



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

Sam Crabtree, John Piper (Foreword)

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It happens in marriages, parent-child relationships, friendships, workplaces, and churches: Communication falters, friendships wane, teenagers withdraw, marriages fail, and bitter rifts sever once-strong ties. Christian communities are no exception. Why do so many of our relationships suffer from alienation, indifference, and even hostility?

Author Sam Crabtree believes that often at the heart of these breakdowns is a lack of affirmation. He observes in Scripture that God grants mercy to those who refresh others, and in life that people tend to be influenced by those who praise them. Crabtree shows how a robust "God-centered affirmation ratio" refreshes others and honors God.

Practicing Affirmation sounds a call to recognize and affirm the character of Christ in others. When done well, affirmation does not fuel pride in the person, but refreshes them and honors God. All who are discouraged in relationships will find wisdom and practical insight in this book.

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

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Alex says

3.5 stars. GREAT message, mediocre writing. In spite of the fact that I'm only giving this 3.5 stars, I highly recommend that everyone who interacts with another human reads this book, or at least chapter 2.

From what I understand, the author is a colleague of Piper's, and the vibe of his writing is extremely similar. In fact, Piper wrote the intro, and if you didn't know the author you could easily think Piper wrote the book.

THE DOWNSIDE: At times the author drives the point he's already made home to the point of tedium. It could easily be shorter (and it's already pretty short). At one point he's analogously talking about affirmation like it's a key to gain entrance into a house; he spends multiple paragraphs talking about how important a key is to a house - including an example of a time when he was unlocked out of his house. This sort of thing is overkill to me; a key analogy can be sufficiently made in one sentence, two tops.

THE UPSIDE: The lessons in the book are extremely important and convicting. Here are a few I took away.

1. While he makes clear there's no biblical affirmation-to-critique ratio, he convincingly argues that if the overwhelming tone of a relationship isn't one of affirmation then critiques will be worthless. In making this point, he shares a C.J. Mahen quote that encourages 5-10:1 affirmation-to-criticism.
2. Related to point #1, if you want influence, you must affirm. This can be done in an ungodly, manipulative way. But that fact doesn't change the reality that this is the way people are wired.
3. He talks about the importance of God-centered affirmation. This means affirming something that reflects God's character and often in a way that explicitly mentions God. He points out that the pattern of the Bible isn't direct gratitude but sharing with someone that you thank God for them. Don't focus on shallow compliments, e.g. You are pretty. Focus on God-centered affirmations, e.g. God displayed his abundant creativity and care when he formed you.
4. Live life in a way that gives people the benefit of the doubt and seeks ways to affirm. I could elaborate on his arguments here, but this point is pretty self-explanatory. Not new info but tough to live out.
5. If you want to receive mercy and affirmation, be the kind of person who dishes it out.

These five (overlapping) points are worth the price of the book as well as the repetitions and over-elaborated analogies endured in the book. Read it and live it.

Rita says

This book was so helpful to me at this particular stage of my life that I didn't even notice how repetitive it was. I must have desperately needed the repetition since affirming does not come easy for me...not even close. My default mode is critical and judgmental. I thank God my pastor put this book into my hands at just the right time. I intend to re-read it at least once a year.

Brian Pate says

Praise what God is doing in other people. That's the big idea of this book. If we fail to commend the character of Christ and reflection of God's image in others, we actually rob him of his rightful glory. We should bring God into our compliments, since they are to be based on reflections of his character.

The bulk of the book is in chapters 2-3 (45 pages), where Crabtree explains that there must be a healthy proportion between correction and affirmations. Too much correction will cause the recipient to tune us out. He argues against the "sandwich method," phony affirmations, hero worship, and flattery. God-centered affirmation can encourage, motivate, celebrate our values, glorify God, and just make us easier to live with.

Positives: This book challenged me to have the reputation of someone who always encourages (pp. 40, 46). It gave me practical ideas to obey 1 Cor 14:26 and "let all things be done for building up." It made me pray that I could grow in alertness (to spot things to affirm), humility (to consider others more important than myself), and gratefulness (so I am eager to affirm others).

Critiques: If I were the editor at Crossway, I would have said to Crabtree, "I thank God for the heart you have for this topic and the biblical insights you have on it. There is much in this book that is fantastic! In order to help people grasp your insights better, I recommend a rewrite. The material seems out of order and repetitive."

Also, Crabtree often gave lengthy answers to questions that no one is asking. He starts by addressing the concern that praising others would be idolatry. Who thinks that? He worries that very innocuous statements will set off our "heresy meter" when I think he is the only one who is concerned about it (e.g., p. 91).

Finally, I wish the book had been more practical. I was not looking for a theological defense of the legitimacy of affirming others. I already know I should do it. I'm just selfish, lazy, and don't know how.

John Brackbill says

The concept was very helpful and important to be reminded of. He laid out the Biblical basis for practicing affirmation in the first part of the book. There are some helpful examples given as well.

Here are a few negatives (at the risk of not being affirming!)

- The formatting on this kindle addition was very bad-worst I have seen.
- His style of writing does not flow very well.
- At times it seemed like the biblical foundation for affirming was a distant memory and popular psychology tactics had taken over.
- There was some sloppiness in wording and precision (e.g. when he referred to or words being our justification. He didn't take the time to clarify in what way our words are our justification).
- Several times he wrote as if he was not convinced that what he was saying was needed. Here is one example: "Some readers don't need this chapter and they are welcome to skip it" (chapter 4).
- It seemed that what was said could be said in much less than 176 pages as it was repetitive.

Despite my negative comments, I did take away some concepts and encouragements that I believe will stick with me and impact me. I would recommend this book for someone who recognizes they struggle with affirming others-it will challenge you in that struggle and be useful to equip you. I would recommend it on the basis that I currently know of no other book that would raise this issue in an extended way, not

withstanding the real weaknesses I have mentioned.

Trisha says

I wanted to like this book more than I did. Perhaps it was a Kindle issue and there were errors in the formatting. Crabtree's writing often didn't flow, and he was a bit too repetitive in trying to make sure we understood what he WASN'T saying. I'm sure he was trying to ward off critics ahead of time, but his efforts were a bit frustrating. Some of his suggestions and assertions didn't sit well with me, but I'd have to reflect more on why, and perhaps just read this one again. In spite of these criticisms, this is a worthy read, and Crabtree makes many great points and offers practical ways to affirm those in our lives, in both word AND deed.

Joshua D. says

A helpful book on the ministry of affirmation (or encouragement). The premise is this: every good thing comes from God. When we see a good thing, we ought to affirm it. When we don't, we actually pass over something good God is doing, therefore demeaning or undervaluing his work in the world or in other people. So this is a vertical issue (how we praise God), but it's also a horizontal issue (there are tremendous benefits in affirming other people).

To the first point: we need to affirm good things God is doing in others - this a helpful corrective to cynics (who see only negatives), and to the "high truth" people (who think all encouragement is fluff). To the second point: affirming others helps to build up other people. Commending what is commendable tends to reinforce good behavior in others. It helps encourage folks when they make strides in their walk with the Lord. It generally makes you a more pleasant person to be around (contra the quarrelsome person who is like Chinese-water torture). And it is a great way to gain hearing with people (so that you have the opportunity to say hard and corrective things at other times).

Perhaps the most practical lesson in the book is Crabtree's mention of the "Affirmation Ratio." Basically he argues that there is a proportionality that needs to happen with our words - we must affirm much more than we correct. This helps us see well, believe the best, have open eyes to God's work in others, and create space to be heard when we do correct. This is especially important in marriages and with children. How many relationships are in crisis because communication is primarily negative (see Proverbs for warnings about this)!

I gave this book three stars, not because the content was bad, but because it was highly repetitive. It easily could have been boiled down to a long article (20 pages or so). Chapters 2-3 are the most helpful, and could give you the essentials of the whole book. John Piper's Foreword is also worth reading.

Read this if you are a parent.

Devin says

Sam Crabtree: an excellent pastor and, now, a pretty good author. I picked this book per the suggestion of a

friend and mentor after I confessed to him how little affirmation I have given to others. This book was just what I needed.

Crabtree does an excellent job throughout the book keeping a pastoral tone. While addressing theological controversy where he needs to, he paints a beautiful picture of how habitual affirmation can create and restore deep relationships in marriages, families, friends, and churches.

As mentioned above, Crabtree does address theological controversies when he comes close to them. One of his wrestlings throughout the book centers around how his message is not promoting some kind of self-esteem gospel which feeds people's sinful pride. Crabtree is always sure to bring his focus on affirmation in line with Christ, keeping our eyes fixed on him who is most valuable. One of the themes in these sections sounds like this, "Our problem then is not that we want to be made much of. Our problem is that we want to be made much of for the wrong reasons" (p 29). Crabtree never pretends that Christians are unemotional automatons who need to get over themselves but shows how we can both uplift each other and glorify God in our affirming words - both to believers and unbelievers.

Throughout my read, I often caught myself smiling. A world in which people practice affirmation the way Crabtree describes it sounds wonderful. What's more, it sounds obtainable! Yes, implementing any of the suggestions in the last chapter, "100 Affirmation Ideas for Those Who Feel Stuck," will require repentance and humility. However, the joys which may result from making the effort are worth every ounce of awkwardness one will have to overcome.

This book's is a timely message. In a world which preaches wrong affirmation and affirmation in the wrong things, I thank God for Crabtree and his book which can help the church rightly use this wonderful gift of affirmation.

Brittany says

I really liked this book. It has encouraged me to want to look for the good in others and affirm that. We don't want to offer empty affirmations aka flattery, but instead take the time to really notice God at work in others lives, even non believers- for even they experience the common grace that God offers. This book made me reflect on the words that I speak; am I affirming others (spouse, kids, family, friends) or criticizing? Highly recommend this. I believe it could be life changing for a marriage, in parenting, friendship and even winning the hearts of unbelievers for Christ.

Amanda says

Short, simple and practical read on the biblical call to affirm the people in our lives - believers and non-believers alike. Because all of God's creation echoes Him as our Creator in some way, there are always good and praiseworthy qualities to be found in others. Crabtree's intent in this book, though, is to challenge readers to not settle for surface affirmations (such as "your hair looks nice") or overly general affirmations (such as "good job!") - while these kind of affirmations are not "bad", rarely do they accomplish much in the way of long-lasting benefit to people and they usually avoid crediting God for the good we see in others. "The aim is to glorify God by refreshing people as we help them see God at work in their lives, moving them toward Christlikeness" (p. 69) . A small practical example he gives to this end on the following page is: "While there

is nothing wrong per se in complimenting a smile, it is better to commend cheerfulness." I also appreciated the points he made about how God often uses affirmation toward people who do not yet know Him as a means to gain a hearing of the Gospel - a way of loving and honoring people simply because of their image-bearing status. Lastly, I appreciated the high and hopeful call he laid out in this book for all people to grow in being good affirmers - simply because we have a God who is at work in those who are His in growing us in the ways of His love (affirmation being one manifestation of love).

Barry says

There is a lot to affirm in this book. Unfortunately, there isn't much to write about. Mr. Crabtree has an excellent message and his delivery is clear. However, for the amount of editing that he indicates took place, the book is surprisingly disjointed. He includes a Q&A as chapter 6 of 9. I don't believe I've ever seen a Q&A with that much of a book left. Granted, the last half of the book feels like a series of appendices, but still, I'm surprised that with a team of editors involved a book would still feel herky jerky. That said, the message of this book is timely, ageless, and needs to be heard. The church ought to be a leader in encouraging people, and hopefully Mr. Crabtree's message will be heard and applied by the masses.

David Morris says

It's not very affirming of me to give this 2 stars. And I feel bad. But personally I didn't enjoy this book as much as I had hoped. I found the first chapter and the idea that good affirmation affirms Godliness or Christlikeness helpful. Stylistically, I thought the book was repetitive, the vocabulary esoteric at points, and at times the wording cloying. It also seemed really light on Scriptural support, and though it wasn't pop psychology it lacked a consistent exegetical support to match its solid theological underpinnings.

At the same time, the reason I read this book was because I've been made aware of my need to encourage and affirm others, and it was good for me to think through. Perhaps my review means I haven't learned my lesson yet, but while I affirm its central point I was hoping for more substance from this book.

Jayson says

Wonderful book. For me it eliminated a dichotomy between praising people and a robust God-centered, Gospel-driven trajectory. It also helped clear up the difference between affirmation and flattery and the manipulative sandwich method of correction.

This was a wonderful eye-opener for me, an area of weakness in my ministry and family leadership. I hope, by God's grace to grow in seeing and verbalizing sightings of Jesus in others. Very practical and helpful!

Michael says

An excellent book about seeing the grace of God in others. Very useful and encouraging resource on

improving your attitude towards others. Not a squishy, feel-good read. It's a positive theology of building up others and actively seeing the sanctifying work of God in those around you.

Read in March 2012 and again March 2013 to prepare for a sermon.

Stephen Altrogge says

This book was so very helpful to me. I am critical by nature. I am more inclined to point out people's flaws than encourage them for their strengths. This book challenged me to grow in the biblical practice of affirming and encouraging other Christians. I recommend this to all.

Rebecca says

Very practical and Scripturally-sound. I found myself in my everyday life recalling sections and looking for specific ways in which to affirm those around me in order to point back to their Creator. It led me in a VERY healthy practice for my relational life. I think there were a few points where I felt the message was clear a little sooner than the chapter ended (i.e. it dragged on a bit) but in all I recommend it highly! Particularly for someone hoping to grow in Words of Affirmation (I know I need the help...)!
