

# Editorial: Weed pulling: You have to be careful with metaphors

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A once-beloved comedian told about making a cake for his child. He was agitated and grabbed a carton of eggs out of the refrigerator with a bit too much aggression. Coming to his senses, he addressed the audience, saying, “You have to be careful with eggs.”

The same is true of metaphors. You have to be careful with metaphors.

I used a metaphor a couple of weeks ago that had unintended consequences, and I am sorry for what I communicated unintentionally.

## The metaphor that went wrong

A couple of weeks ago, I wrote about [the quietness of the BGCT annual meeting](#). I referred to a garden and pulling weeds. I intended one thing, but some of my readers understood another thing, one of whom wrote a [letter to the editor](#), which I published along with my response.

The letter writer didn’t put me up to an additional response. The reason I’m coming back to this discussion is because I’ve editorialized about the importance of word choice. [The words we use matter](#). The letter writer helped me take another look at my own words.

## A metaphor is built on relationships

A metaphor relies on context. Adding to that challenge, contexts differ,

taking the received meaning of metaphors along for the ride.

Some of my readers took “pulling weeds” as a direct reference to them. They have felt, with respect to denominational disputes, as though they were treated like unwanted weeds. Others have argued that point, not with garden metaphors, but by saying—right or wrong—those now out of the BGCT chose a path that ultimately led to their being out of fellowship.

Some of my readers may have taken “weeds” as an accurate description of people and churches who no longer are part of the BGCT. These readers may have appreciated the metaphor. They may have agreed, thinking it accurate.

Given the difference between these two groups of readers, my metaphor was not a helpful one, regardless how I intended it.

## **Responding to readers**

To the second group of readers: I was not trying to reduce people and churches from their status as beloved by God to something more like a despised weed to be pulled and thrown away.

To the first group of readers, those who may have thought I called them weeds: I have friends and family among those no longer in the BGCT. It is a source of grief for them and for me. I should have been more careful in the words I chose. I meant you no harm, and I am sorry. I did not intend to reduce you to anything less than who you are—fearfully and wonderfully made in God’s image.

The same goes for both groups of readers. You both are beloved by God.

## **Be careful. Metaphors are loaded**

When we find ourselves holding diametrically opposed views from one another, we tend to draw up sides and reject the opposition. To take the sting out of rejecting people we historically considered part of us, we resort to dehumanization—subtle or blatant.

It's easier for us to attack, cut off or hurt those we see as less human than ourselves. Sin has so affected us that we don't seem to mind dehumanizing one another, and once done, we don't seem to mind hurting one another.

Here's a test: For Republicans, what do you think about Democrats, or vice versa? For those opposed to same-sex marriage, what do you feel about those who accept it, or vice versa?

And do our thoughts and feelings about one another make our positions any more correct or Christlike?

We will know by our descriptions of one another.

We must guard against dehumanizing others, which is accomplished with dehumanizing words and, yes, metaphors. We must maintain one another's humanity, even when—especially when—we disagree so strongly with one another.

## **What's behind the weed metaphor**

It may be too little consolation to know what undergirds my metaphor and much of my thought about the Christian life, but here goes.

Much of my thought about discipleship—a person's relationship with Jesus and how that person follows Jesus—is informed by the 19th century Danish Christian, writer, philosopher and provocateur Søren Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard took God, Jesus, the Bible and the church very seriously. Some think he took them too seriously; others think he didn't take them seriously enough. It's so easy to disagree, isn't it?

I've spent years reading and studying Kierkegaard's Christian writings, five of those years for my Ph.D. dissertation. To distill his thought about discipleship into a couple of sentences is difficult, but here goes.

Kierkegaard's concern was that people submit themselves to Jesus no matter the cost and that each person relate to Jesus with his or her own faith, not with someone else's faith. For a person to have such a direct relationship with Jesus, that person must allow Jesus to work on him or her inwardly, living in the tension of never being totally certain but always trusting.

Kierkegaard never thought he exemplified his ideas about the Christian life.

## **Pulling weeds as a metaphor for spiritual formation**

I used to be a landscaper. I've pulled a lot of weeds, maybe as many as the sand on the shore. I don't know; I lost count. While I was a pastor, I spent many afternoons meditating as I pulled weeds around our church building.

I tried to pull every weed up by the roots. I didn't want to break the weed off at the ground because it would just grow back with even stronger roots. Dry clay worked against me, holding fast to the roots as I broke the weed loose. Every time that happened, I knew I would be dealing with that weed again.

If I thought of a specific person while pulling weeds, I asked for God's help working through a situation with that person or for God to help that person in his or her situation. I didn't seek for any person to be removed from the

church, the community or from life. Mostly, I asked God to rid me of my own sin, to remove it completely from my life so I wouldn't keep dealing with it.

To my readers, wherever you are in relation to the BGCT, Baptist life in Texas, Baptist life in general or otherwise, every single one of us has the weed of sin growing in us. That weed needs to be pulled out by the roots. We can't afford to be impatient, imprecise or careless about it, leaving the root to grow stronger while, by all appearances, we look like a well-tended garden.

One weed we need pulled, one that seems to be gaining ground daily, is the weed of dehumanization. It's sneaky. It's prolific. It's deadly. Pull it, roots and all.

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