

PRO-LIFE 101

SESSION 5:
THE FOUR ESSENTIAL TRAITS OF A LIFE DISCIPLE

TAKEN FROM

making LIFE
DISCIPLES™

*Equipping the Church to offer compassion, hope, help,
and discipleship to women and men considering abortion.*

FOUR ESSENTIAL TRAITS OF A LIFE DISCIPLE ^{22,23}

EXERCISE:

Write words below that describe the meaning of each trait and actions that exhibit each trait:

AUTHENTICITY	ACCEPTANCE	HUMILITY	EMPATHY

1. AUTHENTICITY

The first trait of a Life Disciple is authenticity. Authenticity means to be genuine or real. It involves being transparent and true to your own self. Since God uses us as we are, there is no need to try to be someone other than who you are.

2. ACCEPTANCE

The second trait of a Life Disciple is acceptance. Acceptance means to take or receive something with approval or favor. It involves receiving people as they are, not as we wish them to be. Within the context of *Making Life Disciples* ministry work, it means receiving women and men facing a pregnancy decision as they are.

Acceptance is a vital trait because women and men considering abortion often come into a church with fear. When you accept them, it reduces their fear and, ironically, opens them up to being authentic and accepting of your help and the church's ministries and services.

Fortunately, we have a wonderful model of acceptance in our Lord. Romans 5:8 tells us: **“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”**

While Jesus clearly does not accept sinful behavior, nor does He just shrug it off, He also does not wait for people to achieve perfection before receiving them. We all still engage in behavior that most assuredly grieves Him, yet He continues to accept us fully out of His great love. In the same way, we are called to accept the women and men we serve regardless of their behaviors, choices, circumstances, or backgrounds. Our role is to love the way Jesus loves us.

3. HUMILITY

The third trait of a Life Disciple is humility. Being humble means you have a servant's heart and meet others at their point of need. It involves being respectful of others and is characterized by the absence of pride and arrogance. It means to be modest about your abilities and traits. Humility has more to do with others and less to do with you. In fact, the truly humble person is comfortable with who he/she is in the Lord and is thus freed to be focused on others.

Within the context of serving as a Life Disciple, humility involves respecting a woman or man even when their pregnancy decision does not match the decision you want them to make. Your role is to provide accurate, fact-based information with compassion, while leaving the outcome in God's hands. It's vital that you do not allow your own agenda and desires to negatively affect how you coach a woman or man facing a pregnancy decision.

Putting the woman or man's needs over your own desires can be challenging, especially if your agenda is driven by what you think is best. The need to remain focused on the person you are serving becomes clearer when you recognize the important differences between goals and desires.

Dr. Larry Crabb²⁴ defines the difference between goals and desires:

- A goal is an objective that is under my control.
- A desire is an objective that I may legitimately and fervently want but cannot reach through my efforts alone.

You may desire a woman (or man) facing a pregnancy decision to choose life, but you **cannot** cause her to make this choice; the decision is hers to make. Because her choice is outside of your control, it cannot be a goal. But your goal **can** be to minister in truth and love—a goal within your control.

Imagine how a pregnant woman (or man or couple) would feel if you tried to impose your agenda. For example, the woman may have heard that she can freely discuss her pregnancy decision with someone from the church without judgment. If your agenda is to talk her out of abortion, and she thinks you are trying to assert that agenda, she may feel resentful, pressured, or a myriad of other negative emotions.

How a woman's agenda (or expectations) can be different from those of a Life Disciple:

The woman facing a pregnancy decision might expect three things:

1. Someone to support her decision to have an abortion
2. Someone to help her find an abortion
3. Someone to help her pay for the abortion

The Life Disciple might have an agenda based on these three goals:

1. To “save” the baby
2. To convert the woman or man
3. To change the woman's lifestyle

These competing agendas are a recipe for disaster unless three things happen:

1. The Life Disciple becomes aware of these differences
2. The Life Disciple realigns her/his agenda to match goals that are within his/her control
3. The Life Disciple lets the woman's agenda drive the conversation

Returning to acceptance for a moment, a Life Disciple must accept a woman's expectations or agenda by remaining humble. The practice of humility and acceptance allows the Life Disciple to look at the woman in an entirely different way. It opens a Life Disciple to a different agenda.

Think now of a Life Disciple with the following agenda:

- To love the woman facing a pregnancy decision and see her through God's eyes
- To be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit during the interaction
- To educate the woman with truth and compassion

While these goals still don't match the woman's expectations, they nonetheless provide for a healthy relationship, one that does not focus on unachievable goals but instead on worthy goals that are both honoring and obtainable.

4. EMPATHY

The fourth trait of a Life Disciple is empathy. The *Merriam-Webster* dictionary defines empathy as: the feeling that you understand and share another person's experiences and emotions : the ability to share someone else's feelings.²⁵

There is a marked difference between *empathy* and *sympathy*. Sympathy is the feeling of pity or sorrow for another's misfortunes.²⁶ Sympathy is more detached than empathy.

Empathy happens when people connect because of shared personal experience. The shared experience does not need to be identical for empathy to occur. For example, we've all found ourselves in difficult places at one time or another. The Life Disciple does not need to have ever considered abortion to be able to empathize with the woman or man facing a pregnancy decision's feelings of being overwhelmed.

Empathy is more than sympathy. Sympathy involves offering compassion to a person in distress, and perhaps even feeling regret for the situation, but not necessarily experiencing the same feelings of the person. When you understand and feel another's feelings, you have **empathy**. For example, if a person's story touches you on a personal level, you are experiencing empathy.

While empathy is a wonderful attribute, a Life Disciple should never rely solely on feelings. To effectively empathize with women and men facing pregnancy decisions, Life Disciples must both draw upon and balance their "thinking" and "feeling" selves.

The **thinking self** helps a Life Disciple observe and analyze the situation of the person facing a pregnancy decision. If you rely primarily on your thinking self, however, you might have difficulty understanding their feelings. Your body language might reflect this limitation through, for example, crossed arms and sitting back in your chair, thus reflecting emotional distance.

A Life Disciple must also rely on their **feeling self** to offer appropriate assistance. The feeling self allows you to sense and even ask a woman or man what she/he is feeling about the pregnancy decision. If you rely too heavily on your feeling self, however, you run the risk of being overwhelmed by the story and feelings without being able to identify the best way to help. Your body language and behavior might reflect lack of boundaries, for instance if you lean too far into their space, react to them with overly sympathetic phrases, or even cry along with the woman or man facing a pregnancy decision.

Be authentic about whether you rely primarily on your thinking or on your feeling self and strive to strike a balance between the two. Ask God to give you this balance as you begin serving as a Life Disciple. Ask your *Making Life Disciples* ministry leader or an experienced Life Disciple for help if you struggle to find balance.

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