

The role of the outcasts

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HAWKINS, Texas—Have you ever wondered why God seems to delight in choosing the weak and base things of the world to make manifest His work?

In our reflective moments, do we ponder the significance of the apostle Paul's sobering reminder to the worldly carnal Corinthian congregation (as well as to those of us in the scattered and dismantled greater Church of God)?

■ **1 Corinthians 1:26-29:** "For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence."

Why does God in His supreme wisdom and sovereignty carve out a special role for rejects, offscourings and castaways? Are there perhaps some characteristics of outcasts and undesirables (at least in the world's eyes) that we need to emulate?

Undesirables and castoffs

Several years ago longshoreman-philosopher Eric Hoffer wrote a provocative essay entitled "The Role of the Undesirables" in which he compared the pioneers of America, Australia, and the outer reaches of Siberia to tramps and failures, people for whom the established society had no purpose or prescribed niche.

Hoffer states that, "with few exceptions, this seems to be the case in the settlement of all new countries. Ex-convicts were in the vanguard in the settling of Australia.

"In this country, a large portion of our earlier settlers were fugitives and felons. The exceptions seemed to be those who were motivated by religious fervor such as the Pilgrim Fathers and the Mormons."

Upon reflection, I began to see that the "exceptions" also fit into Hoffer's "rejects and failures" thesis. The Pilgrims were also rejects and castoffs from the Anglican Church, which considered them heretics. The restless pioneer, or

pilgrim, spirit emanated from a feeling of discontent, of having failed or been frustrated in one locale, hoping for something better in a new location.

One of my grandfathers, feeling a keen disappointment at his social and economic status in Europe, in an act of desperation indentured himself as a servant for a time to pay for his passage to the New World for an opportunity for a better life.

Thinking of himself as a lowborn in the old country, he felt he had nothing to lose by emigrating to America.

Hoffer contends that much of the credit for shaping new civilizations must go to the "poor, the outcasts, the misfits, and those who are in the grip of some overpowering passion—to merge their wasted lives into something grand and complete."

He continues: "History contrived an earth-shaking joke when it lifted by the nape of the neck lowly peasants, shopkeepers, laborers, paupers, jailbirds, and drunks from the midst of Europe, dumped them on a vast continent and said: 'Go to it; it is yours!'"

Learning from mistakes

Perhaps the most popular theme in literature and motion pictures revolves around the underdog, the failure making good. This perennial rejection-repentance-regeneration theme permeates the Scriptures. We experience an exhilarating catharsis when the prodigal son as he hits rock bottom comes to himself.

■ **Luke 15:16-19:** "And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. But *when he came to himself*, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."'"

This "coming to himself" and repentance were preceded by a stark realization that he had failed, resulting in a loss of pride, leading to a submission to his father's will. It seems axiomatic that, unless someone is willing to give up self, admitting failure and acknowledging that he is poor in spirit, he cannot be taught.

The feeling of lack or neediness results in the teachable attitude displayed by the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:31. He humbly said to Philip, "How can I [understand], unless someone guides me?"

The sense of helplessness, the sense of having failed, the sense of rejection, God uses as a motivator for restorative action.

Helpful reminders

The interrelationship between humility and wisdom and pride and stupidity is a recurring theme throughout the Scriptures.

- The humble He guides in justice, and the humble He teaches His way (Psalm 25:9).
- Surely He scorns the scornful, but gives grace to the humble (Proverbs 3:34).
- When pride comes, then comes shame; but with the humble is wisdom (Proverbs 11:2).
- Before destruction the heart of man is haughty, and before honor is humility (Proverbs 18:12).
- But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit (Isaiah 66:2).
- God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5).
- Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and He will lift you up (James 4:10).
- Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God that He may exalt you in due time (1 Peter 5:6).
- At the very top of the list of things the Lord hates is a proud look: suggesting haughtiness, arrogance and a feeling of superiority (Proverbs 6:16-19).

Being teachable

God's displeasure with the Laodicean church is its arrogant, self-satisfied assumption: "I am rich and become wealthy and have need of nothing" (Revelation 3:17).

In the latter part of the verse God Almighty suggests that the key to the regeneration of the Laodicean mind-set would be in the acknowledgment of neediness, helplessness and dependency and an admission of having failed.

Jesus' brother James, when he warned against snob appeal and favoritism, reminds us: "Listen, my beloved brethren: Has not God chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?" (James 2:5).

Poverty is not inherently virtuous, but the condition of poverty, with its attendant feelings of helplessness and failure, often brings about a lowliness of spirit that God can use to accomplish His work.

Paradoxically, when Moses perceived himself as "not eloquent, slow of speech and slow of tongue" (Exodus 4:10), God looked upon that needy and helpless condition as a prerequisite for godly service. As long as Moses retained the moldable, teachable attitude, God used Moses mightily.

Moses' mistake

However, for our admonition and example (1 Corinthians 10:6), God made Moses an object lesson of what can happen when humility is breached. In Numbers 20:8 the Lord explicitly commanded Moses to "speak to the rock" in front of the assembly of people. Moses apparently tried to use a little theatrical flair.

■ **Numbers 20:10-12:** "And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock; and he said to them, 'Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?' Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank. Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.' "

We begin to get the picture that if an act of presumptuousness cannot be tolerated in the man who was designated as "very humble ['meek,' KJV] more than all the men who were on the face of the earth," how much more abominable must it appear in those who have reinforced this trait through their habitual practice of self-satisfied pride and arrogance.

A humble spirit is a teachable and moldable spirit, but a haughty, self-satisfied, pride-filled spirit cannot be molded into a godly vessel.

Paul learned the lesson

It wasn't until the learned zealous Pharisee Paul was knocked to the ground by a blinding light, rendering him as weak and helpless as a newborn kitten, could this cut-down-to-size Pharisee become an instrument in God's hands (Acts 9:3-9).

In his humbled state, Paul realized that all his accomplishments and honor appeared as dung alongside his calling (Philippians 3:8).

Paul eventually realized that becoming an instrument in God's hands may appear to the "wise of the world" as foolish, dishonorable, weak, and downright filthy!

■ **1 Corinthians 4:9-10, 13:** "For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to the angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored! . . . Being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now."

When Paul contemplated the possible reasons for a chronic physical affliction he had been experiencing, he considered it a check and balance against self-exaltation.

■ **2 Corinthians 12:8-9:** "Concerning this thing [the metaphorical thorn in the flesh] I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you for my strength is *made perfect in weakness.*' "

Grafted because of humility

As Paul expands the olive-tree metaphor in Romans 11, he feels compelled to admonish the gentiles that their grafting into the tree is conditional, subject to their humility, faith and submission to God's purpose.

■ **Romans 11:18-20:** "Do not boast against the branches. But if you boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, 'Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.' Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear."

The humility of the poor contrasts with the haughty attitudes of people who let riches go to their heads in Proverbs 18:23: "The poor man uses entreaties [humbly and respectfully petitions], but the rich answers roughly [arrogantly and disrespectfully]."

Humility of rejection

God the Father did not spare our Elder Brother from the humility of rejection and scorn.

The psalmist writes (in Psalm 118:22-23): "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes."

Isaiah graphically portrays the Messiah as despised, rejected and quite ordinary looking.

■ **Isaiah 53:2-3:** "For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of the dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him."

God the Father in His sovereignty evidently looked upon the experience of rejection, scorn, and humiliation as necessary precursors to godly service.

■ "Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered" (Hebrews 5:8).

Are we learning the lesson?

What about us brethren? Have we learned any obedience by the things we have suffered?

Most of us in the greater Church of God have been uprooted and transplanted twice and maybe are destined for more uprooting and transplanting before this story is concluded.

Virtually every one of us as we came out of the religious traditions of the world became an instantaneous outcast, serving as a perpetual irritant to the world's prevailing customs.

When many of us were a part of a church that returned to many of those same religious traditions, we had to uproot a second time. I hope we have learned not to trust in our own understanding but to the sovereignty of God Almighty.

Assembling the outcasts

God has called a group of misfits through which He desires to accomplish a miraculous feat. Virtually every prophetic vision indicates that God will assemble outcasts and rejects with a repentant and broken spirit who are willing to yield to His purpose for a marvelous calling.

- The Lord builds up Jerusalem; He gathers together the *outcasts* of Israel. He heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds. The Lord lifts up the humble; He casts down the wicked down to the ground (Psalm 147:2-3, 6).
- He will set up a banner for the nations and assemble the *outcasts* of Israel and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth (Isaiah 11:12).
- The great trumpet will be blown; they, who are about to perish in the land of Assyria, will come (Isaiah 27:13).
- The *outcasts* in the land of Egypt shall worship in the holy mount of Jerusalem, "For I will restore health to you, and heal you of your wounds," says the Lord, "because they called you an *outcast* saying this is Zion and no one seeks her" (Jeremiah 30:17).

The reference at the conclusion of Lamentations could apply to the current scattered, confused and disoriented condition experienced by the greater Church of God.

- You have made us an *offscouring* and *refuse* in the midst of the peoples (Lamentations 3:45).

The ultimate miracle (perhaps God loves a challenge) consists of the transforming of misfits, offscourings, outcasts and undesirables into a unified family under His eternal rule.

- "In that day" says the Lord, "I will assemble the lame, I will gather the *outcast* and those I have afflicted; I will make the lame a remnant, and the *outcast* a strong nation; so the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion from now on, even forever" (Micah 4:6-7).