

Affirmation, an Essential Task

Six Essentials for Families

Deuteronomy 3:27-28; 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

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Bethany Church

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People choose to live their lives on the basis of belief or unbelief. They believe they have been created, or they don't. They believe they are loved by God, or they don't. They believe God has a plan for them, or they don't. They believe they have a call, or they don't. We all choose each day to live our lives on the basis of belief or unbelief.

Affirmation involves a choice to believe what is true. The word "affirmation" or "affirm" first appeared in our English language in the 13th Century. It came from a Latin word that meant to strengthen, to make firm. According to Jesus nothing is firm unless it is founded on what is true. You remember his parable about two builders. One constructed a beautiful house on sand. The other built his on rock. They looked the same, appeared the same and were similarly impressive until one day a storm blew in. As the sand washed away beneath the first house, it collapsed. The second house stood firm because it was built on immovable rock. Jesus wanted people to know that they were building their lives either on sand or the rock of truth. Tests would eventually come their way and reveal their choice.

Unfortunately, the term *affirmation* has become a catch word for any idea or action that makes us feel good about ourselves. The television news show, 20-20, did an expose! on self-esteem programs a few years ago. Games were played where everyone was rewarded trophies and given certificates. Achievement was ignored, and participation was glorified. Ironically, the students internally kept track of the score and celebrated or mourned the results regardless of the instructors' desire to affirm everyone. The program raised questions as to whether this form of

affirmation was inspiring confidence or reinforcing poor effort. This television news magazine offered evidence that current programs of affirmation may actually be misleading and counterproductive in youngsters' lives.

Affirmation for the sake of feeling good carries little value. Affirmation, however, that strengthens one's grip on truth is very productive. It is the truth that sets us free to live!

In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses ascends Pisgah, a mountain east of the Jordan River. From the vantage of Pisgah, Moses could see the land that would become known as Israel. He saw the land that was promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. There would be a struggle to claim it. City after city must be conquered as God judged the Canaanites for the harm they were sowing. God told Moses to commission Joshua, to strengthen and encourage him. God told Moses to affirm Joshua as a leader and man of God.

When Joshua was affirmed, he was strengthened and encouraged in a vision of reality. He saw himself as a child of God which he was. He envisioned himself as a divinely chosen leader which he was. He saw more clearly that God was with him. Consequently, he grew in resolve to obey God and embrace God's calling on his life. That's affirmation that makes a difference.

All human beings need that kind of affirmation. People need affirmation that helps them see reality, strengthens them to embrace reality and encourages them to act on reality. God gave us families as the basic unit that prepares people for life. When we consider the divine purpose for families, we quickly discover that their most critical task is affirmation. Each family member needs to become firm in the truth. Each person needs to be strengthened to live according to the truth. Affirmation is necessary because there are deceptive influences in our world.

We see this influence first in the Garden of Eden when a serpent lies to Eve. We later learn that the liar is called Satan which means “the accuser”. Satan is out to deceive, condemn and strip us of our value as creatures of God, as offspring of God, as children of God, creatures made in God’s likeness.

In the book of Job, Satan stood before God not as a serpent but as an angel and belittled Job. Satan demeaned and condemned Job. When that didn’t work with God, Satan used weather and wicked people to attack and discourage Job. Then Satan used the words of Job’s friends to accuse him. Satan sought to conceal God’s love for Job. Satan sought to separate Job from his trust in God and thus destroy him.

This same evil one appears to our children and to us through the voices of peers who say to us, “*Idiot! Fool! Dummy! Stupid!*” Do you remember what Jesus said in the same sermon that he concluded with the story of the two houses?

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.” But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, “Raca,”(which means air-head) is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, “You fool!” will be in danger of the fire of hell. (Matt 5:21-22, NIV)

The voice of condemnation comes from hell, and those who give it voice, share the evil one’s destiny. This same evil one attacks people through the words of us teachers and parents who call individuals, “*Lazy, worthless, selfish, egotists.*” He curses through human voices that say: “*You’ll never amount to anything. You’ll get yours when you have kids. You’ll never grow up!*”

The devil also whispers into the spirit of children through our actions and inactions. For example, a child might conclude she’s worthless because Daddy always has better things to do than play with her. She might figure she’s hopelessly flawed because Mommy is never satisfied

with her work. A boy might feel he is bad because Dad is always irritable. The Accuser always looks for a way to deceive.

The Accuser uses well-intentioned theologians. Preachers curse us as they proclaim from pulpits that we're all sinners. Aren't we all sinners? According to St. Paul in Romans 3, "***All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,***" but once we are born anew and baptized into Christ's death, we are called saints. What is our identity in Christ, sinners or saints? Aren't we to live as confident saints, not weak sinners? Preachers may teach that we are *just* forgiven sinners, but God declares that you through Christ are a new creation. You have a new identity and a new potential in which you're to be strengthened. We are to put to death the old because the new has come. The Bible affirms us as holy people and calls us to live holy lives.

Over the years we've learned if we raise expectation, we raise achievement. Jaime Escalante left private industry to teach math in an inner city school. His story is told in the movie *Stand and Deliver*. The school was on probation precisely because students did so poorly in math. Jaime courageously brought about change that made his school one of the top math schools in California. I remember one scene when he spoke of a great Latino mathematician and then declared to his class, "*You have math in your blood!*" Again and again, he would drill the youth not only on mathematics but on their ability to think and achieve. Jaime's primary task in teaching mathematics was affirmation.

At an early age my parents affirmed in me the truth that I was God's child and Christ's ambassador. Again and again, I was told that I was a missionary. I felt devastated when I acted in ways that betrayed that identity. I was told about my name Wesley. I was told about John Wesley, his dedication and pivotal role in bring people to God and reforming a country. I was told that I was given a special name and I became proud of my name. I was encouraged to live

up to the honor of that name; and the passion grew in me to serve God with John Wesley's passion and creativity. Such affirmation is seen in Jacob being renamed Israel, which means *Prince with God*. It's seen in Abram being called Abraham, *father of many nations*. It's seen in Jesus calling Simon, Peter, meaning *the rock* on which Christ will build his church.

The way of affirmation is a way of vision. It is a way of faith. It is a way of seeing the truth about a person, and then acting and teaching and confronting them so they recognize the truth and act on it.

Affirmation is much more than what we often label self-fulfilling prophecy. Affirmation is partnership with God in forming people. When the Apostle Paul wrote his second letter to the believers in Thessalonica, he reminded them that God loved them, God chose them and God was working in them. He wrote:

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. (II Thessalonians 2:16-17, NIV)

This prayer recognizes that God encourages and affirms. Most frequently that happens through emissaries who partner with Christ. We become the voice of God and Christ when we affirm people in the truth. We are ambassadors of Christ when we believe the good truth about our spouses and call the best forth from them. *"You can change. You will change. God has made you new. Pursue the change."* We can call out the best in our children. *"Christ has given you a humble spirit, don't let pride trap you."* *"God made you industrious, don't let laziness deceive you."* *"You've been given a gentle spirit; live it out!"*

In our families affirmation builds lives and develops leaders. Affirmation is an essential task for Christian parents and spouses. Watch your words, assess your actions and embrace your task!