

A PREZ RELEASE from AGTS

Monthly commentary from the President of the [Assemblies of God Theological Seminary](#)

Bowling Alone

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I have been working my way through Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam's best-selling volume, *Bowling Alone*. This book chronicles the struggle throughout American history, between our value of rugged individualism and the power of civic and community life. Putnam highlights the concept of social capital as the tangible substances that count for most in the daily lives of people;... good will, fellowship, sympathy and social interaction among the individuals and families who make up a social unit. Putnam's volume takes its name from the simple fact that bowling leagues, like the Y and churches, are no longer the places where people connect. In fact, Putnam demonstrates convincingly not only the disconnectedness of Americans, but the huge price we are paying because of that alienation from one another.

Reading Putnam has been a source of serious spiritual conviction for me. Somehow church is not seen as the most obvious and prime intervention that is countering the "Bowling Alone" phenomenon. While Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions offer a spiritual bond that is significant, the cultural tendency toward privatized faith and individualist piety blunts the fullest potential development of social capital by these traditions.

This tendency to value individual concerns over the needs of the family and local community is increasingly interwoven with the post-modern affirmation that "truth" is naïve or even worse than that...it's oppressive. Exclusive claims to "truth" are not in vogue these days. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life is considered "narrowness" and often categorized as bigotry. The drive to make everyone's "truth" valid has appeal that our "sound-bite" world loves.

A short while ago I was at a conference with seminary presidents from a broad spectrum of faith traditions, both Christian and Jewish. A brilliant rabbi spoke some penetrating words that convicted me to my core. Rabbi Brad Artson affirmed that while he "acknowledged the gap between human limits and God's being, he still asserted his understanding of Scripture was that it was authoritative." Rabbi Artson said, "If all we have are subjective readings, don't we reduce religion to aesthetics? And don't we preclude real conversation if there is no access to truth, goodness or wisdom beyond one's subjective preference?"

What Rabbi Artson was so passionately contending for was a "meta-narrative": the belief that there is objective and absolute truth beyond the mind of the knower that subsequently has authority to require repentance and obedience. While I affirm that the Bible is such an

authority, I also affirm that the building of meaningful communities is necessary for today. In a world where people are "Bowling Alone" nothing less than the "social capital" created by the transforming power of an authoritative "meta-narrative" centered in Jesus Christ will make sense.

We live in a world where the "meta-narratives" of Islam and Christianity are clashing at multiple levels. We survive in a western culture that is starving for relationship, but addicted to countless forms of self-centeredness. Post-modern militancy against exclusive truth claims may very well replace the Inquisition and the McCarthy era as the historical examples of the destructiveness of human zeal "religiously" applied.

If followers of Jesus Christ hope to impact the world at local or global levels, it is time for major self-evaluation. My somewhat wordy excursus into philosophic and historical murkiness in this Prez Release has found its way back to a verse of Scripture that fuels the core of my being. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us...be reconciled to God (II Corinthians 5:20). Followers of Christ, who have no option but to be bound together in local communities of faith, are God's plan to convince the world of the power of reconciliation. We are inextricably linked to a God who wants to replace self-centeredness with relational interdependence that lives under the eternal rule of a King who has reconciled us to God and thus to each other.

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