

# PART 1

## UNDERSTANDING AMERICA

*With help from Colossians 2, our Founding Fathers, a Frenchman, and five American sociologists, we identify the great challenge we face and the great opportunity we have in our generation.*

### 1 Chr. 12:32 NIV

From Issachar, men who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.

### Col. 2:1-10 NIV

I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is. So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head ...

### THE GREAT RIVALRY

Fine-sounding yet deceptive, hollow philosophies of human tradition

vs.

The wisdom and fullness of Christ, the true Deity

## THE GREAT AMERICAN TRADITION

America has many traditions, but the greatest American tradition is honoring and protecting the individual. One cannot understand America without understanding what we shall call “individualism.”

Two important books:

- *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville, 1835.
- *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, Tipton, 1985, 2007.

“The central problem of our book concerns the American individualism that Tocqueville described with a mixture of admiration and anxiety (Loc 515).”

**Healthy individualism:** protection of the individual, expression by the individual, and responsibility of the individual.

**Unhealthy individualism:** loneliness, social tension, and anxiety.

The authors of HOTH show how every area of American life is tarnished by unhealthy individualism, including our economy, family life, love and marriage, friendship, community activities.

**What about church community?** Do you wonder why the call to commit to a church makes our generation wince?

Christian community, says HOTH, “... *assumes a certain priority of the religious community over the individual ... The relationship of the individual to God is ultimately personal, but it is mediated by the whole pattern of community life. There is a givenness about the community and the tradition. They are not normally a matter of individual choice*” (Loc 3898).

We modern individualists wince at this! We say “No! The individual sits enthroned over all! Everything is a matter of individual choice! I’m going to make up my own version of truth!” This is the rivalry.

### **THE HEIGHT OF ITS POWER**

Novelist Tom Wolfe called the 1970s *The Me Decade*. But compared to now, individualism back in the 70’s was like a cute monkey, which over the last 50 years has grown into a tyrannical gorilla. It has taken four steroids to develop from cute monkey to tyrannical gorilla:

1. Erosion of institutional defenses
2. Increased technology
3. Increased choice
4. Erosion in spiritual formation of Christians

### **A HOLLOW DECEPTION**

1. Loneliness
2. Social tension
3. Anxiety

### **OUR GREAT OPPORTUNITY**

The Bible teaches us in Colossians 2 that the deceptive, hollow philosophies of human tradition can be replaced with the wisdom and fullness of Christ, the true Deity. The one that is false can be traded for the one that is true. You can trade the one that leaves you empty for the one that leaves you full. Loneliness can be traded for community. Social tension can be traded for acceptance and love through Christ. Anxiety can be traded for the Prince of Peace! And, we the Church are they who hold out this Christ!

And the five unlikely sociologists encourage us:

“Absolute independence is a false ideal. It delivers not the autonomy it promises but loneliness and vulnerability instead ... A church that can be counted on and that can count on its members can be a great source of strength in reconstituting the social basis of our society. Such a church may also, through its social witness, have the influence to help move our society in a healthier direction. To be effective, however, the church tradition in the United States would have to be **revitalized**” (HOTH Loc 4193).

What does a **revitalized** church look like? Colossians 2 helps us again.

- The rivalry between human traditions and wisdom in Christ means being **counter-cultural**.
- To be “united in love” means being a **committed community**.
- Those who acknowledge “Jesus as Lord” are **Christ followers**.
- And like Paul, we must contend for others as those **on mission!**

**A counter-cultural, committed community of Christ-followers,  
on mission.**

Make no mistake, this is a counter-cultural, rebel cause. America shouts “I’ll do it my way.” We shout “We’re actually going to do it His way.” America shouts “Go it alone.” We shout “We’re actually going to go together.” This is a Holy Rebellion.

What were your two largest “light bulb” moments?

In what areas in your heart do you feel the assault of individualism most keenly?