

Century Marks

Century Marks in the [June 29, 2004](#) issue

End of discussion: A church youth group was discussing how 9/11 affected their prayer life. One young man said he's not been able to pray since that event, since he assumes that many of the people in those planes and buildings were praying that God would spare them, and their prayers weren't answered. Another fellow said he can't pray for a different reason: he assumes that the terrorists were praying to Allah for courage to follow through on their plans, and their prayers were answered. Then a young woman said that she is still praying. Being an artist, she tends to pray with images, she said, and in her images the victims and the perpetrators of 9/11 are sitting around a table in heaven, trying to figure out together what happened on that day. At that point the pastor intervened, saying that the scene she described is not possible, because the terrorists are in hell (story told by Mark Yaconelli at a Symposium on Youth Ministry & Spirituality, June 3).

The least and lowest: Dr. Timothy Johnson, medical editor of ABC News, notes that in Jesus' parable on the Final Judgment (Matt. 25:31ff.), there is no mention of a correct position on social or political issues, no mention of power or fame or wealth, nor even mention of the amount of time to be spent in traditional religious practices. The bottom line is service to others—the sick, the imprisoned, those in need of food, water and clothes, and strangers. Johnson thinks his daughter Kiplee exemplifies Jesus' teaching on service, despite the fact she has always been independent-minded and not particularly religious. For instance, during her summer vacations Kiplee volunteers at a summer camp for people with serious physical and mental challenges. She feeds and clothes them, helps them go to the bathroom and to bed (*Finding God in the Questions: A Personal Journey*, InterVarsity Press).

Muslim vs. Muslim: With the signing of power-sharing protocols on May 26, Sudan's 21-year north-south civil war (Muslims vs. Christians and animists) may be nearing its end. But the newer conflict taking place in western Sudan is proving to be similarly devastating; in the Darfur region, government-backed Arab Muslims are killing, raping and displacing black Muslims. Warning of "genocide in the making," the All Africa Conference of Churches has accused African governments of

indifference to the suffering of the people of Sudan, of failing to respond to their appeals and of supporting the reelection of Sudan to the executive committee of the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Commission. The AACC reported that the homes of about 23,000 people had been destroyed in the Upper Nile region. AACC General Secretary Mvume Dandala described some camps for black refugees and displaced persons near Khartoum as “hell on earth.” Thousands of children, women, elderly and young people are languishing there in temperatures ranging from 108 to 116 degrees Fahrenheit (ENI).

Required course: Compulsory education is one of the ironies of a liberal, democratic society. In essence, society tells its citizens they must go to school in order to be free. To make this system work in a democratic society, argues school reformer TheodoreSizer, authority must be shared in the educational enterprise between the governments that set the standards and secure the funding, the school systems that provide the education (including boards, administrators, teachers and unions) and families. What about students themselves? Realistically, by virtue of numbers, students are the ones running the schools, especially in the higher grades, since they outnumber adults an average of 14 to 1. And what about school choice? Sizer acknowledges the concept of “school vouchers” has become politicized in debates over where students can be educated using state funding. But what family doesn’t like choice? he asks. And if the rich have choices in where their young are educated, then the poor should too. Sizer likens a school voucher system to the GI Bill of Rights for military veterans—hardly a sinister privatization gambit (*The Red Pencil: Convictions from Experience in Education*, Princeton University Press).

King George: N. T. Wright, Anglican bishop of Durham and noted New Testament scholar, says that Americans plead ignorance when it comes to understanding the concept of the kingdom of God. Americans don’t live in a kingdom, and don’t have a king—they booted out George III 230 years ago. But, said Wright, when you look at the world today and ask who “has the kind of authority and the kind of empire that George III had, the answer is George II, your current president. You actually have something much more akin to the sort of monarchy that we had then, even though it’s democratically elected” (interview on the *Dick Staub Show*).

A charge to keep: Chris Seiple of the Institute for Global Engagement says that when he was in the Marine Corps he learned two principles of leadership: one, the leader is responsible for all that his unit does or fails to do; and two, leaders can’t expect what they don’t inspect. He concludes that the atrocities in the Abu Ghraib

prison in Iraq stem from a failure of leadership. It is hypocritical for senior military officials to champion the chain of command, says Seiple, but then suggest that these atrocities were the work of a few people at the bottom operating on their own. Besides, “junior enlisted soldiers from rural Maryland and Pennsylvania don’t develop systematic sexual techniques to shame the mind of the Arab male” (www.globalengage.org, May 25).

Standing up for Jesus: Author Kurt Vonnegut notes with irony that some Christians want the Ten Commandments posted in public places, but none seem to want to do the same with the Beatitudes. “‘Blessed are the merciful’ in a courtroom? ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’ in the Pentagon? Give me a break!” (*Truthout*, May 10).

Religion sells: Religion continues to be a hot category in book publishing. April sales were up 54.9 percent, spurred, some think, by the film *The Passion of the Christ*. Sales for the first four months of the year were up 34.2 percent (PW Newslines, June 1).

Don’t call the doctor: Over 43 million Americans are without health care insurance, and the problem is getting worse. According to the Institute of Medicine, the U.S. spends \$35 billion each year to treat people with no insurance, and as a result the economy loses between \$65 and \$130 billion in productivity.