

## ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

(Adapted from the book *'If You Can Keep It'* by Eric Metaxas)

In 1831 Alexis de Tocqueville was sent by the French government to examine the prisons, penitentiaries and political philosophy in America. They were curious why the French Revolution ended in a nightmare of guillotine executions and endless political upheavals, while the American Revolution ended in peace and unprecedented prosperity.

When he returned to France he wrote his classic two-volume work *Democracy in America*. Perhaps the following is the most famous quote from that book: *"Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America every ceases to be good, she will cease to be great."* De Tocqueville put it bluntly: *"Liberty cannot be established without morality"*. He continued: *"Upon my arrival in the United States the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention; and the longer I stayed there, the more I perceived the great political consequences resulting from this new state of things. In France I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America I found they were intimately united and that they reigned in common over the same country."*

He further explained: *"Despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot. Religion is much more necessary in the republic which they set for in glowing colors than in the monarch which they attack; it is more needed in democratic republics than in any others. How is it possible that society should escape destruction if the moral tie is not strengthen in proportion as the political tie is relaxed? And what can be done with a people who are their own masters if they are not submissive to the Deity? . . . There is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America, and there can be no greater proof of its utility and of its conformity to human nature than that its influence is powerfully felt of the most enlightened and free nation of the earth"*

Metaxas is concerned that modern America is returning to the world view of the 18<sup>th</sup> century French Enlightenment that recoiled from religion. Tocqueville saw the error of such thinking and wrote: *"The philosophers of the eighteenth century explained in a very simple manner the gradual decay of religious faith. Religious zeal, said them, must necessarily fail the more generally liberty is established and knowledge diffused. But the fact by no means accord with their theory. There are certain populations in Europe whose unbelief is only equaled by their ignorance and debasement; while in America one of the freest and most enlightened nations in the world, the people fulfill with fervor all the outward duties of religion"*.

While the elitists maintain that religion will evaporate as knowledge and liberty increase, the facts in America stubbornly repel their prognostications. Tocqueville explained: *"The character of Anglo-American civilization . . . is the product. . . of two perfectly distinct elements that elsewhere have often made war with each other, but which, in America, they have succeeded in incorporating somehow into one another and combining marvelously. I mean to speak of the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom"*. With regard to denominationalism he wrote: *The sects that exist in the United States are innumerable. They all differ in respect to the worship which is due to the Creator; but they all agree in respect to the duties which are due from man to man. Each sect adores the Deity in its own peculiar manner, but all sects preach the same moral law in the name of God . . . Moreover, all the sects of the United States are comprised within the great unity of Christianity and Christian morality is everywhere the same"*. The cynic said it like this: *"One thing we learn from history is that people do not learn from history"*. Thank you anyhow Alexis de Toqueville!