

NOTE: This paper is based on a draft of a study that was published in *Missiology: An International Review* (Jan 2021, 1-12), titled: *Jesus friend of sinners: a three-party kerygmatic model of mission*.

Jesus friend of sinners: The gospel's three-party framework for disciple-making

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The following paper is intended for the equipping and on-going learning of ministry teams engaged in mercy initiatives, church planting, advocacy, community organizing, intercultural mission training, and more. As such the discussion questions in the conclusion work best when used in the context of a team that shares a common ministry and seeks to grow in their understanding of the gospel and how we bear witness to the good news as followers of Jesus. The questions are grouped into four sessions, with each session taking 90 minutes.

Summary: Nora Rodriguez is a pentecostal pastor in the hillside slums of Caracas, Venezuela whose vision changed when she realized that Jesus was a friend of sinners. This paper takes the gospel image of “Jesus, friend of sinners” and explores its properties for framing the work of making disciples. According to this three-party framing, the evangelist engages outsiders *and* fellow insiders within a common, if at times sequential, gospel encounter. These properties, the paper argues, are inherent to the good news that Jesus incarnated. The paper reflects on missional experiences from pastor Nora’s congregation and a selection of gospel texts, while making use of in-group/out-group categories and the adversarial nature of insider-outsider relations. Reflection questions are included for exploring implications for disciple making in the reader’s context.

Introduction

Nora Rodríguez¹ pastors a small congregation called *Vino Nuevo* (New Wine) in one of the thousands of socially and economically marginalized barrios² dotting the hillsides of Caracas. Like many Pentecostal³ believers in Venezuela, the pastor was taught to believe that a Christian should not have friendships with nonbelievers (Banks Puertas, n.d.:3). This teaching insists that to be holy, a Christian must avoid contact with sinners. Given the dangerous and destructive forces that often entrap youth in these neighborhoods (such as street crime, drugs, and witchcraft) there is a contextual logic for such social distancing. Their efforts for survival in an unholy environment are further complicated by society’s

¹ The name of the pastor was changed to protect her identify.

² *Barrio* in Caracas refers to the hillside communities that began as squatter settlements and have built up over the years, still suffering the stigma of marginalization in relation to the non-barrio city (Trigo, 2008). They are similar to the *favelas* de Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, or the *comunas* of Medellín, Colombia.

³ Pastor Nora’s congregation belonged to the large network of traditional Pentecostal churches called Luz del Mundo Internacional, until Nora came to be pastor. The nomenclature “pentecostal” is no longer widely used among Pentecostals themselves in Caracas. Most Pentecostals in Caracas self-describe themselves as “evangélicos” (evangelical), with so-called neo-Pentecostals preferring simply “Cristianos” (Christians). When I use “evangelical” I am including Pentecostals, who make up the vast majority of evangelicals in Venezuela.

rampant relativism, which is viewed as a threat to their truth claims. Separation, therefore, both physical and philosophical, functions as a means of survival for many, the majority of whom are first generation believers with a vivid memory of their dramatic break with those forces.

According to pastor Nora's testimony, in a moment of illumination while reading the gospels, she realized that what she had learned from the Church was mistaken. For the first time she saw that Jesus loved sinners and spent time with them. His contact with women and men was not conditioned on whether they were clean or not. If he could remain holy as he touched and freely associated with people who were unclean according to the law, then what does that say about our holiness? The pastor realized that if the Lord's holiness was not an obstacle to interacting with people of the world, things shouldn't be any different for us. When the time came to be commissioned as pastor of her first congregation, she knew that she was going to minister differently, with a new kind of relationship to sinners. She didn't realize that by relating differently to sinners, she would also relate differently to the believers around her, who would be challenged by her new way of following Jesus, the friend of sinners.

Pastor Nora's story

Shortly after becoming pastor of the church in December 2008, pastor Nora organized a rather innovative cultural event. In a context where her government was actively promoting the cultural dimension of non-Christian spiritualities, she sought to hold an event to evangelize such groups in a "Jesus friend of sinners" kind of way. Without Christian labels, she created a non-churchy environment, where Christians could interact openly and freely (without preaching) with *Babalawos*, *Santeros*,⁴ witches, and occult practitioners about beliefs and cultural practices. The unconventional public meeting did not produce immediate conversions or decisions for the Lord. Yet the round-table format of mutual interchange of beliefs and customs gave the participating Christians an equal footing with the others to share their beliefs.

To pastor Nora's chagrin, this vision provoked backlash among her pastoral peers in a network of leaders to which she belongs. The other pastors, notably male apostles and prophets, didn't approve of this unconventional approach to evangelism; nor to her discernment of the matter. If God was behind her plan, they reasoned to her, why didn't God speak to the leaders of the network about this idea? In the end, only one of the leaders joined her in the event.

This initial attempt by pastor Nora to flesh out her new vision underscores the basic contours of what we describe in this article as a three-party framework consisting of an evangelist sent to outsiders, with fellow-insiders challenged, if not offended, by the evangelist's message and/or approach. Pastor Nora and her pastoral peers represent, respectively, the evangelist and fellow-insiders (see Figure 1 below). The event participants from other religions constitute her out-group in relation to the evangelical-pentecostal church in Caracas. Pastor Nora's message, as the proposed model suggests, sharpens on two edges, since her gospel to the outsiders, becomes a suggestive, if not offensive, message with gospel implications for her fellow pastors. As such, it appears that pastor

⁴ Santeria is a religion with roots in the Yoruba people of Nigeria, with a strong foothold among Caribbean Afro-Americans. In Venezuela, it is known for seven African deities that promise a variety of benefits to their devotees. Each deity is linked to a Catholic saint (Pollak-Eltz, 1994: 166-167).

Nora’s attempt at evangelizing the unsaved via mutual interaction challenged the established mode of evangelizing the lost which assumes a unidirectional gospel presentation. In Figure 1 we contrast the three-party framework with the reigning two-party model.

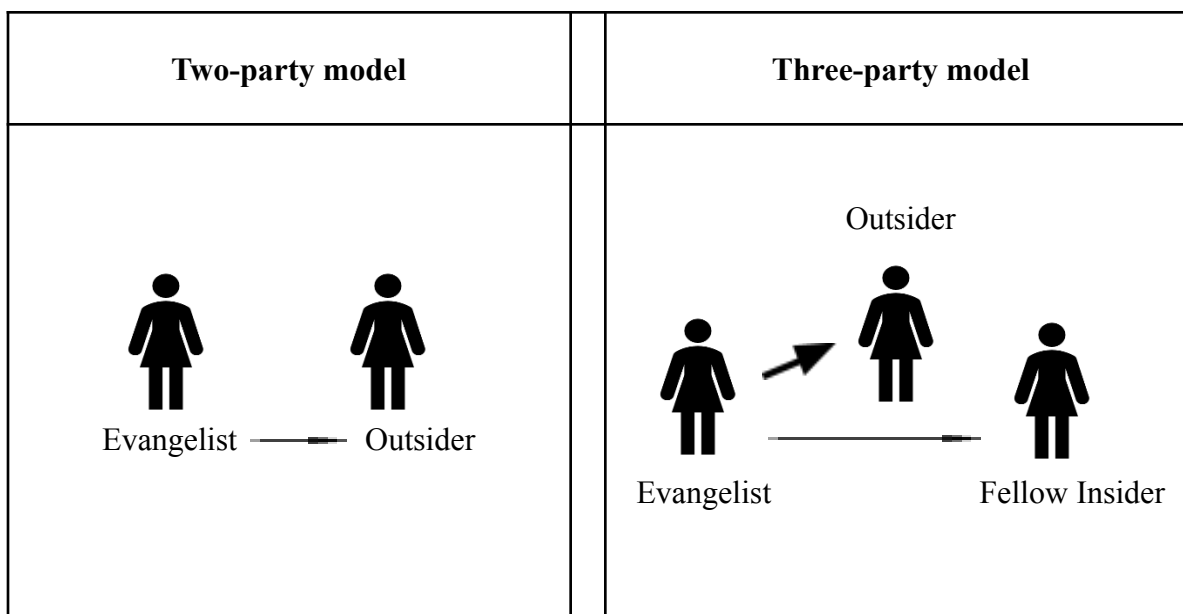


Figure 1. Contrasting models

Some initial missional steps

As promising as she envisioned this new direction for her church, pastor Nora experienced firsthand how threatening it might become to others from her church background. Upon discernment with her own congregation, she changed tactics a bit, commissioning two families who were pillars of the congregation to head up a ministry team (referred hereafter

as FUNVIN), in carrying out what she called a “social,” “unstructured” mission of the church in the community.

The newly commissioned workers began their ministry by linking up with a mission team that doesn’t belong to church’s pentecostal network. The mission team, from an organization called InnerCHANGE (IC), was located in the same hillside barrio. In this initial phase of partnership, the FUNVIN team learned two important gospel lessons that profoundly shaped their understanding of how they would flesh out a mission like Jesus friend of sinners. First, in a poignant moment of seeing in a new light the mercy with which Jesus treated his disciples, the FUNVIN team experienced a deep re-orientation of their image of Jesus. From a divine figure inclined toward scolding his children for failing, they came to affirm God, in Jesus, as an understanding Lord, who patiently walks with his followers, seeing them through their troubles and failings. FUNVIN’s leader described this as a complete break with the image of a harsh God that characterized her formation as a believer.

The second formative lesson they learned with their new ministry partners took shape as a discernible, growing empathy for those around them. The team describes this as feeling what it’s like to “put ourselves in the shoes of our (hurting) neighbor,” something they saw Jesus doing in the gospels. They began imagining what evangelism with sinners could look like from a posture of empathy.

Parenthetically, though not inconsequential, IC brokered for FUNVIN a relationship with the local catholic parish. Some of the IC workers, even though evangelicals, regularly attended mass at the Catholic church. The leader of the FUNVIN team found herself needing to explain this to her fellow Pentecostal church members who didn’t understand why these evangelical partners in mission would prefer Catholic mass over their Pentecostal service.

Following in the steps of the compassionate Jesus, friend of sinners, led to a whole new kind of missional activity for FUNVIN. This has included their participation in activities of the Catholic Church and with catholic neighbors,⁵ the coordination of a nonviolent protest to promote peace with the involvement of Pentecostals and renewed Catholics, their accompaniment of, and learning under, the leadership of an indigenous pastor in the Amazon, their street outreach to homeless people and gays, and their participation in a government social program despite the fact they did not agree with its policies. In these activities, the team shares their faith in Jesus in a way that humanizes the “pagans” in their midst (Santeria practitioners, witches, etc.), while avoiding the all-too-common judgment of local “sinners” (Catholics, gays, etc.). Their most ambitious work is imparting their faith to boys and girls in a program to help them emotionally overcome adversities, a ministry rarely understood or appreciated by the believers around them. In brief, their shifting image of Jesus and their desire to follow his example bloomed into a new kind of relationship and testimony with outsiders to their own Pentecostal family.

At a congregational level, the church wrestled with how to live out this kind of relational evangelism with sinners/outsideers amidst the dangerous and destructive forces in their neighborhood. According to the Pentecostal formation that pastor Nora received, a new believer should no longer attend family’s parties because of the drinking and dancing

⁵ FUNVIN was formed in “Luz del Mundo Internacional”, that teaches “the Catholic church was invented by the devil to deceive the innocent” (Banks Puertas, s.f.).

that characterize such gatherings. With the FUNVIN team guiding the learning, the congregation used a simulation exercise to practice a different way of participating in a family party. They dramatized a typical scenario that they all face. To go or not to go. With a clear decision that there must be a way to go, --in the way of Jesus friend of sinners-- they experimented. A single man, for example, would invite two friends from the congregation to accompany him as his guests to the family party. Would they dance? If so, under what conditions would it become a positive part of their testimony to Jesus? What if a Christian guest is invited to drink a beer? Would it ever be circumstantially okay for him to accept it?

These are critical questions. To what extent do such steps (such as drinking a beer or joining a dance) constitute a genuine temptation for these young men who are trying to stay on the straight and narrow? What good news do they preach with a beer in their hand? Is there a risk of this kind of action fomenting (unnecessary) confusion for other believers who might unwittingly witness it? How will their pastor and fellow parishioners react to the decisions the three men make? Will the congregation be mature enough to listen and learn together from the experience? These are questions that pastor Nora and her congregation are just beginning to face.

From this section we can take special note of the proposed three-party framing in some of the experiences cited. First, in FUNVIN's partnership with IC, FUNVIN found themselves evangelizing sinners *and* explaining the unusual conduct of their strange ministry partners to their congregation (their in-group). As cited above, the FUNVIN team enters Catholic homes for certain activities. One example is being guests for a *novenario*.⁶ This kind of action breaks with evangelical practice. Yet because the team has the relationship and respect of these neighbors who belong to their out-group, the hosts invite them to contribute something from their tradition into the religious mix of the gathering. This is typically a gospel song and a scripture reading. The three-party model manifests further in this scenario when you imagine (as often happens) an evangelical passer-by (a fellow insider)⁷ noticing the odd presence of a fellow evangelical sitting in the living room during a *novenario* ritual (an out-group event). A member of FUNVIN or IC is typically standing at the door and able to engage the passer-by with a gospel perspective on the gathering (Imagine Jesus in a house with sinners and the Pharisees passing by, hooking the ear of the disciples to ask about the unusual gathering—Luke 5:30). This kind of scenario, of the evangelical passer-by, applies also to the earlier example of a believer attending their family party where drinking and dancing occur.

The three-party framework in the Gospels

“The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by her deeds” (Matt 11:19). The first thing to note here is that when imagining these scenarios of Jesus friend of sinners, we rightly envision the presence of another party who is *not a sinner* and assumes a privileged status of belonging with God. This is the third party of the model, the evangelist's fellow insider. Significantly, this point ushers us into the realm of in-groups and out-groups; insiders and outsiders.

⁶ “Novenario” is a type of Catholic wake for the deceased that lasts nine days. Family and close friends gather in the living room or patio of the home. A designated person, often invited for their expertise in the necessary prayers, leads the recitation of prayers.

⁷ In the hillside barrios of Caracas the homes are open and public enough that it's not unusual for passers-by to end up on the inside of a party or gathering.

An in-group can be understood as any group to which a person acknowledges some degree of belonging (Nida, 1981). This can range from the nuclear family to a nation, yet significantly, can also express the belonging that unites groupings according to gender, race, language, religion, career, social behaviors, and more (Malina, 1993a: 70). In this regard, Jesus belonged to many in-groups. An out-group, on the other hand, is any group of persons not belonging to the in-group. As Malina comments regarding the treatment of such outsiders in the sociocultural context of Judea, they “simply do not count” and “may be treated as a different species” by the in-group (1993a: 47).

Some in-groups that Jesus belonged to:

- **Israel** – ethnic belonging (he was not a Gentile)
- **Men of Israel** – gender status (he was not a woman)
- **Respected, holy men of Israel** – moral, clean reputation (he was not a “sinner” or “unclean”)
- **Galilean** – regional identity on the periphery (he was not from Jerusalem)
- **Nazarene** – unsavory local, family ties (he was from a particular town)
- **Travelling band of disciples** – his own missionally fashioned in-group (unaffiliated to existing movements)

Clearly Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes did not fraternize as a social unit, akin to a family or tight group of associates. In what regard, then, could we consider them belonging to a common in-group? First of all, in the broadest sense, according to Malina’s classification of persons in Judea, both Jesus and these leaders would fit within the same realm of “full-blooded Israelites” (1993b: 160). Secondly, they belonged to the category of non-elite persons, meaning they were not representative of the Jerusalem-based authorities (the elite class), nor the small, marginalized unclean class (Malina, 1993b: 93). More pointedly, Jesus and the Pharisees shared an identity within Israel as respected, Torah-abiding, holy men with spiritual authority that commanded respect among the masses. This belonging within the masses (Witherington III, 1990) no doubt fed the competitive, adversarial dynamic to their relationship. With loyalty being the hallmark of in-group expectations, the Pharisees and their scribes expected Jesus to mirror their loyalty to Moses and the traditions of the elders. Even the way that Jesus’ loyalty was publically challenged (Matt 22:24; Mark 7:5; John 8:3) further supports the argument that he belonged to the same social strata as the Pharisees and their scribes (DeSilva, 2000: loc 1028; Malina, 1993b: 35).⁸

Using in-group, out-group categories, we can list some of the encounters and parables in the Gospels that support the proposed three-party framework.

Table 1. Sampling of in-groups / out-groups in the encounters and parables of Jesus

	Out-group / Outsider	In-group / Fellow-insider
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⁸ DeSilva (2000: loc. 375) and Malina (1993b: 28-55) explain the cultural phenomenon, a kind of social game, of “challenge and response (riposte)” that characterized the relationship between Jesus and his peers among the Pharisees and their scribes. within a culture of honor-shame.

Encounters		
Matt 8:5 “I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.”	a Roman centurion	anonymous (Jewish) followers
Luke 5:29-32 “eats with sinners”	tax collectors and sinners	Pharisees and teachers of the law
Luke 7:36-50 In the home of the Pharisee	“the sinful woman”	Simon the Pharisee
John 4:3-42 Jesus at the well	the Samaritan woman	the disciples
John 8:2-11 Throw the first stone?	an adulterous woman	teachers of the law and Pharisees
John 9:1-24, 39-41 “ask him”	a blind man	authorities, Pharisees
John 12:1-8 Anointed with perfume	Mary	the disciples
Parables		
Matt 20:1-16 Workers in the vineyard	last hired	first hired
Matt 22:1-14 Wedding banquet	“anyone you find”	those invited
Luke 10:29-37 Good Samaritan	the Samaritan	Priest and Levite
Luke 15:11-32 The prodigal son	the younger son	the older son
Luke 18:9-14 The Pharisee and tax collector	the tax collector	the Pharisee

As we can see, Jesus’ discourse consistently engages an out-group in relation to one of his in-groups (i.e., Roman centurion and Jews; sinful woman and Simon the Pharisee; blind man and authorities). In the parables, note the presence of a neighbor in each kingdom lesson. One group of hired laborers wrestles with the privileges of another (Matt 20). Two groups, with two responses to Jesus and his message. The outsider gets honored, while the insider leaves dumbfounded, if not offended (Bailey, 2003; Spina, 2005).

In the veiled, pedagogical manner of parables, these kingdom stories clearly challenge Israel’s insiders who considered themselves privileged before their God. This is often done with respect to their disposition, or lack thereof, to include their excluded neighbor (Luke 10:29). Jesus seems determined to operate in this fashion such that when he preaches to one party, as in the Nazareth synagogue, he goes out of his way to mention the gentiles as worthy recipients of God’s special in-breaking (Luke 4:23-30).

Much could be extracted from these richly dense passages. For our purposes, we will highlight three offensive aspects of these encounters and parables that get recapitulated time and time again, in diverse and nuanced fashion. The three offenses manifest in regard to the ‘who,’ the ‘how’ and the ‘what.’

First of all, Jesus picks the wrong kinds of persons to associate with: women in general,⁹ women of dubious moral character, foreigners, the unclean, and the ignorant commoners to boot. Though obvious for a study such as this, this point must be stated upfront. Jesus engages the outsider, often breaking with behavioral norms to do so. This leads to the second offense that gets repeated throughout his public ministry: His declarations of welcome. His encounters with outsiders, and the parables regarding the same, get broadcasted with little inhibition. He extends a shocking welcome to the outsider

⁹ *Jesus and courageous women* by Elsa Támez is representative of this point. In general, I find feminist theologians, writing from an outsider vantage point that seeks the dignity of belonging, to be quicker to engage the ‘why’ question of this framework, because their belonging represents a direct contribution (via a challenge) to become a “complete family” (see last paragraph on last page).

as if she were an insider, under conditions which are condemnable to Jesus' in-groups. Only in-group trust and belonging would beget such solidarity with sinners. He touches the unclean (Matt 8:3). He allows himself to be touched by a woman of ill repute (Luke 7:36). He stops for little children (Luke 18:15). With a large Jewish crowd in tow, Jesus turns to them and states unequivocally that the Roman occupier of their holy land who stands before them, has the kind of faith that Israel lacks (Matt 8:11-12). Similar scenes occur in John 8, Luke 4, 5, 10, 15. Thirdly, in this repeated pattern, Jesus appeals to fellow-insiders to see as he sees (see Matt 8:10-12; Luke 10:36; Mark 2:8-11).

This is the three-party model at work. Jesus brings the message of his kingdom, and the urgency of turning to become a part of it, to both groupings; those who assume they know God and his ways, and those who assume they are unworthy of such belonging. Jesus' message cuts both ways, honoring the outsider with inclusion and offending the insider with potential exclusion. At the heart of this study, we are putting our finger on a crisis of sorts, a shock effect. Moreover, we would argue that for the sake of Christ's kingdom this clash is necessary for the working of God's mission, an inherent dimension of the good news itself.

It should also come as no surprise how fitting the prodigal parable becomes for the proposed Jesus, friend of sinner model. The three emblematic characters of this explosive, paradigmatic exposé of Jesus' mission and message line up squarely with the three-party scenario of Jesus, a fellow-insider, and a sinner (Bailey, 2005: 15; Wright NT, 1996: 126). The outsider embodies the "younger son," while the disgruntled insiders in Jesus' encounters line up with the "older son." Moreover, in the father's party, the parable also points to the end goal of Jesus' friendship with sinners: a complete family, with both sons joining the father in the celebration (Padilla, 2010: 181). In this hope, Jesus the friend of sinners performed saving acts of solidarity with sinners, while extending a saving hand to his opponents who condemned the sinners (John 8:2-11; Luke 7:36-50).

Conclusion

In this article we have argued from the gospels, with support from the experience of a Pentecostal ministry in Caracas, Venezuela, for a disciple-making mission built around an expanded field of engagement that includes fellow-insiders with outsiders, each of whom hears the implications of Christ's kingdom. In this way, Jesus friend of sinners embodies an approach that honors outsiders in ways that may offend insiders, since the message urges both to turn (repent) in light of God's salvific intentions for one people, called out from many, in continual conversion and unity with Jesus. This inspires possibilities while challenging reigning paradigms. While this proposed framework transcends the pragmatism of models that seek to efficiently complete the task of evangelism, its pursuit of faithfulness to this Jesus, friend of sinners, holds firmly to the Father's promised faithfulness to fulfill the work begun in his Son, and which is carried forth today in the Spirit.

The following discussion questions will enable your team or cohort to wrestle with the implications that result from including fellow insiders as a third party in how we carry on God's work of disciple making.

SESSION ONE

Introduction (p. 1)

1. In what ways can you identify with pastor Nora's testimony about how she was taught to distance herself from the world?
2. How do you understand the last sentence of the introduction that implies that pastor Nora's new way of relating to the world would affect her relationship to fellow believers?

Pastor Nora's story (p. 2)

3. Based on this section of the paper, describe the proposed framework in your own words.
4. What is one way that this framework differs from other ways you may have thought about evangelism and discipleship?

SESSION TWO

Some initial missional steps (p. 3)

5. How does this presentation impact your image of Jesus? Do you perceive qualities in Jesus that you perhaps didn't see before?
6. Who are the outsiders ("sinners") in your ministry context in relation to the churches?
7. Describe an experience of reaching out to outsiders of your neighborhood or city? What was the reaction of your family? Your church? Or co-workers?
8. Consider a norm (often in form of an unspoken rule) that you broke in order to care for them. Whose norm was it? (from the church? society in general? your family?)
9. Can you think of other Christians in your context who break such norms in order to welcome outsiders?
10. Have your efforts to reach out to outsiders ever upset fellow believers or church leaders? If so, what bothered them?
11. What did this experience teach you about the gospel? Or about mission?
12. What is your reaction to the example of evangelical-pentecostals collaborating with Catholics? (p. 4) Is this example illustrative of collaborations in your context that your church may not approve of? Explain.
13. What is your reaction to the example of Christians drinking a beer at a party? (p. 5) Is this example illustrative of something in your context that is a temptation or danger to the faith of new believers? Explain.

SESSION THREE

Three-party framework in the gospels (pp. 5-7)

14. In your own words and from your context, describe an in-group in relation to an out-group. Why do we find an adversarial nature to insider-outsider relations? (p. 5)
15. Select one gospel encounter from the chart on page 6 and describe Jesus' conduct toward his fellow-insiders and toward the outsider.
16. Select one parable from the chart on page 6 and describe the kingdom lesson that Jesus gives his fellow-insiders.
17. Have you ever experienced envy, jealousy, or anger because you felt unfairly overlooked by God or God's people when someone you deemed less worthy than yourself received special recognition?
 - a. What did you learn from the experience?
 - b. How could such an experience expand your understanding of God's love or enhance your ministry?
18. Think of an example of the three-party framework in the gospels that is *not* on the list of encounters and parables.

SESSION FOUR

19. Consider the following strategic question that reflects the three-party framing for disciple-making:
How do we make disciples (and plant a church) within a new population that is culturally or socially different from the sending body while also creating meaningful linkages between the new body and the sending body?

Read Acts 11:19-30 and consider this case of a sending body in Jerusalem and a new church formed in Antioch.
 - a. Describe the meaningful linkages forged between the churches of Antioch and Jerusalem.
 - b. What were the differences that Paul and Barnabas sought to bridge?
 - c. If you were to steer your disciple-making efforts by the strategic question posed above, what shape would it give to your ministry?
20. Select one of the following social issues of relevance to your context, and consider how becoming more like Jesus friend of sinners could empower you to engage the issue.
 - a. Race relations.
 - b. Poverty.
 - c. Politics.
 - d. Economics.
 - e. Creation.
 - f. Pluralism.
 - g. Human rights.
 - h. Human trafficking.

- i. LGBTQ+
- j. Migration.
- k. Another issue...

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Notes