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Discrimination, prejudice, and ethnocentrism are values generally denounced by Western societies (Prati, Crisp, and Rubini 2021). From a missiological point of view, tribalism and nationalism have long been seen as barriers to the spread of the gospel (Glasser et al. 2003a). Yet these sorts of phenomena have regularly appeared in Christian communities throughout the church's history (e.g., Acts 6:1, 15:1-2). Conflicts between groups occur when status differences appear unjust (Bettencourt et al. 2001), both among believers and nonbelievers. Within the field of social psychology (the study of how a person's thoughts, feelings, and behavior affect the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of others), social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Hogg 2006). has been very successful in describing these phenomena, predicting when they occur, and testing ways to attenuate them.

Social Identity Theory

From a psychological point of view (in contrast to a legal point of view), one's identity is a theory of self (Stets and Burke 2000). My identity is a collection of beliefs that I have about who I am and what I do. Social identity theory (Hogg 2006; Tajfel and Turner 1986) posits that in addition to a *personal* identity (beliefs about one's personality, abilities, values, and whatever else makes a person distinct from others), individuals also have a social identity, defined by the groups of which they are members.

My personal identity describes how I am different from others. It includes my personality traits, my abilities (however extensive or limited they may be), the experiences that have shaped me, my values, and the personal relationships that I have with others (Hogg 2006; D. Abrams et al. 2005). My personal identity is continually varying, depending on whom I am with and the aspects of self that are salient. When I am with my wife, I think of myself one way; when I am teaching in a classroom, I see myself in another; when I am at an academic conference, I see myself in yet another way.

In contrast, my social identity reveals how I am similar to others. My social identity consists of beliefs associated with the groups (or social categories) of which I am a member. In broad terms, one's social identity is a set of categorizations that clarifies and defines one's place in society (Hogg and Terry 2001). When I think of myself as a member of a group, I tend to focus on the attributes and behaviors shared by members of that group. These groups may be very large (defined by my sex, race, age, or nationality) or they may be slightly narrower (defined by my occupation, education, or licensing). These groups also may be defined by limited or local memberships (my local church, the department in which I work, my small group Bible study). Focusing on my membership in various groups helps me see what my role in society is and how I expect to be viewed by others. By behaving like other members of the group, I affirm the value of the group and my place in it.

From a Christian point of view, the most important aspect of one's social identity is one's membership in the body of Christ, the universal church (Rom. 12:4-5, I Cor. 12:12-13). Like my personal identity, my social identity is constantly shifting depending on what group membership is salient. If my age or occupation is salient (as may be the case when I meet with a group of students), I will tend to act like an older professor. If my relationship with Christ is salient, I will tend to act in a Christ-like way. This implies that by keeping my identity in Christ salient, at the forefront of my thoughts, I will be more likely to behave in a God-honoring way.

The Concept of Groups

In social identity theory, groups are viewed as cognitive phenomena (in contrast to legal, administrative, or physical phenomena). If a person views himself or herself as part of a group, the group is real (Hogg 2006); this group membership will influence his or her thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Generally, a group requires at least three people viewing themselves as having shared characteristics that distinguish them from people not in the group. Three people are necessary for a group in social identity theory because a member of the group needs to observe at least two other group members in order to construe the group's behavioral norms.

As a group grows in importance in an individual's life, it becomes part of the identity of the individual. The observed group norms become internalized and inform the person of how they should behave and interact with others (Turner 1982; Hogg 2006; Terry and Hogg 1996), as well as what they should believe and value. Since people may be members of many groups, the group membership which is most salient at a given

time will have the greatest influence. Some group members are chronically present in one's mind, either because of strong internalization of values (such as comes from times of daily prayer and Bible study and from regular fellowship with other believers) or because there are constant reminders in one's environment of group membership (such as regular consumption of media that emphasizes specific types of identity). Other group memberships are only salient and influence our behavior occasionally. For example, the only time a person may feel American could be when traveling overseas.

Social Categorization and Prototypicality

As we interact with other individuals, we place them into categories that are similar to the categories in which we place ourselves: race, ethnicity, sex, age, economic status, political orientation, organizational affiliations, religions, and many others, consisting of groups both large and small. For each group, we develop a mental concept of what a typical member is like, known as a prototype (Hogg 2001, 2006). If I hear that a person is a Democrat and know very little else about this person, I will assign him or her attributes similar to the prototype of Democrats that I have in my mind. If I hear that a person is a Republican, I will use a different prototype. Moreover, the prototypes that I use for various groups differ from the prototypes that others use. Prototypes are based on people's evaluations and interpretations of their experiences, and observations, which are highly dependent on personality, beliefs, culture, and even genetics (Hogg 2006; Zuckerman 2005; Dunaetz 2019a). Moreover, we are biased so as to emphasize the traits which favor our groups and distinguish other groups from our own (D. R. Forsyth 2008; Crisp and Hewstone 2006; Prati, Crisp, and Rubini 2021).

In small groups, all members can be observed to infer the group's behavioral norms. However, in larger groups, group norms are inferred from the most salient or important members. When people go to a church's website to find out more about the church, they often go to the page on church leadership. This helps them understand the nature of the church by providing them with information to form a group prototype. Are they happy, casual people who look like me? Are they serious defenders of the faith who graduated from conservative seminaries? Are they well-educated scholars who will provide me with intellectual stimulation? Are they filled with emotion that will stir me during a worship service? Are they foreigners from a culture that I know little about? Different prototypes will appeal to different people, depending on their own personal identity (their traits, values, experiences, etc.) and the social identity that they already have from other groups to which they belong.

No matter what size the group, the role that the leader plays is essential for the direction and future of the group. So, especially in young groups, the leader defines the group prototype. During times of leadership transition, groups look for leaders who fit the already established prototypes. The more a leader conforms to the prototype of the ideal or typical member, the more the members will be committed to the group. Moreover, the prototypicality of a leader has a stronger effect on group cohesion and commitment than does personal attraction to the leader (Hogg 1993; D Abrams et al. 2000). For example, people may flock to a church with a flamboyant, entertaining, narcissistic pastor, but their commitment to the church will be lower than if the pastor is humbler and a better prototype of what it means to follow Christ (Dunaetz, Cullum, and Barron 2018). Similarly, even if a potential leader has very strong leadership qualities (e.g., those found inBass 1990; Northouse 2013), group members will not desire to follow the leader if he or she does not conform to their prototype of the group (Hogg 2006; Hais, Hogg, and Duck 1997).

Motivations for Joining Groups

Social identity is the part of one's identity that comes from the groups to which one belongs. For some groups, we have little or no choice about our membership. These groups are low in *permeability* and our membership in them does not change throughout our lives (Hogg 2006; Bettencourt et al. 2001). However, our thoughts and evaluations of these groups evolve according to our experiences, as well as our thoughts and evaluations of low permeability groups which we cannot join. For groups that are high in permeability, not only may our thoughts and evaluations change, but also, we may either join or leave such groups. Social identity research has identified three motivations that influence our thoughts, evaluations, and especially our choice for joining groups. This is especially relevant for church planting missionaries because their primary goal consists of presenting the gospel in a way that motivates people to put their faith in Christ and actively join his body as manifested as a local community of believers.

Increasing Self-Esteem

Perhaps the greatest factor that influences whether we join a group is its effect on our self-esteem. If being a member of a group would raise our self-esteem and makes us feel better about ourselves and what we are doing with our lives, we are likely to want to join that group if we believe that it is possible. We will be more likely to value membership

in that group and pay the necessary costs (involving our time, our resources, and our own interests which may need to be subordinated to the group's interests). However, if membership in a group would make us feel bad about ourselves because we would feel ashamed or less honorable, we are not likely to seek membership in that group. Two ways that groups influence our self-esteem are through inclusion (Baumeister and Leary 1995; M. R. Leary et al. 1995) and status (D Abrams and Hogg 1988).

Inclusion, being socially accepted by others, is a fundamental human need (Baumeister and Leary 1995). "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18, NIV). In the sociometer model of self-esteem, (M R Leary and Baumeister 2000; M. R. Leary et al. 1995) self-esteem functions as a monitor of social inclusion: When we feel socially included, our self-esteem rises; when we feel excluded, our self-esteem falls. This model has been empirically validated and at least partially explains why exclusion and rejection by others hurt so much, as well as why people try so hard to be accepted by others. One of the most attractive features of the Christian community is that it emphasizes loving one another. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35, NIV). The degree to which members of a Christian community live up to this standard will likely influence the effectiveness of their efforts in evangelism. People will see a community that loves one another and will want to be included in it.

Status, the belief held by others that one is competent in socially valued ways, is also another source of self-esteem (Berger and Webster 2006; Driskell and Mullen 1990). By being a member of a group, individuals, to some degree, are infused with the status of that group and feel better about themselves if they believe that membership in this group increases their status in the eyes of others and they feel worse about themselves if membership in the group causes status to go down in the eyes of others (D Abrams and Hogg 1988). From a church planting perspective, this phenomenon is extremely important. It is a major factor determining who will consider becoming a Christ-follower. Those whose self-esteem would rise by being a member of the church will be much more open to exploring the claims of Christ than those who would feel ashamed to be associated with the church. Since many young churches are similar to the church in Corinth where "not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth" (I Cor. 1:26, NIV), it is difficult for such churches to attract members who are more financially stable, have greater leadership potential, and have the social connections needed to be positively viewed by the community powerholders. This difficulty is one of the most important for church planters to navigate while remaining focused on Christ.

Reducing Uncertainty

A second reason that people seek membership in groups is to know who they are and how they should behave (Hogg 2006). Life is filled with a virtually infinite number of questions. Group membership answers these questions by providing prototypes describing what people do and should do. If I am part of a group, I can observe group norms and know how others habitually behave. This enables me to avoid dangerous behaviors and situations that could cost me dearly and to plan my activities to maximize the benefits that I receive.

The more people are uncertain about their identity and their self-concept, the more they will strive to be part of a group that will reduce their uncertainty (Hogg 2000). This explains one reason why youth ministry can be so effective: Adolescents are seeking to discover and develop their identity and are willing to experiment with various social identities to find what they believe is appropriate (Kidwell et al. 1995; Erikson and Erikson 1998. Groups with clear, prescriptive prototypes and a strong sense of distinctiveness might be most attractive to those who are the most uncertain. This may include churches with a clear, strong commitment to biblical values, but it may also include churches with an authoritarian, cult-like leadership structure (Hogg 2006).

Optimal Distinctiveness

A third motive for joining groups is optimal distinctiveness (Brewer 1991; Leonardelli, Pickett, and Brewer 2010). As humans who want both to belong and to be unique, we try to balance these competing desires into an optimal balance that makes us valuable to others, enables us to have close friends whom we can count on, and permits us to make autonomous, authentic decisions to ensure our well-being (D. R. Forsyth 2010; Hogg 2006; Deci and Ryan 2008). This optimal distinctiveness is closely related to Paul's concept of the Body of Christ, "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its parts form one body, so it is with Christ" (I Cor 12:12, NIV). Being a part of the body of Christ and using one's gifts to benefit others enables the believer to achieve optimal distinctiveness. Finding utility, developing close relations, and having the ability to make one's own choices are often reasons cited for wanting to follow Christ and join a church.

Missiological Applications

Social identity theory is descriptive, not prescriptive. It describes how group membership influences a person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Not only does my personal identity (my personality, abilities, values, and all that makes me unique) inform what I should think and do, but my social identity (my beliefs about myself based on groups that help define me) does as well. Several important missiological implications and applications can be drawn from social identity theory.

Group Permeability

One of the goals of church planting and other missionary undertakings is to have people join a local community to grow in their Christian commitment and to serve together. Group permeability (Bettencourt et al. 2001; Tajfel and Turner 2004) is a measure of how possible it is for a member of one group to join another group. If the perceived barriers are too high (e.g., people must be morally perfect to become a Christian or join the church), people will not even consider the possibility of joining. If the barriers are too low (e.g., everyone who desires can join the church), the distinctiveness of the group will be lost and it will blend into the surrounding culture.

Several factors determine a group's perceived permeability (Armenta et al. 2017). Sometimes there is a perceived fundamental incompatibility of group memberships. If one considers oneself to be Muslim or Jewish, becoming a Christian might be considered inconceivable. In such cases, a group of Christ-followers may choose to identify as something other than Christians if the word presents a barrier to others, preventing them from becoming part of the believing community.

Other times there are personal constraints that prevent a person from becoming part of the a. If a group is perceived to be uniquely comprised of people from one race, who speak a specific language, or have a specific accent, then outsiders who are different might not feel that they could ever belong to the group. For Christians, it is important to emphasize that these characteristics are neither important from God's perspective nor the group's, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28 NIV).

Perceived values can also make a group appear to be impermeable. Sometimes Christian values are attractive to outsiders. Love, joy, and peace are valued in many cultures and may make a church attractive. However, patience and self-control (continuing with examples pulled from the Fruit of the Spirit, Gal. 5:22-23) may be less

valued. Similarly, the sanctity of life, sexual restraint, and a strong work ethic may be viewed negatively by some. In such cases, churches need to not only proclaim their values but should also provide a strong defense of them in order to be attractive to those outside. Sometimes, churches may be associated with specific political parties or specific types of authoritarianism. This may make it easier to attract people from some groups, but it may present an insurmountable barrier for members of other groups. Churches, even young churches, need to clearly define who they are trying to reach so that they can structure themselves to be permeable to members of their target audience.

Yet another source of impermeability is related to the social status associated with a group (Armenta et al. 2017). If the social status of the members of a group seems impossible to achieve (a status beyond that to which a person aspires), then that group may be considered impermeable. If members of a church seem to be of a much higher social class than someone observing it, this person would likely consider the church as impermeable. However, in missions contexts, this is rarely the case. It is more likely that the first members of a church will be of low social status rather than high social status (cf. I Cor. 2:26; Fraser 2016). "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" (Mark 2:17, NIV).

Group Status

Humans are generally motivated to be socially competent and valuable, making a contribution to the well-being of others and developing mutually beneficial relationships (Ryan and Deci 2000; Gen. 2:18; Eccl. 4:9-12; Deci and Ryan 2008). Their social value often influences their self-esteem, a feeling that can be said to crudely measure one's perceived social integration (M. R. Leary et al. 1995; M R Leary and Baumeister 2000). From a social identity perspective, people will seek to join groups that will raise their self-esteem and avoid groups that would lower their self-esteem. This phenomenon has some very important implications for evangelism and church planting.

In a perfect world, new believers in Christ would quickly develop into mature, responsible, and competent members of Christ's body, working together to successfully better the world through the efficient and effective use of their gifts and abilities. The changes brought about by their faith in Christ would be clearly visible to those who observe them, communicating that becoming a Christian is an excellent way of developing one's full potential. However, this is often not the case. Sometimes, young

churches resemble the church of Corinth, "You are still worldly; For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans?" (I Cor. 3:3, NIV).

To some degree, this type of church is to be expected in church planting. Struggling with sin after one's conversion seems to be the normal Christian experience (Rom. 7:14-25, I John 1:8-10). Churches often claim to be a "hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints." The Parable of the Weeds (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43) indicates that separating the good seed from the weeds will occur at the final judgment; "Let both grow together until the harvest" (Matt. 13:30 NIV). However, from a social identity perspective, this can create a barrier to following Christ, especially for people who view their social status as above that of those who attend a church. Following Christ and joining a church would be a step down socially, presenting a stumbling block to those considering the gospel. This may be one reason that it is difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven (cf. Matt. 19:24).

Research in social identity has discovered several processes by which this phenomenon can be mitigated. We will examine basking in reflected glory, social creativity, and leadership.

Basking in Reflected Glory. Also known as BIRGing, basking in reflected glory occurs when people associate themselves with others who are successful or have a higher status (Cialdini et al. 1976; Dijkstra et al. 2010) and thus feel more successful themselves. First observed in the higher likelihood of college students wearing their school colors after their football team's victory than after their defeat, BIRGing occurs in churches when celebrity Christians (ranging from pop culture icons to missionaries who have made great sacrifices for the sake of the gospel) are upheld as examples. Such people help define for the observers what it means to be a Christ-follower. Although there may be more semi-homeless people struggling with addictions in the church than such stars, promoting examples of successful people as the prototype of what it means to follow Christ makes a church more attractive to those considering it. A similar, and potentially more effective strategy would promote Jesus himself as the prototype. This is one of the reasons that worship that clearly points to the Lord and his greatness can effectively attract people to a church and the gospel (Morgenthaler 1999).

Social Creativity. One strategy for feeling better about a group is to change the standards for value and status. If the dominant culture values material wealth and fame, a group for whom wealth and fame are unlikely may seek to change the standard of what defines success (Tajfel and Turner 1986; van Bezouw, van Der Toorn, and Becker 2021;

Bettencourt et al. 2001). This is an especially important strategy for churches. Serving and loving others is at the center of Jesus' teaching on interpersonal relations (e.g., Mk 9:33-35, Jn 13:34). Such behaviors should be the source of status and value within the Christian community. "The greatest among you will be your servant" (Mt 23:11). Helping a young church adopt such a social norm will not always go smoothly, but it needs to be communicated clearly and continually so as to become the norm for members' behavior. Such a standard is very different from what many people have grown up with, but with the help of the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:15-21), it becomes doable. Moreover, it is not rare for people outside of the church to value love for and service to others, thus making the church more attractive and credible. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (Jn 13:35).

Leadership. Another way that church planters can make a church more attractive to outsiders is to ensure that the leadership within the church is respectable. The leaders "must be above reproach . . . and also have a good reputation with outsiders" (I Tim. 3:2-7 NIV). The prototype of the church member, the mental concept describing the typical group member, is not simply an average of the traits of all the group members. Rather, it is especially determined by the group's leaders (Hais, Hogg, and Duck 1997; Hogg 2001). Those who lead the church, those who are the most visible, generally have more of an impact on outsiders than the typical church member. By choosing and appointing leaders who are viewed as credible and trustworthy (that is, above reproach), the low social status of church members may be less of a threat to the self-esteem of people considering joining the church (Dunaetz 2015, 2019b). Unfortunately, this is not always possible and missionaries may need to provide leadership to a young church for longer than they had foreseen until appropriate leaders emerge. This was apparently the case for Paul and Titus at the young church in Crete, "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town" (Titus 1:5).

Dangerous Social Identity Phenomena

Several negative social identity phenomena occur quite regularly when demographic identities (such as race, ethnicity, and gender) and political identities are emphasized. *Ingroup favoritism* occurs when people consciously or unconsciously choose to favor members of their own group over members of other groups (Balliet, Wu, and De Dreu 2014; Greenwald and Pettigrew 2014; Crisp and Hewstone 2006). Prioritizing the needs of our ingroup can be appropriate when being a Christ-follower is central to our identity, "Let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of

believers" (Gal. 6:10 NIV) or when we have responsibilities within our families, "Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (I Tim. 5:8). However, favoritism based on other characteristics is unacceptable, "If you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers" (James 2:9).

Outgroup derogation is another social identity phenomenon that occurs regularly when left unchecked. When members of a group feel threatened or uncertain, they often disparage, criticize, or condemn members of their outgroup in order to feel better about themselves (Branscombe and Wann 1994). Although this can create solidarity within one's ingroup, it builds a wall between the outgroup and ingroup, even if outgroup members are considering joining the ingroup. For example, if non-Christians hear Christians disparaging their political party, the non-Christians are more likely to reject the gospel because they feel condemned for a political alignment that they view as good. Similarly, if group membership is made salient within a church (e.g., ethnicity), members of one group within a church may derogate outgroup members if they feel threatened, leading to divisions and damaged relationships.

Another dangerous social identity phenomenon is *outgroup homogeneity*. Whereas people tend to see members of their ingroup as holding diverse opinions, values, and beliefs, they tend to see outgroup members as all the same, often choosing the most extreme cases as the prototypical member of the outgroup. For example, a person might see members of their political outgroup as all holding the values of one of the outgroup party's most obnoxious politicians. Similarly, a non-Christian may believe all churches hold values like Westboro Baptist Church or have pastors who act like their least favorite televangelist.

Preventing Negative Social Identity Phenomena in Christian Organizations. Christ has called us to live in peace together (Col. 3:15, Rom. 12:18), focused on him. We live in a time where there is great emphasis placed on group identity, increasing the likelihood that some of these negative phenomena occur in our churches or ministries. From a social identity perspective, there are several strategies that can be used to reduce the likelihood of racism, nationalism, or ethnocentrism occurring and preventing us from experiencing unity in Christ and the reconciliation we are called to experience (2 Cor. 5:18-21, Col. 1:20).

Focusing on Our Identity in Christ. A major theme of the New Testament is the transformation that occurs when we place our faith in Christ (John 3:1-21). Making this

transformation and new identity central to our thinking is especially important when considering modern ills associated with identity. Social identity theory predicts that we are most likely to be influenced by aspects of our identity that are salient and accessible in our mind (Hogg 2006); this points to the importance of making our identity in Christ central to our thinking. Moreover, in Paul's discourse on reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:11-21), the Christian's change of identity is crucial to his argument, "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Cor. 5: 16-17 NIV). This transformation brought about by faith in Christ is so fundamentally associated with our identity that Peter says, "You are a chosen race (γένος), a royal priesthood, a holy nation (ἔθνος), a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (I Pet. 2:9 NEV).

This reconciliation with God can lead to reconciliation with others because we are called to live in the light that he has provided. Because "God is love" (I Jn 4:8), love is to characterize everything that we do (Jn 13:34-35, I Cor. 13:1-13, I Cor. 16:14, Col. 3:14, I Jn 4:7). This prepares us to be reconciled with those who desire it, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Eph. 4:32, NIV). Moreover, love means that when injustices exist, as they often do in organizations in which we serve (and even in those that we create (Dunaetz 2020), we must work to right the wrongs and make things fair, just as the Apostles did in Acts 6 when the Greek-speaking widows were being ignored.

Humility. An especially important trait to develop in order to prevent negative social identity phenomena such as ingroup favoritism (e.g., ethnocentrism) and outgroup derogation (e.g., racism) is humility, which can be contrasted to entitlement, grandiosity, and narcissism (Dunaetz, Jung, and Lambert 2018; Dunaetz, Cullum, and Barron 2018; Campbell et al. 2011; Ashton, Lee, and De Vries 2014). Humility (and its correlate of serving others) is central to Christian ethics (Mt. 23:11, Mk 10:44-45, Jn. 13:12-14, James 4:6-10). With a spirit of humility, one is more likely to accept group differences, understand the weaknesses and limitations of one's own social group, reject injustices that favor one social group over another, and care about people who are not part of one's social group.

Multiple Social Categorization. People who view themselves as members of several social categories that do not completely overlap (e.g., organizational, educational, interest-focused, political, service-focused, ethnic, or racial), in contrast to members

who view themselves of only one social category (e.g., national or racial), have a higher level of *social identity complexity* (Roccas and Brewer 2002). Research in social identity theory has also found that such people are less likely to be intolerant and closed-minded, and they are less likely to act against the interests of those who might not be a member of one of their own social groups ((Roccas and Brewer 2002; Prati, Crisp, and Rubini 2021; Bettencourt et al. 2001). By using multiple categories to understand people, they form more nuanced views of individuals and understand the limitations that each category provides for understanding others.

For churches and other Christian organizations, this means that it is important to not let the organization become associated with only one social category, such as race or ethnicity in a multicultural society. When Christianity is associated with a specific category, deviant beliefs (e.g., White Christian nationalism) can develop that are quite contrary to the gospel. To prevent the confusion of social categories (e.g., White, Christian, and American), churches and other Christian organizations, even if they are relatively homogeneous demographically, should include members of other social groups in their public meetings, leadership, and publicity. This may not prevent their opponents from accusing them of intolerance, but it will reduce the likelihood of intolerance arising within the Christian organization.

Conclusion

By considering people's feelings about various social groups, specifically their desire to feel good about who they are, social identity theory has identified various phenomena that may be useful or detrimental in missions work. By creating a positive and desirable identity associated with the churches we plant, lead, or serve, we can make the gospel more attractive to outsiders. However, social identity phenomena can also create effects that are contrary to the gospel, producing conflict rather than reconciliation. By emphasizing our identity in Christ which should make us focus on loving and serving others in humility, along with emphasizing that following Christ is for all peoples, we can more effectively and persuasively proclaim the gospel, glorifying God "who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18).

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