

# Kingdom Kernels: The Reality of Weeds



A number of years ago, I was working on a Church Planting Movement (CPM) assessment team that was evaluating the presence of a large CPM in South Asia among Muslim-background believers. Our team divided into pairs as sub-teams to head to various parts of the country to interview dozens of precious believers—some new in their faith and some leaders of churches or networks of churches.

« Those that went to the oldest areas of the movement had an amazingly uplifting time of testimony after testimony of God bringing salvation to places that had previously been demonic strongholds. These teams were elated to say the least. They had seen God’s hand working in power. »

When the various sub-teams returned to the capital, a wide range of emotions was evident based on the findings the various pairs had turned up. Those that went to the oldest areas of the movement had an amazingly uplifting time of testimony after testimony of God bringing salvation to places that had previously been demonic strongholds. These teams were elated to say the least. They had seen God’s hand working in power.

On the other hand, a couple of the sub-teams (mine included) visited areas that more recently had seen breakthrough and didn’t have a very long track-record of church formation and leadership development. Personally, I went into my interviews full of faith and hope for what we were going to learn about what God was doing in this movement.

However, as the interviews progressed, it soon became apparent in one interview of two young “pastors,” that instead of *pastors* we had *imposters*. As can happen so easily in this region, these young men thought there might be financial gain in visiting us posing as pastors. With our Muslim-background translator, we very quickly realized that they were not even believers.

The good news is that we were able that day to share the gospel with them and baptize both of them in front of the witnesses of their friends. We were thrilled about that, but I was still disturbed that we were not seeing what we had been led to think we would see—a movement raging through the neighborhoods and villages. Was there really a movement here? Even as an optimist, this was the question I kept coming back to. My teammate, who was naturally more skeptical, concluded that there was not.

So, when the sub-teams reassembled, the emotions were mixed. To compound the problem, the team leader asked *me* to lead the debrief the next day to discuss what we had learned in this CPM assessment. I felt the least qualified to lead this because I felt disillusioned from what I had seen. Nevertheless, I agreed.

After a lot of questionable village fare, the team went out that night in search of some Western food. Instead, I

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begged off. I needed time to fast and pray. My heart was not ready to lead a discussion the next day. I spent much of the night fasting, praying and searching the Scriptures. I needed a breakthrough from God in the midst of my disillusionment.

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After some time, the Spirit led me to the *Parable of the Weeds* (or *tares*, found in Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43). For years leading up to this incident and in the years since, I have worked hard to let the parables of the kingdom define my understanding of the kingdom and *not* let my opinion about movements define my understanding of the parables. In other words, no matter how radical, I had to let the Word guide my understanding in all things.

Reading and meditating on the Parable of the Weeds completely cleared up the disillusionment I had been experiencing and enabled me to have a clear and neutral mind as we moved into the following day of evaluating what we were learning. What changed?

Perhaps first was that Jesus told this parable immediately *after* telling that magnificent Parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:3-9, 18-23) and its lesson that even though we will encounter bad soil that bears no fruit, we will also encounter soil that is “movement soil” – multiplies 30, 60 or 100 times. Jesus taught us to expect movements when the kingdom comes to a place. In many CPMs, we have observed that the first Person of Peace often results in 100 other people coming to faith, sometimes 60 and sometimes 30. We have seen similar patterns where churches multiply many times over. As new believers are taught to become followers of Jesus and fishers of men by the power of the Spirit, Acts-like movements are reoccurring all over the world.

« Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. »

(Matt. 10:16-18, ESV) »

So why tell the Parable of the Weeds (which feels a bit like dumping water on the fires of our enthusiasm) after this “growth” parable? To compound the matter, Jesus then returns to two more growth parables which feel even more remarkable in their potential for expansion—the Parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven (Acts 13:31-33). Both of these teach that great movements of the kingdom will start from small, humble beginnings.

So, again, why this sobering, somewhat discouraging parable in the midst of the others that center on growth and hope? Before I answer that question, it is critical that we remember a basic rule of interpretation when it comes to parables. We must let each parable stand on its own and let images (word pictures) be interpreted unique to that parable. In other words, sometimes the image of “seed” refers to the word of the kingdom (Matt. 13:19). However, in the Parable of the Weeds, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom (Christians) and the bad seeds are the sons of the evil one (non-Christians; Matt. 13:38). The Greek word used for “weeds” or “tares” refers to an imposter plant – one that resembled wheat for a while before becoming evident that it was not wheat. This sounded to me a lot like the “imposters” we had led to faith who were posing as pastors.

The sower in the Weeds Parable does not refer to us but to *Jesus* as the good sower (Matt. 13:37) and the *devil* as the evil sower (Matt. 13:39). The reaping in the Weeds Parable has nothing to do with the reaping of souls for Jesus as a result of salvation. Instead, it refers to the end of the age when the angels will reap the sons of the kingdom for heaven and the sons of the evil one for hell (Matt. 13:40-42).

Jesus is describing a different reality by changing the images He uses in the Parable of the Weeds from those He used in the Parable of the Sower. That’s why it is critical to let each parable stand on its own and contribute its unique message to the truths of what the kingdom is like.

« The presence of *weeds* (imposters; non-believers) does not invalidate the presence of *wheat* (real believers), nor does the presence of *weeds* invalidate the presence of a *movement*. »

Why tell this sobering parable in the midst of the growth parables? *A reality check, plain and simple.*

Jesus didn't want His disciples expecting trouble-free growth and expansion of the kingdom. But instead, as He has done before, He is giving the disciples a reality check. He issued other warnings to His disciples in other growth contexts. For instance, He clearly foretold difficulties and persecution for disciples as they pursued the mission:

*<sup>16</sup> Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. <sup>17</sup> Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, <sup>18</sup> and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. (Matt. 10:16-18, ESV)*

As I sat upon my bed that night in South Asia, pondering the truths from the Parable of the Weeds, God seared this truth, or reality check, into my soul:

**REALITY CHECK: The presence of *weeds* (imposters; non-believers) does not invalidate the presence of *wheat* (real believers), nor does the presence of weeds invalidate the presence of a *movement*.**

Armed with this simple truth, I was able to lead the group through a healthy debrief the next day. We came to realize that imposters, posers, non-believers with duplicitous motives and other similar problems do not mean that a movement is not raging around us. In fact, at times, it almost seems to be more likely that we would have a movement accompanied by many weeds. It appears from the parable that the devil is actively trying to 1) attack movements of the kingdom and 2) disillusion us or cause us to become jaded when evaluating movements.

For some reason, we develop this false idea that a movement means an absence of problems. Nowhere is that implied in Scripture. Rather it is usually the opposite:

- Jesus puts this reality check parable second in the line-up of growth parables.
- The book of Acts, which describes movement after movement, shows the attacks, difficulties, disbelief and false prophets that go with that.
- The epistles are clear that false teachers will arise and scatter many of the sheep.
- For years, I had this verse taped to my desk where only I could see it:

*Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox.*  
(Prov. 14:4, ESV)

Production comes from having oxen, and with them comes a lot of poop in the manger!

Whenever there is life and growth, expect problems. Smile and remember that these problems *might* be a sign that a lot of good growth is emerging as well.

We must be pretty naïve to think that God will move in power but that the devil will not follow along on the heels working his own wiles. We have an active adversary and need to be on the alert at all times. At the same time,



the lesson of the parable seems to imply that we should not focus on pulling up all the weeds<sup>1</sup>. That is ultimately God's work. Instead, we must not become distracted weed-pullers but rather avid wheat cultivators.

« Though we don't prefer to have problems, they don't invalidate the work we do. Keep your eyes focused on the wheat and cultivate a Church Planting Movement in the power of the Spirit. »

By the end of our debrief time in South Asia, I think that most of my colleagues had circled around to trust the truth of the reality check above. In God's providence, in the larger country-wide movement, some of us had seen more wheat and some of us had seen more weeds.

Frankly, weeds no longer bother me. I actually find their presence slightly reassuring that I am seeing a *real* movement. In fact, I almost entitled this article "The Reassuring Reality of Weeds."

However, let me highlight three more truths to remember from this parable. They are three more reality checks:

- **The presence of weeds is no guarantee of a CPM.** The most we can say from this parable is that they do not rule out its possibility. Remember that the enemy is at work in a variety of situations. I've seen imposter Christians planted in the deadest of churches.
- **The presence of weeds is no guarantee a great work is *about* to break out.** I've heard this one too many times, and this cannot be implied from this parable. We say, "Wow! The fact that the enemy is attacking must mean we are about to see a great breakthrough!" This is not necessarily true. The devil is no prophet. He does not foresee the future. He may just be attacking. Period.
- **The lack of weeds should make us a bit suspicious when a CPM case study is presented.** Movements have problems. There's no way around it. When presenting a case study of a movement, acknowledge those problems; if there are none, examine whether you really have a movement. If it sounds too good to be true, it may not be true. When I receive reports from those I disciple and train, I probe deeply to make sure that what we think is going on really is. I'm not worried about encountering problems along the way. They reassure me that we are dealing with the real world, a real enemy and a triumphant God!

So, let's press onward toward kingdom movements in every place. Let's do so with eyes wide open that the enemy is at work at the same time. Though we don't prefer to have problems, they don't invalidate the work we do. Keep your eyes focused on the wheat and cultivate a Church Planting Movement in the power of the Spirit.

*Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (1 John. 4:4, ESV)* 

<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that we ignore discipline which is a critical aspect of body life. However, we must not go on witch-hunts to root out all problems. If we do, the believers (wheat) get neglected in the process.