

# What First-Century Christians Could Teach Us Today

Growing up in a country like America where we get to vote and influence the government, it's difficult to imagine what it would feel like to live under an absolute monarchy. Or a tyrannical dictatorship. Or an oppressive, all-controlling regime. Yet the early followers of Jesus not only lived in such environments, but they flourished and grew. What can we learn from these early believers? What would they teach us today?

First, they would teach us that no matter who leads the nation, no one can stop the gospel. And no matter what form of government we have, the church can grow and thrive.

I do imagine that these Christians would be amazed at the liberties we enjoy. (Obviously, they would be amazed by a lot of other things too.) They would likely tell us to do our best to guard these liberties.

But they would remind us to put our trust in God not in government and not to confuse patriotism with the kingdom of God.

Second, they would encourage us not to get caught up in partisan politics, a concept that would have been largely unknown to them.

You see, in the Roman Empire, there were not rival political parties, with your vote making a difference between which candidate would come into power. You did not have Democrat vs. Republican (or the equivalent). And while there were different social and philosophical factions, there was not a political divide. For the most part, the emperor was supreme.

For the early Christian, then, the divisions were more basic.

There was light and darkness. There was the church and the world. There was the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. There was heaven and hell. And there were saved people and lost people.

That is how these early believers saw their world, and that is how they saw their mission. Put another way, although they brought about powerful cultural change through the gospel, their focus was not on reforming the Roman Empire. Their focus was the Great Commission.

They still had to deal with the distractions of the flesh and the world, just as we do today. But partisan politics did not vie for their attention. Or consume their emotions. Or divide them as believers.

That's why I say that they would encourage us not to get caught up in partisan politics.

Again, they might well encourage us to exploit our democratic liberties to the full and even to run for office, if some of us were called to do so. But I believe they would help us to step above the political frenzy that so dominates and divides our nation.

Third, they would remind us that the church is not a building, especially at a time like this when our church buildings are shut during the COVID-19 crisis.

In my just-released book *When the World Stops*, I have an entire chapter devoted to this subject, titled, "What Is Church and How Do We Do It?" And I am convinced that this is one of the major lessons we must learn during this forced lockdown: The church is not a building, and Christianity is not a spectator sport.

I would think that these first believers would be stunned to see our large church buildings and cathedrals. But it would not be because they had never seen magnificent buildings. To

the contrary, those who were alive to see the second temple (which was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70) would have seen something far more spectacular than our largest megachurch facility. And the Romans themselves knew how to build.

It's just that the believers met in homes back then. There was no such thing as a church building. Consequently, a greater emphasis was put on being the church more than on going to church (although they certainly emphasized the importance of meeting together).

In this context, they would remind us that the preacher is not a performer. And the body is not an audience. And, to say it again, Christianity is not a spectator sport.

This doesn't mean they wouldn't welcome church meetings of all sizes and buildings of all sizes. It's just that their emphasis would be put on every member of the body being connected and activated. It would be on the priesthood of every believer.

Fourth, these early Christians would remind us of the need to rely on the power of the Spirit. While they would rejoice in the many ways the gospel can spread today, ways that would have been unimaginable to them, they would encourage us not to lean on technology. Or human personality. Or worldly techniques.

Instead they would urge us to remember the words of Jesus, who said, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8)

It is by the power of the Spirit that they rocked their world. It is by the power of the Spirit that we can rock ours.

What other lessons do you think these first believers could teach us today?