

# A PREZ RELEASE from AGTS

*Monthly commentary from the President of the  
Assemblies of God Theological Seminary*

## The Loss of Civility July 2004

The swirling rhetoric around gay marriage, presidential elections and just about every other topic for discussion creates considerable heat these days. A culture in which people with differing opinions seriously engage one another has disappeared, leaving little wake nor hint that such a world ever existed. I am particularly sensitive to this current state of affairs because stereotypes with which most people engage each other simply don't fit me. I have perspectives that some would call conservative (even fundamentalist—which is the new f-word) and some perspectives I have, people might even call liberal—though I'd call these reasonable and progressive. My point is that we regularly hinder ourselves hearing one another because we have allowed extreme stereotypes to preclude dialogue that respectfully listens.

The demise of society into a moral cesspool is the picture we have mentally superimposed on a person or cause that is deemed liberal. Ignorant, narrow and Taliban are images that get connected to a conservative position or person. When we allow these extreme images to interrupt listening to a differing opinion we undercut the foundation of a civil society—that is a society with people of a vast variety of opinions who have the decency to engage in thoroughgoing dialogue about issues. This does not preclude having strong opinions defended with rigorous rhetoric. What we experience as the fruit of this lack of civility is a new version of conspiracy theories. It used to be only marginal people engaged in such banter. Now even intellectuals and highly visible leaders blabber on about how they have been victimized by some intruding ideology. Add to the conspiracy theory awakening, the new era of “documentaries” that make Oliver Stone look like William Jennings Bryan in the Scopes Trials.

But as a Christian I have to admit that we have not set the best of examples in our own community. Emerging leaders and established leaders talk at each other like ships in the night. Generational divides thrive in our churches under the guise of “specialized ministries.” We have created new classes of church society based on what kind of music the church espouses. I'm disappointed that in the middle of the current destruction of civil society, we Christians have not given a better showing, but I think several New Testament texts give us guidance to insert a corrective to this dilemma. James 1:19 says, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry.” Listening carefully and questioning carefully to get the fullest meaning of someone's words is the basis of communication that is effective. That is, listen to what someone says—don't just be silent long enough to prepare your rebuttal. Anger is the result of a communication process that sees being right more important than reflecting respectful dialogue that clearly defines the issue.

The book of Jude is written in a setting where members of churches were tearing apart each other and church communities with contentious speech. Civility was non-existent. Jude refers to a discussion between the archangel Michael and the devil arguing over the burial of Moses—Jude says they did so without slander—Jude goes on to say in verse 10, “Yet these men speak abusively against whatever they do not understand, and what they do understand by instinct, like unreasoning animals—these are the things that destroy them.”

There’s not much I can do to remedy the current world communication slugfests. However, I can be part of a renewed effort by Christians to offer to our society an example of civility where we listen, speak carefully and with conviction, yet refuse to enter into verbal warfare to destroy someone whose perspective on life differs from our own.

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## **Information on AGTS events and resource for 2004**

**AGTS is listed in *Christianity Today*’s 50 top Christian organizations to work for the second year in a row.**

Check it out at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/005/26.42.html>

### **Leadership Roundtables with Dr. Stanley Grenz**

November 8-9—Charlotte, NC

For details and registration for these exciting events check out our website [www.agts.edu](http://www.agts.edu)