



When Silence Screams

I recently read the book, *'Practicing Affirmation'* by Sam Crabtree. If I could afford it I would buy a copy for every member of BBC. It really is that good.

It is the first book that I have come across that specifically deals with this essential theme. My only regret is that it was not written thirty years ago. But I thank God that it is never too late to be changed by the Spirit of God.

Its premise is that a failure to biblically affirm others is often the reason behind a breakdown of relationships. Crabtree (kind of a funny name for a guy writing about affirmation!) makes the case that all too often we are prone to correct others apart from also biblically commending them. As a result the relationships become strained because there is little assurance that the 'corrector' truly cares. In a sense we send the message that the individual is merely a problem or project rather than a person in whom God is at work. Crabtree points out that parents who always correct without also (legitimately) commending their child will create a relational 'gap'. The same is true in other relational areas such as husbands and wives, employers and employees, relationships among church members as well as church leaders and the congregation they serve.

The book explains the difference between flattery and legitimate affirmation. The author ably points out that we are to commend issues of character rather than issues of hereditary skill. He answers the objections from those who are concerned that such commendation may lead to the sin of hero worship and to the sin of seeking to usurp the glory that is due to God alone. In a summary statement he says, *'God is glorified in us when we affirm the work He has done and is doing in others.'* In other words, it is honouring to God when we affirm the evidence of His grace in others. A habit of neglecting the expression of such affirmation may look 'spiritual' to a wrongheaded 'reformed Christian' but ultimately it robs God of the glory that is *His* due. In other words, our silence can be deafening.

I would argue that when we are consistently mute in offering affirmation and/or appreciation for and to others that our silence in fact *screams*. Our silence shouts rejection; our silence shouts disregard; our silence placards the message that (whether intentional or not) we view others as unimportant. When you hold your tongue and refuse to say thank you to someone who is reflecting the work of God in their life; when you refuse to encourage someone for the blessing they have been to you; when you are *silent* about God's grace evidenced in someone's life then you may be *heard* in ways that are damaging; and even damning.

For example, Paul exhorts, *'Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged'* (Col 3:21). This is then followed by *'Children obey your parents ... for this is well pleasing to the Lord.'* Notice a couple of things here.

First, parents (particularly fathers?) are in danger of discouraging their children as they raise them. And surely one such way is by always correcting without commending. When this is the 'culture' in the home then after a while the child may view their parent(s) as an annoying 'dripping faucet'. No wonder they cut themselves off so as to be out of 'ear shot.' They reason, "Obviously since I can't do anything right, why bother. My parents don't see anything good in me. They don't see the work of God in me. I guess I am hopeless." Parents, beware lest our constant 'correcting' morph into condemning by the 'silence of commending.'

But *second*, notice that after Paul exhorts fathers (parents) to be careful to not break their child's spirit, Paul then exhorts the children to *obey*. Now of course regardless of the failure of the parents

(v. 21) the child is still obligated under God to obey (v. 22). Yet the order here strikes me as significant. Namely, parents who do not provoke their children to discouragement create an environment that is more conducive for their children's obedience. Obedience, for all of us, is at times difficult. But when an atmosphere of acceptance through affirmation is prevalent then obedience is easier to secure. I am not suggesting that we use affirmation to manipulate. I am simply saying that we should not put unnecessary stumbling blocks before our children. In fact Paul offers an incentive to secure the obedience of children: *'for this is well pleasing to the Lord.'* When was the last time that you affirmed your child's obedience by pointing them to this God-centred fact?

What applies to children applies in all relational areas: do not discourage others but rather encourage them towards God-centred living. By affirming them for what you see to God's grace in their lives will be a blessing to them, it will be a blessing to your relationship; all to the glory of God.

I wonder how many people have left churches because they were discouraged by the screaming silence of never being affirmed? Perhaps they needed to be corrected in some area yet there was never any commendation as they grew in grace. Perhaps others have laboured in ministry and yet there was the persistent silent scream of rejection as no one came alongside to commend them for their efforts. In a day of 'Celebrity Christianity' this is so often the case.

A colleague shared with me that after preaching his heart out from Romans chapter 1, a church member said to him on the way out the door, "Tonight I will bring you a tape of a great sermon from the same passage preached by Martyn Lloyd Jones." No commendation for his efforts but a comparison that screamed 'failure.' Ouch!

We all know that there are others more gifted than we are. We are all aware (or we should be) that we have a long way to go in growing towards Christlikeness. Nevertheless when others affirm the presence of God's grace in our lives then we are motivated to pursue excellence in our gifting and to pursue Christ with greater fervour to the glory of God.

So, whom do you need to commend? Just do it. Say the words or write the note or send the email. Do it sooner than later. Simon & Garfunkel were spot on when they sang of, *'the sound of silence.'* Your silence is probably being heard. So resolve to speak up with a view to building up. We will then be encouraged to look up to the One who gives us cause to break the silence.

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