“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 criticism 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

SAM CRABTREE (MA, South Dakota State), is a former public school teacher and has served as executive pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis since 1997. He is also lead pastor for life training, serving as the “vision keeper” of the church.
Practicing Affirmation: God-Centered Praise of Those Who Are Not God
Copyright © 2011 by Sam Crabtree
Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Interior design and typesetting: Lakeside Design Plus
Cover design: Dual Identity Inc.
First printing 2011
Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.


Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 Biblica. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved. The “NIV” and “New International Version” trademarks are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica. Use of either trademark requires the permission of Biblica.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added.

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-2244-4
Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-2245-1
ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-2246-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Crabtree, Sam, 1950–
Practicing affirmation : God-centered praise of those who are not God / Sam Crabtree.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.
ISBN 978-1-4335-2243-7 (tp)
BV4597.53.P73C73 2011
248.4—dc22
2010044483

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.
Contents

Foreword by John Piper 7

1. God-Centered Affirmation of Those Who Are Not God 11
2. Key to Refreshing Relationships: The Simplicity 35
3. Toward Greater Refreshment: The Complexity 63
4. Important Assumptions 83
5. Mistakes I Have Made 89
6. Questions and Answers 113
7. Sightings of Jesus 133
8. Mixing Correction with Affirmation 143
9. 100 Affirmation Ideas for Those Who Feel Stuck 149

Appendix 1: Decision Grid 161
Appendix 2: Tone of Voice 165
Acknowledgments 169
Notes 171
Scripture Index 175
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, bless-
ing 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 affir-
mation 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

SAM CRABTREE (MA, South Dakota State), is a former public school teacher and has served as executive pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis since 1997. He is also lead pastor for life training, serving as the “vision keeper” of the church.