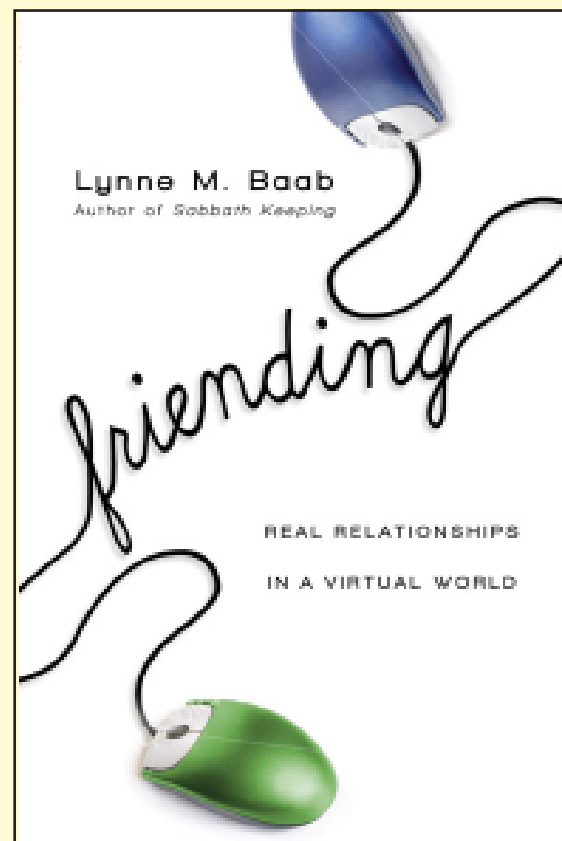


Lynne Baab has written a warm and practical meditation on friendship that embraces all of the challenges and opportunities that accompany its practice in our day and age. Like friendship itself, Baab's book is a rich resource that invites and rewards personal investment. Make friends with this book.

Tim Keel, author of *Intuitive Leadership: Embracing a Paradigm of Metaphor, Narrative, and Chaos*

## Chapter One: Real Relationships



The light from a clear blue sky flooded my home office as I turned on my computer. My husband was eating breakfast, and the cheerful clinking of dishes from the other side of the house, coupled with the slanting morning sunshine on the trees outside my window, made me feel lighthearted and optimistic about the day.

I found a handful of new emails, one of them from my editor at InterVarsity Press. He and I had been discussing the possibility that I would write a book on friendship as a spiritual practice in this electronic age. When I saw his email, I wondered if the editorial committee had met to discuss my proposal.

I opened the email. Great news! They wanted me to write the book.

I wrote back, telling him I was delighted and mentioning one detail I'd thought of since we last corresponded. I closed his email and found one from my brother, Mark, responding to an article about golf I had sent him the day before and mentioning his son, Ross, who works in a hotel.

Hi there Lynne. That was a funny article you sent me yesterday. We're feeling pretty happy here because Ross just got a promotion. He'll have a regular shift at the front desk rather than filling in as needed. It will mean full-time hours for him.

A friend is someone who is there for you and who doesn't gossip about you.

Sandie, twelve years old

I wrote a quick email back to Mark.

Give Ross my congratulations. And you can congratulate me, too. You're the first person to know I'm going to be writing a book on friendship in the Facebook age. I just got an email from my editor and I'm really, really happy.

Mark happened to be online and wrote back right away.

Great news, Lynne. Here's a story for your book. Ross found out that the position had opened up at work because of Facebook. The guy who was fired from the position did some venting on Facebook, so Ross knew he could apply. Ross heard the news first on Facebook, at home, on his day off.

I wrote back to Mark, joking about the situation and its significance for what I wanted to say in the book.

A friend is someone you can rely on through thick and thin, who understands you, and who would tell you the cold hard truth. A friend is someone with similar interests who you want to spend time with. A friend understands your jokes and makes you smile.

A definition from a group of teenagers

As I wrote, I pondered the fact that Mark was writing from his office in Oregon, while I live in New Zealand. My brother and I-seven thousand miles apart-were having this conversation about my book and about communication, while my husband was peacefully eating breakfast only two rooms away from me, not yet knowing I was going to write the book.

Is something wrong with this picture? I wondered. Not everyone can say her husband is her best friend, but I can. Was I slighting my best friend, who happened to be in close physical proximity to me, to have this online discussion with my brother, who was on the other side of the world? Or was this simply a normal aspect of life today?

The new communication technologies of the past two to three decades have shrunk our world. People far away are present to us with an immediacy that was unimaginable only thirty years ago. What are "real" relationships in this new context? What are the characteristics of healthy, life-giving friendships in today's world? What choices and skills are necessary to navigate these new realities?

It's a bit daunting to undertake the writing of this book, because so many people have such vehement opinions about these questions. I have read their forceful views online in blogs and newspapers, and in print as well. Opinions on the subject of friendship today vary tremendously. On the one hand, many writers have expressed their passionate opinion-usually based on their own experience-that the many new communication





technologies facilitate friendships in fresh and exciting ways. All these new ways of communicating are helpful, they say, in mitigating against the busy schedules and scattering of loved ones that can make relationships challenging in our time.

On the other hand, many other writers use words like faux, pseudo or imitation to describe friendships today, particularly friendships with a significant Internet component. They believe we have exchanged meaningful and intimate face-to-face friendships for impersonal, superficial online connections. People can't talk to each other with any depth these days, they assert, and as a result relationships are impoverished.

How will I navigate a path in the midst of these strong and heartfelt opinions?

I'm also feeling daunted at the challenge of writing this book, because putting friendship under a microscope seems potentially dangerous. What if it damages my own friendships? My friends are one of the most precious gifts in my life. They have supported, encouraged and affirmed me. When times have been hard, they have listened to my endless worries and complaints. I am thrilled at the diversity of gifts and personalities among my friends, and I feel

awed when I think about their commitments and expertise in so many areas. To have a window into their thoughts and priorities is a great privilege, and to be a part of their lives challenges me to be my best self.

To analyze something almost always changes it. Scary.

But I do want to write this book. I've been thinking about friendships and how they work since I was a child. We moved almost a dozen times in my first fifteen years, so from an early age I had to give attention to the question of how to find and care for friends. I believe the basic skills of friendship remain constant, and I want to write about those skills, exploring the way they apply in the global, frenetic, digitally connected world today.

I see friendship as a spiritual practice, a place where we live out the things we believe in. Friendship is a space where our values and commitments take flesh. This is true for people of any kind of religious commitment and for people who have none.

For the sake of readers who have a Christian faith commitment or an interest in seeing the connections between the Christian



faith and friendship today, I want to discuss the ways friendship with God overlaps with our other friendships. This very best Friend can teach us a lot about how to relate to others, guiding us, empowering us and giving us the confidence and peace that undergird healthy friendships. The many biblical passages about relationships are just as relevant in the online world and in our homes, neighborhoods and workplaces today as they were in dusty Palestine two thousand years ago.



### **Resources for This Book**

In preparation for writing this book, I interviewed dozens of people ranging in age from twelve to eighty-five. They said fantastic and fascinating things about friendship, and you'll hear their voices throughout the book. You'll also hear the voices of some of my closest family members, with whom I've been discussing friendship all my life.

My mother, now in her mid-eighties, has been a powerful model of friendship for me. She has a small group of very close friends and a whopping circle of other



friends and acquaintances. She is always open to making a new friend at church, at her golf club, in her neighborhood or in the wider community. She invites people over for meals, writes cards and notes, makes phone calls, sends emails and shares photos online. My father died several years ago, and my mother now goes on trips with her friends. She is always very conscious of those friends she hasn't seen for a while, and she makes contact when too much time has elapsed. Mom has said to me many times, "You have to work at friendships. If you don't, they wither." She lives out her commitment to her friends every day of her life.

My brother, in his fifties, is another valuable conversation partner with me on the subject of friendships. Mark has a tight circle of close friends, and he has made many intentional choices to provide support to them over the years. He works hard to be faithful to his family, so he limits his time with friends, but he never neglects them. Every Friday after work, he gathers with his buddies to drink beer and swap stories for a couple of hours. He might play golf or squash with one or two of them during the week as well. Once a year he spends a weekend in Reno with his circle of local friends, expanded to include his two closest friends from high school, who live a couple hundred miles away. And once a year this same

Two are better than one,  
because they have a good  
reward for their toil. For if they  
fall, one will lift up the other;  
but woe to one who is alone  
and falls and does not have  
another to help.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

group of his local and high-school friends spends five days together skiing. My brother exemplifies a wonderful balance of work, family and friends, and he models careful, intentional thinking about friendships.

My two sons have also stimulated my thinking about friendships. My younger son, in his late twenties, nurtures a wide circle of friends strewn all over the world. He keeps up with them through blog posts and Facebook, and by texting on his cell phone, emailing, Skyping and visiting. My older son, in his early thirties, has nurtured a deep friendship with his wife, and he also stays in close touch with his childhood best friend. He uses Facebook, email and phone calls to stay in contact with his wider circle of friends. He Skypes frequently with my husband, his father, who he considers to be one of his closest friends.

A friend is someone with whom I have a reciprocal relationship, whom I know I can trust with a secret or confession even if I don't necessarily choose to confide deeply with them.

Lewis, a photographer in his thirties

## **Two Views About Communication Technologies**

My sons represent two significant viewpoints about friendships and new communication technologies. My younger son believes that this is the best time in human history for friendships, simply because of the



many options for staying connected. "I can be on a business trip in New York City," he said, "and I see something in a shop window that reminds me of a friend in Europe. I can pull out my cell phone and flip him a text message. Or later that day I can send him an email or instant-message with him online. I can post something on Facebook or on my blog that I know that friend will like."

All those varied forms of contact, he believes, make it possible for us to begin from a point of connection rather than distance when we see friends face-to-face. He notes that the variety of ways to connect provides options for people with different communication preferences to find one way or a few ways to stay in touch that suits them. He is convinced that all this makes friendship alive and vibrant in our time.

My older son enjoys the variety of ways to stay connected as well, but he has concerns about them and is generally less optimistic than his brother about their benefits. He believes we are shaped by the communication technologies we use the most. He is concerned about the brevity of cell-phone text messages, updates on social networking websites and even emails. He believes they nurture glib and flippant communication styles that damage

Friends are people who care about you and really listen to you. They pay attention to your life; they know what you are up to. They will be there when you need help. They keep one eye closed to your bad points, and they are good at forgiving.

Sarah, a life coach in her sixties

meaningful communication and inhibit depth in relationships, particularly over the long haul. He said,

Have you ever noticed that the actors in movies from the 1950s all seem to talk in rich, plummy tones? They sound like radio announcers, which is understandable because they all listened to hours and hours of radio during the Depression and World War II. Their communication style was shaped by what they heard so often. In the

same way, people who watch a lot of TV seem to talk in sound bites and expect everyone to be beautiful. Just watch. People who send a lot of text messages and post short, offhand comments on Twitter or Facebook are going to be shaped by that style of communicating.

Scholars call his viewpoint "technological determinism."<sup>1</sup> This school of thought asserts that the communication technologies we use determine the way we use them; each communication technology has its limits, and those limits shape the messages and ultimately shape the person sending the messages as well. Much of

<sup>1</sup>"The medium is the message," Marshall McLuhan asserted in 1967 in the book with the same title. Neil Postman made a similar argument in 1985 in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York, Penguin, 2005, twentieth anniversary edition).

the negative discourse about online communication comes from the technological determinist perspective. Because cell-phone texting and most Internet communication eliminate nonverbal cues that convey emotion, technological determinists are deeply concerned that significant aspects of human communication are missing when certain communication technologies are used.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is the view that technologies are inherently neutral, that the content we put in them gives them form and meaning. My younger son's optimism about all the wonderful ways to stay connected today has some parallels with this "technology is neutral" way of thinking.

Heidi Campbell, a researcher who studies the way religious communities and individuals in them use new communication

technologies, argues for a middle ground. She notes that people of faith – like everyone else – have



<sup>2</sup>Heidi Campbell is the author of two significant books that explore the way religious communities use the Internet and other new communication technologies: *When Religion Meets New Media* (London: Routledge, 2010) and *Exploring Religious Community Online* (London: Peter Lang, 2005). The opinions attributed to Dr. Campbell in these two paragraphs come from interviews with her by the author, November 14-18, 2009.

The words friend and friendship bring to mind deep sharing, deep listening, intimacy, a sense of ease, willingness to risk in care and concern, joy, laughter, fun, jokes, kidding, different levels with different folks and different friends for different times . . . but all good.

Jack, a university professor in his fifties

always shaped different communication technologies to suit their own needs.<sup>2</sup> The printing press, telegraph, telephone, TV, movies, cell phones and now the Internet have been used strategically to meet the goals of organizations and individuals. She believes that any technology does not totally determine the way it is used. Her research indicates that people bring their own priorities, goals and passions to communication technologies and shape their use in

unexpected ways.

Yet, at the same time, she agrees that each form of communication encourages some styles of interaction and makes other styles more difficult. She believes that online communication is excellent for conveying information; however, depth, emotion and intimate connection are harder to convey online. Campbell believes, as I do, that nurturing deep relationships that have a significant online component requires intentionality and commitment.

Ultimately, where we land on the spectrum – of technological determinism versus technology as neutral – is not the most

significant issue with respect to friendship.

Communication technologies are what they are and they are what we make of them. Meanwhile, this book focuses on friendship: what friendship is and what we make of our friendships. It's my hope that this book will help you explore all sides of the spectrum and come out the other side with deeper, richer experiences of friendship in all its fullness.

Throughout this book, I will be referring to social networking, a way to describe websites designed for enabling people to connect to each other. As I write, Facebook and LinkedIn are the most popular forms of social networking – Facebook for personal relationships and LinkedIn for professional networks. Only a few of my interviewees use Twitter to keep up with their friends. Many of them use Twitter to follow famous people in their field or pop celebrities, and those who blog often post updates about their blogs on Twitter. Some of my interviewees used Bebo, MySpace or Friendster in the past, but they have switched to Facebook.

Because Facebook in particular was mentioned by the majority of my interviewees, Facebook will function in most of the stories in this book as a kind of case study for online social networking. Online patterns of communication morph quickly, so I will refer to social networking instead of Facebook as often as possible so that the book will have relevance when Facebook declines in popularity

I'll be there for you.

Theme song from the  
TV show *Friends*

Friendship is a mutual relationship of acceptance of each other as we are. It is a deep listening to the other's story of the joys and sorrows of life. It is experiencing empathy from the other, whether one agrees or not about particular issues of concern. It is being available to communicate with the other, especially in times of trouble.

Adam, a retired minister in his sixties

and something else comes along.

In addition to social networking websites, many other new forms of communication connect friends with each other. Many bloggers enjoy in-depth discussions with the people who respond to their blog posts. Photo-sharing websites, online discussion groups and websites for people with narrowly focused interests provide venues for meaningful connection. Skype – online video conferencing – is

becoming increasingly common. Many people use instant messaging, and email remains popular. Sending text messages with a cell phone is a significant way of staying connected for many people. These and other communication options will undoubtedly continue to proliferate, and the kinds of intentionality and commitment discussed in this book will have relevance for the new, and as yet unknown, forms of connection as well.

### **Changing Definitions of Friendship**

I asked several dozen people, ranging in age from late teens to late forties, whether the use of friend to refer to contacts on social



networking websites is changing the way they understand friendship. All of them said no.

A good number of people who responded to that question said that all their contacts on Facebook are people they already know fairly well or very well. So calling them friends is appropriate. The rest of the people who responded said that they have a variety of ways of referring to a Facebook friend who

they do not know in person or do not know well enough to call a real friend. They might say "Facebook contact" or "someone I know on Facebook." One woman said that when she refers to friends, she usually uses some kind of modifier anyway: "friend from high school," "friend from work," or "Facebook friend" if she knows the person only from Facebook. Many of her friends from high school and from work are also her friends on Facebook, but she doesn't think of them that way because the connection is rooted elsewhere in her life.

Online social networking has changed friendship vocabulary in one notable way: the word friend has become a verb. To "friend" someone is to request that they become a friend on a social

networking website or to accept their request. To "defriend" is to delete him or her as an online contact. In my interviews, no one used friend or defriend as verbs for anything other than online actions. Perhaps in the years to come, friend or defriend as verbs will also be used to refer to acts related to face-to-face friendship, but I didn't hear anyone use the words that way.

As the title of this book indicates, I like some aspects of the verb friending. I want to encourage discussion about the ways friendship – online or offline – is like a verb. Being a friend involves significant actions of caring and commitment. The adage "The only way to have a friend is to be a friend" is still profound and true. Learning how to be a friend and engaging consistently in actions that express friendship reflect the reality that friendship is more like a verb than a noun.

In this book I will argue that nurturing deep friendships in any setting requires intentionality and commitment. Today's Western lifestyle creates three major challenges to friendship: the online component of so many relationships, the frantic pace of life,

A friend is someone who will make themselves available to you when you need help.

Christi, an office worker in her thirties

and the scattering of family and friends to scattered locations. Never before have so many people conducted so many of their relationships using such a wide range of technologies that include cell

phones, computers, smartphones, gaming consoles connected to the Internet and many other forms of technology. Never before has the pace of life been so frantic, with electric light making day and night irrelevant and with people racing around juggling a myriad of commitments. And never before has mobility been so rampant, resulting in families and friends dispersed to the four corners of the world.



### **Confidence About Friendship**

Despite these challenges, most of the people I interviewed were confident they knew how to develop and nurture friendships. Many expressed frustration about the implications in their daily life of three obstacles mentioned above – the tendency of electronic communication to be impersonal, busy schedules, and friends who live far away – but only a few expressed concerns that they don't really know how to go about making and keeping friends.

The generational patterns in the interviews were fascinating. Just about everyone with whom I spoke was concerned about someone else's use of technology in relationships, and those concerns were expressed in generational terms.

A friendship is a deep and meaningful relationship, important to both of us. We do not have to have constant contact, but when needed, I can call on this person in a heartbeat.

Julia, a social worker in her forties

The people my age, in their fifties, told me they had learned how to nurture strong and healthy face-to-face friendships during all those years before computers. They expressed a lot of concern about people in their twenties and thirties, wondering if they'll be able to sustain marriage and

parenting relationships, because they're so used to communicating using technology. The glib, brief and trivial nature of so much online communication might contribute to superficial relationships. Can people in their twenties and thirties have long, intimate conversations? Can they share their deepest feelings?

My two sons, in their late twenties and early thirties, as well as others their age whom I interviewed, are confident of their own ability to nurture intimate friendships. Several of them cited the many years of their childhood without cell phones or the Internet, saying they learned how to have close friends before the age of rampant electronic communication. However, these young adults expressed concern about teenagers: with the proliferation of such brief messages in text messages and online posts, will they be able to engage in the kind of deep conversations that nurture true friendships?

The dozen or so teenagers I interviewed, ranging in age from fifteen to nineteen, were also quite confident of their own ability to nurture friendships. They said they see very clearly that a person can become so focused on online communication and texting that he or she loses the ability to communicate in person. Yet all my teenaged interviewees were confident they knew how to handle that challenge. Many of them talked about the priority they place on face-to-face conversations to nurture friendships, in tandem with staying in frequent contact electronically. They said the frequent, brief updates they send and receive through texting and online social networking make it possible to begin face-to-face conversations from a point of connection. They already know the details of their friends' lives, so they can dive into deeper topics when they speak with each other.

Several of the teenagers, however, said they were worried about twelve-year-olds getting cell phones and joining social networking websites. These older teens worried that younger teens don't have the wisdom to know how to deal with the impersonal



nature of electronic communication, which they said is evidenced by the amount of cell phone and online bullying that goes on among younger teens.

Based on these interviews and on the many articles I've read in recent years about personal relationships in a technological age, just about everyone focuses their concern on other people's use of technology in nurturing friendships. "I know how to cope with it all," they seem to be saying. "But I don't think others do."<sup>3</sup>

Part of my purpose in writing this book is to provide an opportunity to listen to people of all ages talk about friendship. Yes, there are generational differences, particularly in the way relationships are sustained and nurtured. However, I think you'll be amazed at the similarities of commitments and concerns about friendship among people of all ages. I know I was.

This book is an invitation to

<sup>3</sup>The comments I heard in interviews resemble the "third person effect," documented by many scholars, in which individuals believe that media have more negative influence on others than on themselves. People believe they can handle violence or pornography, but that others will not be able to cope as well (for example, W. P. Davison, "The Third Person Effect in Communication," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 47, no.1 [1983]: 1-15).



consider friendship. What makes it work? What are the actions that initiate and nurture friendships? What does it look like to care for friends – to be a friend – in light of the big obstacles to friendship in our time?

### **Questions for Reflection, Journaling, Discussion or Action**

Each chapter of this book will conclude with a few questions to help you reflect on the ideas in the chapter. Perhaps you'll want to discuss the questions with a friend or family member or in a book group or other small group. Perhaps you'll want to journal about the questions or take some action. Because friendship is such a deeply personal part of our lives, I encourage you to engage personally with the issues I raise in each chapter.

What is the balance in your life between online, phone and face-to-face communication with friends? What priority do you give to each? What do you think and feel about your patterns of connection?

What role do busyness and distance play in making friendships challenging for you?

Do you tend to be a technological determinist, believing that technologies greatly influence the kind of communication that can

happen when they are used? Or do you tend to adhere to a "technology is neutral" point of view? Are you a technological determinist about some forms of communication, while believing that other technologies are neutral? What are the factors that influence your views on this subject?

This week, ask two or three people – perhaps friends, colleagues, acquaintances or family members – how they would define friend or friendship. Think about what you like and don't like about their definitions.

Spend time praying about the patterns of your friendships. Ask God for insight to illuminate the growing edges in your friendships. Ask God for wisdom to know how to respond.

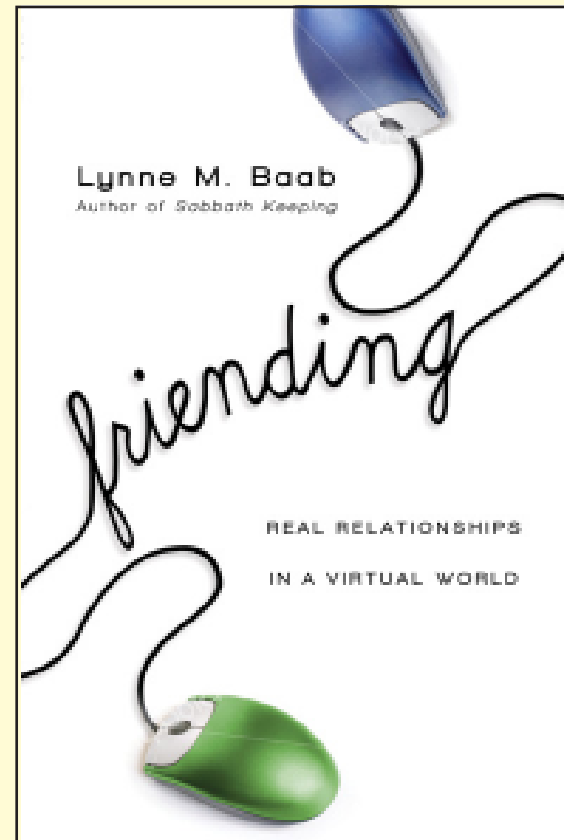
This chapter was excerpted from *Friending: Real Relationships in a Virtual World* by Lynne M. Baab, published by InterVarsity Press. This digital sampler is designed to give you a taste of the content of the book. The format of this sampler is different from the format of the book.

Friending is available in bookstores and from online booksellers such as amazon.com.

Lynne M. Baab is the author of numerous books, most recently *Reaching Out in A Networked World*, *Fasting* and *Sabbath Keeping*. Lynne is a Presbyterian minister with a Ph.D. in communication from the University of Washington. She lives with her husband in Dunedin, New Zealand, where she teaches pastoral theology.

To learn about Lynne's other books and to read articles she has written on topics related to her books, visit her website:

**[www.lynnebaab.com](http://www.lynnebaab.com)**



# Praise for *Friending*

Friends are so important to me! But today there are more forces pushing us apart--as well as new media to bring us together--than ever before in history. Lynne Baab explores a world of options and encourages us to redevelop the art of friendship for a new era. This book is full of practical tools, winsome stories and keen insights. I'm hooked.

Dr. Steve Hayner, president, Columbia Theological Seminary

Lynne Baab offers interesting reflection on the changing nature of friendship in a networked society, where relationships are increasingly cultivated and sustained through social media. Using engaging real-life examples she asks important questions about how friendships may be shaped in certain directions when mediated through technology and the potential spiritual consequences of these interactions. Importantly the book calls readers to personally consider the intentionality and motivations behind their own friendship practices to uncover what values they stem from and the social world they may cultivate.

Heidi Campbell, Ph.D., author of *Exploring Religious Community Online*

## More Praise for *Friending*

As we've come to expect from Lynne Baab, inside *Friending* are thoughtful questions, fascinating research and excellent biblical analysis. I found her discussion on the new wave of technology and how this impacts relationships quite illuminating. This would be an excellent book for small groups to discuss and for anyone who wants help in how to be a faithful friend--to God, to our families and to our circle of friends.

Rebecca Manley Pippert, international speaker and author of *Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World*

Challenging those who decry online communication as shallow and banal, *Friending* offers guidelines and multiple examples of the way close relationships can be maintained and deepened through Facebook and other Internet connections. Writing in the brisk style of digital messaging, Lynne Baab convincingly shows how the biblical virtues of caring, sharing, loving and forgiving can survive and thrive in a world where busyness and mobility have become the norm.

Em Griffin, Professor Emeritus, Wheaton College

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