (1993): 292, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000842989302200302>; Andrew D. Clarke, "'Be Imitators of Me": Paul's Model of Leadership', *TynBul* 49 (1998): 337, <https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.30340>.

56. Bennema, 'Paraenetic Strategy', 225-227. See also Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Ethics: The Legacies of Jesus and Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 128-129.

57. For the Thessalonians as imitators of Christ (1:6) and the Judaeon churches (2:14), see Bennema, 'Paraenetic Strategy', 227-231.

58. For the example of Christ in Phil 2:5-11, see esp. David G. Horrell, *Solidarity and Difference: A Contemporary Reading of Paul's Ethics*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 227-236.

In introducing himself as ‘a slave of Christ’ in 1:1, Paul likens his position to the slave-status of Christ in 2:7 (δοῦλος only occurs in 1:1 and 2:7), showing the Philippians that he is an imitator of Christ. In 1:20-25, Paul ponders the outcome of his imminent trial in Rome. Oscillating between life and death, Paul ultimately desires not what is best for *him* but what is best for the Philippian church. Paul’s attitude exemplifies what he goes on to urge the Philippians to do in 2:4, namely to imitate the attitude of Christ in 2:6-8 that prioritises the interest of others. Then, in 2:17, Paul declares his willingness to pour out his life for the sake of the Philippians, demonstrating that he imitates Christ pouring out his life for the sake of humanity in 2:7. In 3:17a, Paul urges the Philippians to join with one another in imitating him. While Christ remains the supreme example for imitation, the Philippians can imitate Christ by imitating Paul (see also 1 Cor 11:1). Likewise, in 4:9, Paul urges the Philippians to keep on doing (i.e. imitating) what they had observed (ἰδεῖν) him do when he was with them.

Paul also holds up Timothy and Epaphroditus as examples for imitation because each imitates aspects of Christ. Timothy’s description as δοῦλος in 1:1 and δουλεύειν in 2:22 echoes Christ’s slave-status in 2:7, while the mention of his genuine concern for the Philippians in 2:20 reflects the ideal of 2:4 and imitates Christ’s selfless interest of others. Regarding Epaphroditus, the recurrent phrase μέχρι θανάτου in 2:8 and 2:30 indicates that his near-death experience for the sake of Christ has echoes of Christ’s death for the sake of humanity. In 3:17b, Paul even points the Philippians to other Christians living in line with his lifestyle and providing a visible example for imitation in Paul’s absence. So, we see Paul use the concepts of example and imitation as a moral strategy for promoting ‘blameless’ Christian living in the Philippian church.

### 3.2.3 Civic Education

In the Thessalonian and Philippian correspondence, Paul’s brief on how to live well is very similar – to live in a manner that is worthy of God (1 Thess 2:12) and worthy of the gospel of Christ (Phil 1:27). To achieve this, Paul holds up Christ and himself, but also his co-workers or mature Christians, as examples for imitation. In 1 Thessalonians 2:10, for example, Paul exemplifies the *eudaimonistic* goal of being blameless that he holds up for his converts in 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 5:23. We must consider whether Paul intended for his mimetic ethics to simply govern moral life in the church or life in society too. I concur with Richard Hays that ‘Paul speaks only to the community of faith. He

articulates no basis for a general ethic applicable to those outside the church.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, while Paul's ethics is intended for the church rather than society, it is not an insular ethic. His missionary mindset to preach the gospel and form communities of faith would have led him to articulate an ethic that aims at a lifestyle that is attractive to outsiders.<sup>60</sup> The aim of Paul's ethics is producing countercultural communities that do not rock the civic boat. As James Dunn puts it, Paul advocates a 'political quietism' that (negatively) avoids provoking the civic authorities and (positively) results in good citizenship.<sup>61</sup> While Paul's ethics for his churches promotes an alternative lifestyle to that in society, it should also be respectful, even appealing, to outsiders.

We see this in the letters we examined. Paul's lifestyle, mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 1:5b and outlined in 2:1-12, attracted the pagan Thessalonians to Christ, so Paul models a lifestyle for how Christians should live in the presence of their pagan neighbours.<sup>62</sup> In 3:12, Paul indicates that the Thessalonians should abound in love not only for fellow Christians but for all people (εις ἀλλήλους καὶ εἰς πάντας). Then, while the ethical section 4:1-12 promotes a lifestyle distinct from that in society, it nevertheless concludes 'so that you may live properly with regard to outsiders' (ἵνα περιπατῆτε εὐσχημόνως πρὸς τοὺς ἕξω). So, although Paul requires a 'political quietism' (to use Dunn's phrase) from the Thessalonian Christians, their lifestyle should nevertheless be attractive to outsiders.<sup>63</sup>

When writing to the Philippians, Paul is also concerned with life in both the church and society. His use of political language in 1:27 (πολιτεύεσθαι) renders more literally as 'live as citizens worthy of the gospel of Christ'. Having presented Jesus as the supreme example for imitation in 2:5-11 and urged the Philippians to model their corporate life on that of Christ in 2:12,

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59. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 33.

60. See further Volker Rabens, 'Paul's Mission Strategy in the Urban Landscape of the First-Century Roman Empire', in *The Urban World and the First Christians*, ed. Steve Walton, Paul Trebilco, and David Gill (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 99-100, 114-21.

61. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 679. Somewhat differently, Heilig contends that Paul's interactions with Roman ideology operate on a broad spectrum ranging from being 'the careful concealer of his critical intentions and the careless provocateur' (*Apostle*, 51, original emphasis).

62. Clearly, some aspects of the envisaged lifestyle would be countercultural. For example, Paul's instruction to the Thessalonians to imitate his work life 'began to challenge the traditional structures of the benefaction system and the social dominance of the benefactor in antiquity' (Harrison, *Paul*, 251-252).

63. Winter, *Welfare*, 48-51.

Paul states in 2:15 that the envisaged moral perfection of the Philippians will cause them to ‘shine like stars’ in a perverse world. In 3:20, Paul uses political language again (τὸ πολίτευμα ἐν οὐρανοῖς) to remind the Philippians of their heavenly citizenship. By politicising the Christian life, Paul connects it with citizenship – gospel citizenship, as it were. Christians hold dual citizenship, but their heavenly citizenship takes priority and directs their citizenship in this world. Then, while exhorting the Philippians to keep on imitating him, Paul specifically refers to virtues that were commonly valued in the Graeco-Roman world (4:8-9). With Philippi being a Roman colony, Paul intentionally uses political language to instruct the Philippians that they should live as proper gospel citizens in both the church and the world (albeit often in a countercultural way).<sup>64</sup>

In sum, Paul’s mimetic ethics is intended for the church-in-the-world, combining his eschatological desire for morally mature believers at the parousia with his missionary interest of attracting outsiders to Christ.<sup>65</sup>

### 3.3 Petrine Christianity

In his first letter, Peter writes to Christians in Asia Minor who are experiencing alienation and hostility from their pagan neighbours – they have become foreigners in their own society (1:1, 17; 2:11). Peter uses ethno-political language to construct a new identity for them – they are a holy nation and part of God’s people (2:9-10). In keeping with their new identity, Peter calls them to a holy lifestyle that is radically different from that of their pagan neighbours (1:13-2:3; 3:8-4:11). Despite the maltreatment from society, Peter exhorts these Asian Christians to live as model citizens so that their hostile neighbours might note their good behaviour and honour God (2:11-17).<sup>66</sup> For Peter, Christians are

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64. Likewise, Wright states that the example Paul holds out to the Philippians is ‘to sit light to their civic status and be prepared to hail Jesus, not Caesar, as lord’ (*Paul*, 72).

65. Other Pauline letters also contain ethics for Christian living in society. In Rom 12:9-13:10, Paul instructs Christians on their relationships with the wider community and civic authorities, and he does not differentiate between ethical behaviour among Christians and that between Christians and their non-Christian neighbours (Dunn, *Theology*, 674, 678). Similarly, James W. Thompson states that Paul’s ethics focused on the moral formation of Christian communities who lived as minorities within an often hostile culture and hence did not engage in public ethics. Nevertheless, Paul’s ethics extends to relationships with outsiders where ‘believers “do good to all” (Gal 6:10), repay evil with good (Rom 12:17-21), submit to those who maintain order (Rom 13:1), and pay taxes (Rom 13:6-7)’ (*Moral Formation according to Paul: The Context and Coherence of Pauline Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 211).

66. In 2:13-17, Peter combines conformity and resistance in a nuanced stance that we might call ‘polite resistance’ (David G. Horrell, *Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter*

called to live well in both church and society. As Winter asserts, '[t]he doing of public good ... is seen as the means of establishing Christian credibility in social relationships and the sphere of *politeia*'.<sup>67</sup> Then, in 2:18-25, Peter indicates that this call for good citizenship can be realised through mimesis.

It is inviting to see mimesis in the call to holy living in 1:15-16, but the quotation of Leviticus 19:2 indicates a causal rather than a comparative relationship – Christians should be holy *because* (ὅτι) God is holy. A clearer case of mimesis is found in 2:21, which states that Christ's patient suffering when maltreated is an example for believers to imitate. Literally, it is 'an example, so that you may follow in his footsteps' (ὕπογραμμόν, ἵνα ἐπακολουθήσητε τοῖς ἴχνεσιν αὐτοῦ). Katie Marcar argues that 2:22-25 depicts Jesus as the Isaianic suffering servant who is held up in 2:21 as a model for Christian slaves and for all believers.<sup>68</sup> Noting that *exempla* operated across all levels of Graeco-Roman society, she asserts that early Christians may have used Roman exemplary discourse to model distinct Christian values.<sup>69</sup> Besides, the conviction of Greeks and Romans that the best *exempla* came from one's own family especially suits the description of Christians in ethnic and familial language in 1 Peter 2.<sup>70</sup> She then explains how Christ's suffering provides a model of endurance in the face of unjust suffering, first for slaves but also for all believers to imitate.<sup>71</sup> The use of δοῦλος in 2:16 and οἰκέτης in 2:18 links Peter's social ethics in 2:11-17 with his mimetic ethics in 2:18-25. Hence, Peter's mimetic ethics governs education in God's household with a view of Christians contributing to public life.

#### 4. Conclusion

Our study has shown that the mechanism of mimesis regulates how to live well in both Graeco-Roman antiquity and (large segments of) early Christianity, so we labelled this 'mimetic ethics'. We found that mimesis is instrumental in civic education, whether that be Athenian drama educating citizens about civic life, Isocrates instructing princes and rulers on how to live well in the Greek *polis*, Cicero, Seneca, and Quintilian teaching aspiring politicians to be good citizens in Roman society, or John, Paul, and Peter instructing early Christians

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and the Making of Christian Identity, LNTS 394 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 231-238).

67. Winter, *Welfare*, 39.

68. Katie Marcar, 'Following in the Footsteps: Exemplarity, Ethnicity and Ethics in 1 Peter', *NTS* 68 (2022): 253-273, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688521000424>.

69. Marcar, 'Footsteps', 257-259.

70. Marcar, 'Footsteps', 257-265.

71. Marcar, 'Footsteps', 266-272.

on proper behaviour in God's society. We could make this comparison by viewing Christian life or discipleship through a political lens as referring to being a good citizen in God's society. While in Graeco-Roman antiquity the pursuit of the virtuous life occurred in the context of the *polis* or society, in early Christianity the primary context for living well is the church. For John, to live well is to know God and share in the divine life; for Paul, it is to live worthy of the gospel and be blameless; for Peter, it is to live holy as God's chosen people.<sup>72</sup> So, in both Graeco-Roman antiquity and early Christianity, mimesis is a didactic tool to instruct on good citizenship in their respective societies.

For early Christians, living well is complicated by their dual citizenship, where their heavenly citizenship transcends and permeates their earthly one. The church is God's alternative community in this world – a divine society that often operates counterculturally and subversively within earthly societies. Early Christian ethics is not aimed at transforming the world and making it a better place but at attracting people to God's alternative society. The inherent side effect is that Christians are challenged to be good citizens in society. The call to good citizenship in early Christian writings ranges from being highlighted in Peter, to receiving attention in Paul, to being merely implied in John. How to live well is both an ethical and political issue, and for early Christians it relates to both discipleship and citizenship, to both church and state. While early Christians could express this in various ways, the common concern was how to be a good gospel citizen, holding together the religious, ethical, and political aspects of how to live well. Early Christians understood they were to be good disciples or citizens in God's society *and* good citizens in the geopolitical society in which they lived.<sup>73</sup>

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72. Likewise, the Westminster Shorter Catechism's answer to the *eudaimonistic* question 'What is the chief end of man?' is 'to glorify God and enjoy him forever'.

73. Although not part of our study, early Christian ethics was undoubtedly indebted to Jewish ethics. While Meeks highlights that the context of Israel's theocentric ethics was not the Greek *polis* but the covenant (*Moral World*, 65, 91–96), it does not contradict our findings because the church as the context for early Christian ethics is also covenantal in nature. Hence, the concept of God's people has an ethical-political dimension, whether that be Old Testament Israel in the context of the Mosaic covenant or the New Testament church in the context of the new covenant rooted in the death and resurrection of Christ. Likewise, just as early Christian ethics has an outward dimension, so Jewish ethics had an outward dimension in that Israel was to be a light to the nations and model a life with God to the world. Since ancient Israel was a theocracy, there was no distinction between the ethical life with God and political life in society. However, Israel failed in its role to model the ethical-political life to other societies because its 'inner' ethical-political life failed.



Early Christian mimetic ethics has relevance for today. In the area of *personal development and ministry*, for example, we should find good role models from whom to learn how to live well. The ultimate challenge, however, is to become an example to others. While Jesus remains the ideal role model, we also function as role models, whether as parents for our children, as teachers for our students or as ministers for our congregations. Ultimately, we imitate Jesus not for our sake, but for the sake of others! In the area of *civic life*, there are no easy answers to how we can live as good citizens in our societies. We are called to be salt and light in the world, often in a countercultural manner, but nowhere does the New Testament advocate rebellion or violent protest, even as early Christians lived under a totalitarian regime. Christians must seek to be exemplary citizens without compromising their allegiance to Christ and his church. This is a complex endeavour, but Christians can anticipate the good life under God's government in his eschatological *polis*, described in Revelation 21.

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