

If we embrace our true identity in Jesus, we'll foster greater unity and fully engage with everyone irrespective of culture, class and nationality, says senior pastor **Dr Tani Omidéyi**.



WHO SHOULD I SAY I AM?

My rude awakening to identity was arriving in the UK at 20 years of age and realising that being black was actually an issue.

Growing up in Nigeria to a loving dad who studied at the Royal College of Church Music London, surrounded by some of his friends who were white, attending a secondary school with many white teachers, I had grown up totally oblivious to colour. People were just people, defined by their character. The reality in the UK was different: people crossed over the road to avoid me.

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On packed train journeys many preferred to stand rather than sit next to me.

Soon my wife and I started having children and watching them grow up as passionate Liverpoolian British. They struggled to identify with our background as West Africans, nor did we try to make them. They were, after all, growing up in a multicultural church planted in a very poor part of the city. Even though we their parents were well educated and would probably be expected to operate as middle-class, they were growing alongside white and black children from much different backgrounds.

What identity were they taking on? As we grew the Temple of Praise congregation in Liverpool, I remember the looks on people's faces when some of our spiritually adopted children who were white introduced us to outsiders as their mum and dad. They found no shame in their new identity in Christ. This question of identity is deeply rooted in UK culture, even in the church. A young man approached me with tears of joy after I had spoken at a conference on identity of the church. As a mixed-race person, he had felt excluded by constant references to white or black churches. Finally, he was hearing someone reject labels which classified churches by colour.

But the problem of identity is not limited to race. It now very much extends to gender, body image, looks, even marital status. I, like many, carry multiple identities: pastor, husband, dad being obvious. I also have a doctorate, was a school teacher; I'm a writer of more than 100 worship songs, choir conductor, chair of some charity boards. I was born in Nigeria yet proudly travel around the world on my British passport. Which of these really defines my identity? Surely being a Christian has to matter in all this!

The good news is that God dealt with our ancestry in Genesis 2: we are told we all descended from Adam and Eve, made by God. Our spiritual ancestry as Christians dates back to Abraham. The call of Abram was a command to leave his country, people and father's household for an unknown land God would show him (Genesis 12:1). With this single step God was taking Abram away from his heritage-based identity. Abram would become a new person with a new identity rooted in God, the architect of the new land.

The Lord Jesus further developed the theme in His teachings. He introduced us to God the Father and by inference to ourselves as God's children. Suddenly we have a new identity based solely on our relationship with God. This would change how we live our lives: "I tell you, love your enemies. Help and give without expecting a return. You'll never – I promise – regret it. Live out this God-created identity the way our Father lives toward us, generously and graciously, even when we're at our worst. Our Father is kind; you be kind." Luke 6:35-36 (The Message). Jesus' prayers in John 17:15-19 declare that we believers are not

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of this world but belong to Father God. We have the same identity in Christ as sons and daughters of God. It's time to fully embrace it above all else.

Boundless love

Both Paul and Peter faced this challenge. Peter's trance encounter in Acts 11:7-10 challenged his Jewish heritage. Suddenly he was to put aside all he had grown up with, his prejudices and understandings about God, and embrace a different people who were never part of the picture. Paul boasted to the Corinthian and Philippian churches about his Jewishness then concluded that he would count everything as nothing to knowing Christ Jesus as Lord (2 Corinthians 11:22-23/Philippians 3:6).

Is it simplistic to think that in Christ Jesus we take on an altogether different identity as "sons and daughters of God" that supersedes everything else, not one that begins when we die? "When someone becomes a Christian, he becomes a brand-new person inside. He is not the same anymore. A new life has begun!" (2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 8:16). We become citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20).

In the early years, our small congregation was entirely black. One night I had a dream where I saw God change us radically. Within weeks everything began to change. Suddenly I was not a black person trying to reach white people; I was a child of God seeking to reach those He loved dearly. There is no barrier to His love. Have there been challenges? Yes. Liverpool has experienced its share of high-profile racist incidents and we have not been immune to that. But, is it different from other forms of sin? Then I began to develop a real love for our city. Soon we began to transition to a City Transformation Church, which has led

us to develop several life-changing projects including a school for excluded young people.

Our international congregations now include one in Pakistan with pastor and congregation entirely of Pakistanis. My personal assistant is Indian. Like Abram, it didn't matter where I had been born. I am where God always wanted me to be. The UK church has to become a body where colour, gender and class no longer matter (Colossians 3:10-11). This is why in 2010 I jumped at the invitation to help the Evangelical Alliance set up the One People Commission. I didn't know then that part of my destiny was to become chair of the Evangelical Alliance board.

When a believer realises their true identity as above all else, a child of God, the result is liberating. There is freedom to be whom Christ wants you to be, without complexes of either inferiority or superiority. Worldly titles become meaningless, whether pastor, bishop or apostle. You already have the greatest title. You don't have to prove anything to anybody. Your primary desire becomes wanting to be like Jesus and to please God. There is the freedom to also take on your calling to represent Christ to everyone. You no longer view people from a worldly perspective.

The UK is entering a season of great opportunities for the church to tell an alternative story. The challenge with 'identity' is probably as bad as it's ever been, both for individuals and the country itself. We Christians have a different image to share which should be most attractive in our mission to make Jesus known. We church leaders can often be driven by a spirit of competitiveness born out of insecurity. Embracing our true identity will foster greater unity, give us confidence to fully engage with everyone in our area of influence irrespective of culture, class and nationality. I am still on this journey myself and seek grace daily that I might know Him and the power of His resurrection (Philippians 3:10-11).

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