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SAM CRABTREE

FOREWORD BY JOHN PIPER

*Practicing Affirmation: God-Centered Praise of Those Who Are Not God*

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## Important Assumptions

Several important assumptions underly the assertions I make about the power and importance of affirmation. Some readers don't need this chapter, and they are welcome to skip it. Others have begun to wonder if I have taken into consideration several important matters I have not yet mentioned. This chapter is for such readers.

Here then are five crucial assumptions.

### **God Sovereignly Brings about Ends through Means**

If God wants you to understand the content of this book, he can simply zap your brain, and voila! you get it. But he is more likely to deliver understanding of this book by means of having your eyes pass back and forth over the page, after first having spent time learning to read, and before that learning to sit up, use your thumbs, etc. In addition to ordaining the end (understanding and practicing the content of this book), God ordains the *means* to

the end (reading it). God appoints effects, and he also appoints the causes that bring about those effects. Prior to delicious raisins, he ordains roots and rain and sunshine and grapes. He ordains that certain behaviors will bring predictable consequences (ask the man whose thumb has met his hammer).

God could achieve refreshment in the lives of people around you without your participation, but that's not *how* he has planned such refreshment should come to pass in the lives of those who know you. He could wave his hand and get instantaneous results, but he often seems to glory in working through complex processes: Joseph is a slave and prisoner for thirteen years; the children of Israel wander in the wilderness for forty years; the prophets foretell of the Messiah for hundreds of years, and at long last the long-awaited Deliverer arrives. God is bringing about ends through means. The God of the miracle is also the same God who works through natural processes. He could just snap his fingers, and refreshment would happen. But he ordains that refreshment be achieved through means. The means I am talking about is your affirmation of others, affirming them, blessing them, commending and congratulating them, and thanking them. Those actions on your part are the means, and if you subtract the means, you won't get the end: relationships in which the people who know you are refreshed. This book will focus on means, while granting that God brings about both the ends and the means.

Could we just pray, asking God to refresh people directly? Sure. And he might do it. He certainly can. Meanwhile, I'm assuming that the cause-and-effect relationship between affirmation and refreshment is still in force.

### **We Are Dependent upon the Spirit**

How can we affirm people who often do things we vehemently disapprove of? People we loved and enjoyed when the relation-

ship started can eventually become a pain in the neck. The pain of relationships impedes and destroys even the *desire* to affirm, much less the active practice of affirming. A day sometimes comes when the other party is frankly unbearable, and we don't want to put up with them any longer, much less affirm them. At that point, the weary natural self won't do; the self needs help, divine help. Utter dependence upon the Holy Spirit is assumed in this book, though I won't give much attention to it in these pages.

If all a person possesses are concepts and information, but not life, then he will fail to love, fail to affirm well, and only confirm his own guilt, failing to do what he knows he ought to do—namely, affirm in love.

Though the preponderance of this book is not about spiritual dynamics related to being filled with the Holy Spirit, I'm assuming it. Spirit-filled Christians will be *able* to do, and will *want* to do, the things we will talk about in this book. Non-Christians may or may not. People who are not Christians might be attracted to the power of affirming of others initially, but affirmation takes grace and eventually the temptation to snipe will rise. Faithful, steady affirming of others requires taking up a cross, and taking up a cross goes against human nature. So we must rely on the Holy Spirit, abiding in Christ. Abiding in Christ is the lifeline to steadfast love. How precarious it is to turn away from the Holy Spirit, thinking that consistent affirmation can be done in the flesh, especially when what we are talking about in this book is God-centered affirmation.

Furthermore, the very character of Christ that I am emphasizing cannot be produced by the flesh or some kind of behavioral reward system, and it cannot be manipulated or engineered by following a cookbook. It is the result of supernatural transformation. Having said as much, as dependent as Christlikeness is upon the life of Christ being within a person, the process of

sanctification can be nurtured and refreshed by God-ordained affirmation he calls us to deliver in the strength he supplies.

### **Love Affirms; It Also Corrects**

This book emphasizes the part of love that affirms, but does not deny the part of love that corrects. In love, we owe correction to one another: “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13).

There’s a time when love gets in the loved one’s face with correction. While such correction can be done gently and tactfully, it must be done and not abandoned altogether as though love never confronts. Love offers correction, but that’s a topic for a different book.

### **Everything Can’t Be Said in One Book**

This small volume won’t exhaust everything relevant to the subject at hand. In fact, other writers will be able to say it better, more completely, and more compellingly, and I would be happy if they would do so. Relationships would be better off for it.

In chapter 6 I will try to address some of the more prevalent questions elicited by the five earlier chapters. Meanwhile, I admit that not every conceivable question will be addressed.

Even in this very chapter about assumptions, not every relevant assumption is discussed. So if you think something important has been omitted in this book, you’re probably right.

### **Context Matters**

“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver” (Prov. 25:11).

What makes a word “fitly” spoken? Truthfulness is not the only aspect of fitness. Fitness hinges upon many things such as tone, facial expression, body language, timing, motive, and



more—including the context of what you are saying. Someone who enters a conversation already begun is wise to wonder, what else has been said already? Context matters.

Take, for example, the simple sentence, “Hail, King of the Jews!” Whether it is “fitly” spoken hinges upon whether it comes out of the mouths of children lining a path with palm branches or from soldiers who have just flogged an innocent man, mounted a twisted crown of thorns on his head, and mocked him. Same words, different (opposite) meaning, based upon context.

I argue in this book that some of your most reasonable and truthful and important statements will be rendered fruitless because of context, by which I mean the previous actions you have taken and words you have already spoken in that relationship. The context of your factual statements may render them impotent, even destructive.

You don’t have to make the same mistakes I have made. To avoid them, read the next chapter.

“When our mouths are empty of praise for others, it is probably because our hearts are full of love for self. . . . Sam’s book is a healing balm for cranks, misfits, and malcontents who are so full of self they scarcely see, let alone celebrate, the simple beauties of imperfect virtue in others. Or to say it differently: I need this book.”

From the Foreword by John Piper

“Too many of us use most of our words each day for criticizing and complaining. If you find that your communication lacks encouragement, if you want to grow in affirming others, if you plan to say any words at all today—please read this book!”

**C. J. Mahaney**, Sovereign Grace Ministries; author, *Humility*

“Sam lives what he preaches. I’ve never forgotten a short, hand-written note of God-centered affirmation he sent me years ago, having met only once briefly. His words not only encouraged me personally at the time, but have influenced our ministry in a significant way ever since. I am grateful for this book—if no one else needs it, I know I do!”

**Nancy Leigh DeMoss**, author; radio host, *Revive Our Hearts*

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