

BE REAL

BECAUSE FAKE
IS EXHAUSTING



BONUS CHAPTER
BE A REAL FRIEND

RICK BEZET

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Let me ask you a question: Has there ever been a time when you've really needed a friend? Maybe something happened to you, someone cheated on you, or someone in your family was seriously injured. Maybe someone hurt you, then others gossiped about you. Maybe a situation deteriorated to the point where you didn't even want to show your face in public because you felt so embarrassed about it. You wanted something real from those around you, but all you got was a cheap, "I'll pray for you." And you knew they didn't mean it.

I think we've all been there.

When I lived in Louisiana, I had a healthy group of friends, but one of them decided to separate from his wife and have an affair. A typical response would have been to shame him, make him feel bad, or get in his face and call him a dirt bag. I'm being honest – half of us wanted to hurt him. *He should know better*, we thought. We knew his behavior pattern: he regularly met this woman on Friday nights. We talked extensively about how we should respond. Finally, someone in the group, (and, trust me, it wasn't me!), came up with a great idea that we would hang out in his front yard on Friday nights until he got home. We agreed that we wouldn't yell at him or even give him condescending looks, but that we would just be kind to him and let him know that we loved him.

So, the next Friday night, he came home somewhere around 3am, and there we all were, sitting in lawn chairs in his front yard. He came stumbling up to the door, and we quietly said what we agreed

to say, “We love you, man. We just want to be there for you. Let us know if there’s anything we can do.” He didn’t respond, though. He just went inside. We waited a little while, and then we packed up and went home. The next Friday night, we did the same thing.

Week after week, this continued. Not too long into it, he came home, fell on his knees right there in the front yard, and cried like a baby. Shame didn’t get to him, and yelling didn’t reach him, but love did. Consistent love, reaching out to him right where he was with no condemnation, met him, and he was changed. Now, that doesn’t always work. Don’t go making a formula out of this example, because being a friend isn’t about finding an adultery cure-all! At the same time, where are friends like that? It’s definitely rare, and if you’re not real, you could never do that.

Even in the early days of planting New Life Church, I knew that it would be a place where we would make lifelong friends. It would be a place where we would cultivate best friends who would turn down fantastic jobs just to hang out. And that’s exactly what happened. Several people relocated to central Arkansas just for that reason!

Others packed up and moved from great jobs in other states, because they heard about a church where they could have real friends. Many people will tell you that what brought them to NLC was either the music, the preaching or the children’s ministries, but what caused them to stay? It’s always the same answer: Relationships. Being connected. Friends. When you finish reading *Be Real*, you may think you need new friends! But my hope is that after you read it, you will *be a better friend*.

I’m really glad that God took my personality into account when He called me to serve Him. In fact, He put traits in me that would cause me to do ministry and actually enjoy it *at the same time*. Every day, I discover more ways that God wants to be more real to us. If I live to be 100, I’ll probably still realize that I haven’t learned a fraction of it.

I realized the importance of real friendship in my early teens when my dad gave me Dale Carnegie’s book, *How to Win Friends and*

Influence People. After reading it, I realized that people wouldn't care about whether I encouraged them or not, if they didn't even like me to begin with. Winning friends and growing in influence with people is a key to successful ministry, at least in the way God has been directing me in ministry. In fact, many of the principles I utilize in everyday life were derived or enhanced by my exposure to this book. Carnegie explains six ways to become a more influential person:

- Become genuinely interested in other people.
- Smile.
- Remember that a person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language.
- Be a good listener. Encourage others to talk about themselves.
- Talk in terms of the other person's interests.
- Make the other person feel important - and do it sincerely.

It's amazing to realize that three of the six points above directly mention your approach to others and how to practice cultivating genuine interest in things that are important to them. It sounds remarkably similar to Jesus's command to "love your neighbor as yourself," doesn't it? I appreciate Carnegie's principles, and I also live by biblical relationship principles. You can see throughout the Bible that God is interested in your relationships with others. Even in the Ten Commandments, the first four relate to your devotion to God, and the last six are all about relationships with others.

Many people tell me how strong their walk with God is, but how do we know if that is true, until it is displayed in their walk with others? Even many of the most dedicated pastors I know struggle in this area. The book of Philippians makes it very clear what it takes to be a real friend. Take a look at Philippians 2:1-8:

*“If you’ve gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care— then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be **deep-spirited friends**. Don’t push your way to the front; don’t sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don’t be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.*

Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.” (The Message)

A REAL FRIEND WILL TAKE THE HUMBLE

In this passage, the Apostle Paul was essentially spelling out what it means to be a real friend, and he started with the example that Jesus set for us. Think for a minute about how Jesus acted when he was physically walking around on planet earth. Here is the actual King of the universe living 33 years with the humility of a servant. If Jesus calls us to follow him, which he does, then he wants us to go places similar to where he went. He also wants us to do things like what he did. If his definition of success for himself meant living a selfless life, always looking out for others, then his definition of success for us is the same – looking out for others, reaching others, essentially being a real friend.

Have you ever known someone who always has to be in the spotlight? *Taking the humble* means being quick to hand the spotlight to another person, so that God always gets the glory. *Taking the humble* has everything to do with the way you see yourself. A person who is real does not need extra attention to prop himself up.

Being real, however, doesn't mean becoming overconfident in self. It is important that we view our strengths as a starting point to motivate us for whatever God calls us to do, but not to assume that we have it so figured out that we become proud. Overconfidence is a killer, because it makes us forget that we have blind spots.

You might remember something very striking in the news that warns us to never become overconfident. In the mid 1980's, when the Soviet Union was strong and intact, the Kremlin was believed to be the most guarded and secure location on Earth, a claim that was regularly promoted by the Soviet authorities. The Cold War involved back and forth dialog about the size and capability of the military, and the Soviet Union would regularly brag about its superiority over the United States. Many in America were convinced that the Soviets were much stronger militarily than the US. But one day in May 1987, this image took a severe blow when Matthias Rust, a teenager, flew a single engine plane into Soviet territory, through Moscow, and ultimately landed it in the Kremlin, right in the middle of Red Square. It was a disgrace, and the top military official lost his job over the incident.

One aspect of being a real friend, (and I believe it's one of the hardest things to do!), is to take the humble before somebody else does it for you. Know what I mean? You don't want to get to a place where somebody else has to do it. That's not humility; that's humiliating! Nobody wants that. Instead, if you choose to take the humble, then it's *more* likely that somebody will come back and honor you. Everybody wants that! A person who can be real has no problem with this, because they're not depending on other people for their self-worth.

A REAL FRIEND SEES THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY

When I am at a restaurant, especially if the service is less than perfect, it is easy to be demanding. I have never been known to be patient, especially at dinner. My natural inclination might be to complain and make sure that someone knows that we deserve better service, but there is another perspective that Jesus wants us to have. He set the example for role reversal, promoting an upside-down Kingdom. Look at Matthew 20:25-28:

Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you; instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (NIV)

So, how can I serve my waiter? What could I possibly say to him that would let him know that I see him as a person, and not just as someone paid to serve me? Some Christians ask themselves the same question, but then they leave behind a pamphlet with some Gospel message, and they might leave a small tip. Waiters have told me that they refer to the Sunday lunchtime as “dead zone,” because of how ‘church people’ are such poor tippers. (In case you are wondering, 15% to 20% is a good standard).

I don’t always get it right, but when I do, I imagine myself in my waiter’s shoes, working his shift. I watch how people at the other tables are treating him. I think about what a balancing act he has between the high-speed, high-intensity kitchen staff and the demanding, often selfish, customers that he’s waiting on. And I go from there. It almost always turns out well. Every once in awhile I’ll say something stupid, like when the waiter says, “Enjoy your meal,”

and I respond, “You too!” In moments like that, I thump myself on the head and try again. I’ll be honest; it does happen a lot!

I’m pretty sure that God gives us credit for making an attempt, even if we badly mess things up! It’s definitely better than leaving a tract on the table, especially with no tip. That’s just wrong.

A REAL FRIEND IS ATTENTIVE

Many of us think that a good conversation is when the other person can tell you everything that’s going on in their lives. That is bunk. A good conversation is when you’ve done 70% listening. That’s being a real friend. In counseling situations, most of the time I will get a couple to talk about themselves, and by the end of the session, they think I’m a genius. I didn’t say much. I didn’t have to.

People can tell if you really are listening to them or not. When I’m in the foyer at church, talking to one person, I look at them. If someone else pats me on the back or tries to cut in, I choose to pay attention to the first person with whom I am already engaged in conversation. I’m not going to get interrupted. When you practice being attentive to others (and it does take practice), it is important to not allow other people to distract us from the person God has placed in front of us. I’m not saying it’s okay to be rude and ignore people – just keep going with the conversation that’s in front of you.

There are so many examples of Jesus being *attentive to the one*. When Jesus was walking through a huge crowd, a sick lady reached out and touched his robe. He was attentive to her. When Nathanael asked Jesus how he knew him, Jesus responded in John 1:48 with, “I saw you under the fig tree.” He noticed him. On the cross, Jesus told John, “Take care of my mother.” He pays attention to others’ needs.

In the parable of the lost sheep in Matthew 18, Jesus commanded us to go after the one. I call that the *value of a soul*. You’ll never be attentive to others if you’re not interested in the value of a soul, if you don’t understand the value of each individual. One of many

things I do that keeps me sharp in this area is this: as I prepare to preach, I find one person in the congregation who is hurting, and I speak to them. I'm always looking for the person in need.

The ability to listen well is not innate. We are not born with a desire to hear others talk while we remain silent. If any evidence is ever needed to prove this point, I tell my church to go look in the nursery! There might be scratching, fighting or some other destructive behavior going on, based on selfish, human nature. They don't really care a lot about listening. It is a trait that must be developed with as much intention and discipline as a competitive weightlifter.

According to the book of James, a controlled tongue is the sign of a mature person. James 1:19 says this:

“My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”

And James 3:2 says,

“We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.”

If you think it is easy for me to be attentive, you're wrong! It has been very difficult for me, but I know that if I can do it, you can too. Make a commitment to be an attentive listener and a good friend. Get to know people. Look them up on Facebook, if you have to. Facebook is a good tool for that. If you meet with someone, learn something about who they are or what their interests are. Let me summarize with this – God gave us two ears. Use them!

A REAL FRIEND ASKS SMART QUESTIONS

Ask the Right Question.

There are a lot of questions you can ask. The first is a “Get-to-Know-You” question, such as: “Where were you born?” “How long have you been married?” “What was the happiest day since you’ve been married?” “Tell me about yourself.” Ask a lot of “Get-to-Know-You” questions.

It is not always easy to be supportive and engaged with someone who is talking about something mundane. People love their pets, but if you want me to lose interest quickly, start talking to me about how great your cat is!

Being an attentive listener does *not* mean quietly sitting by while a person tells explicit details about every aspect of their life. This is a time when you can help them out by asking the right question. A well-placed question can change a directionless conversation to one with purpose, because it requires the person to communicate on a different level. For example, I might ask a person. “What has God put in your heart to serve others?” Several different answers may emerge. The person may talk about a passion that may never have come out if a good question were not asked. This can result in discovering something about them that you can appreciate and cause them to see service opportunities that they may otherwise have missed.

Ask a Positive-Response Question.

The second kind of question leads to an optimistic response. Sometimes I ask questions that cause people to look on the positive side of issues. Phrase a question that gives the other person an edge toward hopefulness. For example, “Do you think God could forgive what you have done?” “Do you think that God could put your

marriage back together?” “What would you like to do with your life if there were no barriers?” “What would you like to see God do in your life?”

There are times that even the perfectly designed question evokes an answer that reveals hurt, regret or excuses about why they have not achieved what God has placed on their heart. I might ask them again, “If there were *no barriers* in front of you, what would God want you to do?” Then they begin to dream again, sensing that I believe something better is possible for them. Let’s look at Romans 12:9 together:

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

This verse is very clear. We must love a person with sincerity before we hate the evil in them. I tell leaders all over the world that this verse relates to us in everyday ministry, because if you don’t love me, I’m not going to listen to you. On the other hand, if you love me, you can correct me all day long. Christians, even those in leadership, get this wrong all the time. We must remember: sincere love comes first!

Ask a Simple Question.

In chapter three of *Be Real*, I covered the story in John 4 where Jesus was thirsty, stopped for a drink of water, and asked the Samaritan woman for a drink. He asked a simple question that was very much out of the ordinary, “Will you give me a drink?” This seemingly straightforward question started a dialogue that ultimately caused her to recognize him as Christ. But could Jesus

have started this conversation by telling her what he already knew – that she had five husbands and was living in adultery? Maybe, but I believe she would have become defensive and not at all open to hearing him. He started with a simple question, and he was also patient enough to allow her to question him. As a result, she was able to receive ‘living water’ from the true source.

I give similar advice to single people wanting to start up a conversation with someone they may be interested in dating. I suggest, “Go to the coffee bar and just ask them, “Hey, you want a scone?” It’s a simple question at a coffee bar. I know a guy who took my advice. He married her last year!

A REAL FRIEND DOESN'T BLOW UP EASILY

Anger has destroyed a lot of houses. We don’t have to correct people for every little thing they do wrong. How would you like to be known as “Renee the Rebuker,” or “Critical Chris”? If you’re the type who always feels the need to correct other people, then you will also be more likely to gossip about them. Instead, be patient with them, because God is patient with you. When God was watching you make those unwise choices, damaging yourself and probably a lot of people around you, he chose kindness in his response to you. It takes kindness for people to change. Be kind.

A real friend takes the high road, and he chooses to see the silver lining in every situation. When someone complains to me about something in their family, job or even the church, I listen carefully to make sure I’m not ignoring their comments or judging their intentions. Instead, I find something positive in what they are saying that I can use to encourage them.

A REAL FRIEND HAS PASSION FOR THE RELATIONSHIP

The positive side of anger is passion. Once I had a very disturbed couple in my office, screaming at each other in very inappropriate language, blaming each other for everything that was wrong in the relationship. I was praying under my breath, “Okay God, I can sure use some wisdom here! If you don’t help me, I’ll attack them both!” I turned to them, asked them to be silent for a moment, and told them I was glad to see that there was still such passion in their relationship. I continued, “I can tell you guys really love each other a lot, or you wouldn’t be so emotional about things. There are so many couples with no emotion at all, so you should feel blessed! What we have to do is redirect that powerful passion into something positive, and I will give you some ideas.” Amazingly, this particular couple is doing well now, and they’re even coaching other couples. Phew!

A REAL FRIEND KNOWS HOW TO HANDLE BAD NEWS

In my profession, it is inevitable that there will be times when bad news hits. It is common for me to hear that a couple breaks up, someone gets sick, or a child has a traumatic incident. There are few times, however rare, that I will be approached with a negative comment about something involving the church. Be the kind of person who can take the nastiest situation and make it good, the kind of person who can tolerate weaknesses in people.

There is a good way and a poor way to receive bad news. Some people are quick to believe any news, provided that it is bad. It’s human nature to remember or concentrate on negative news rather than positive. Many of us used to watch a sports show called the ‘Wild World of Sports.’ In the intro to every show there was footage of great and tragic sports events, along with the words, “. . . the thrill of victory, and the agony of defeat.” It’s hard to find anyone

who seems to remember what the event was that corresponded to the ‘thrill of victory,’ but they all have a clear picture of ‘the agony of defeat.’ There was that skier, missing his landing and tumbling down the mountain until he crashed into the wall. Why do we only remember that scene? Why does the weatherman tell us that there is a 30% chance of rain, when there is a 70% chance of sunshine? Why is it when we are asking directions, that someone will tell us to go to the 3rd ‘red’ light and turn? I sometimes ask them, “What if the light is green?” Then they look at me like I’m weird. Last question: Why do they call the first piece of bread in a loaf the ‘end?’ I say, “It’s the beginning!”

In fact, the Bible agrees with me that good can be derived from all situations. Look at this familiar verse in Romans 8:28:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

I love this verse! God is working for the good in every situation involving those who love him, and if I am attentive enough to his purpose, I can often find something positive to say about any situation a person is facing.

When I speak about marriage and family, I often talk about the importance of the wife’s role in supporting her husband. The level of positive encouragement that a wife gives has been proven to increase the level of self worth that a man feels, and it even causes his work life to be more productive. The Bible does not *suggest* that a woman respect her husband; it *commands* that she respect him. God is aware of how much a man needs the respect and support of a wife.

The Bible tells a man that he must love his wife as he loves himself. It doesn’t say the same thing to a wife, because a wife may not love herself in the same way a man loves himself. A beautiful woman can look in the mirror and see only faults. But a man can be

overweight, have hair all over his back, and he will still pose in front of the mirror saying, “Wassup? I look good!”

During our church membership class, we make a point using a story about a fictitious guy named Joe. We tell the attendees that Joe used to be in church, but over a period of time he fell away into sin. One group of Christians would look at Joe’s condition and say, “Joe was never saved; if he were saved he could never fall away.” This group believes that a Christian can never lose their salvation.

Another group would disagree, saying, “No, Joe did love God but now he is lost.” This stance represents another theological position. Many churches have divided over issues just like this, and their doctrinal disagreement is the only thing they recognize. During the membership class, we describe this disagreement with such emotion that people are sitting there, waiting for our answer to see if they should join our church or not. (By the way, there is room in our church for both groups!)

We inform people that there is an intrinsic problem with both of these positions, because they have taken the focus of their thoughts off the *person*, Joe. We tell our people, “It doesn’t matter *why* you think Joe is messed up. Let’s just call him and see how we can show love.” A person who sees the ‘silver lining’ will make the call. They are the ones who believe that Joe can be rescued.

A REAL FRIEND CHALLENGES OTHERS POSITIVELY

One of the most common tasks for any leader is to train and motivate people to do more than they intended without his prompting. Many corporate managers utilize fear, competition or other negative emotions to motivate others to achieve more. I have learned over years of study and observation that effective and long-lasting change is achieved through encouragement, not fear. Everyone loves to be challenged to achieve a goal, if they believe they can succeed.

There are many underlying reasons for a lack of motivation, reasons that may relate to culture, family upbringing, personality type or other influence. Unlocking the potential in a person is the ultimate encouragement, and is something I live to accomplish.

There have been many instances when I have asked a businessperson to consider becoming a leader in our church, whether as a lay leader or a staff member. One of the most common responses, even from the most accomplished leaders, is a feeling of total inadequacy when it comes to church. They respond, “I can’t preach or teach,” and I reply, “Good. I don’t need you to preach.” Then I ask them if they will do the same as what they have been doing at work, such as putting a team together, and leading a life group or a service team. Most often I hear, “Sure! I can do that!”

That one small step for a leader might be the very catalyst they need to unlock huge potential inside. A few of our top church leaders came from the business world and are now making a huge difference in people’s lives. Remember, people want and need a challenge. Even if they refuse your challenge, you will be much more respected for taking the time and effort to challenge them in an encouraging way.

A REAL FRIEND SHOWS UP

There are times that we are really good at this and times when we’re not so good, but a real friend is there when you need him. As I was finishing *Be Real*, Jill, the wife of one of our executive pastors, went into the hospital with complications from a cancer treatment. Our staff rallied around this amazing family and went on a 24-hour-a-day prayer vigil that lasted for several weeks. I believe that because of that, Jill gained strength to attend her daughter’s wedding. A couple of months later, we ramped it up and took the entire staff to her front yard to hold a time of worship and prayer for her healing. When she returned to the hospital a second time, we added a 24-hour-a-day fast for her healing on top of the prayer vigil

that we still continued. Well, the Lord chose to take her home about six weeks later. Now that she's gone, we're still there supporting her husband and children.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of practicing being a real friend – to be there when our friends need us. I don't always get it right. No one is perfect by any means, but practicing it as a core value is huge! Sometimes, and it's more often than we realize, we need to set our calendar aside and just be there for a friend. Allow yourself the freedom, and make it a priority, to be responsive like that.

Being real will definitely strengthen your friendships. You'll have more friends, you'll have better friends, and you'll even be a better friend to yourself. And I bet you'll even like yourself more than you do right now! And as you learn to be a real friend, as you learn to listen well, ask smart questions, speak positively into people's lives and challenge others in a positive way, you're becoming an influencer. And when you influence others, you are becoming a leader. Go get you some of that!

ABOUT RICK BEZET:



Rick Bezet is the founder and lead pastor of New Life Church of Arkansas. Since starting NLC Conway in 2001, New Life has grown to include 9 churches in 8 cities with over twenty services, and an online service. NLC was America's fastest-growing church in 2009, according to Outreach Magazine's Top 100. Rick is a founding board member and overseer of the Association of Related Churches (ARC). As an author and international speaker, authentic relationships are the core of Rick's ministry. Rick and his lovely wife, Michelle, have four children and have been married for over 25 years. They live in Conway, Arkansas.

Follow Rick on Twitter: [@rick_bezet](https://twitter.com/rick_bezet).

ABOUT NEW LIFE CHURCH:

God gave Pastor Rick and Michelle Bezet a vision for Arkansas and in 2001, New Life Church began. Over the years, the vision continues to expand; but the values stay the same, reflecting the heart of Pastor Rick and Michelle. New Life Church is a home, connecting people to the love of God, the salvation of Jesus, and the family within His church. As New Life stretches across Arkansas, it remains one house committed to believing for the next one to come to Jesus.

For more information about New Life Church, including locations and service times, visit newlifechurch.tv.