

BOOK SUMMARY

Love, Church Peace, and Unity

John Owen



BE UNITED IN CHRIST BOOK SUMMARY

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Be United in Christ

Book Summary

Love, Church Peace, and Unity

John Owen

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Author

John Owen (1616–1683) is generally considered the greatest theologian among the English Puritans. He was the second son of an Anglican vicar in Stadhampton, England, and earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from Queen's College, Oxford. After serving as a tutor and a chaplain, he was appointed minister at Fordham in Essex, where he married Mary Rooke. The couple had eleven children, though only one survived into adulthood. In 1646, Owen's ministry moved to Coggeshall, at which time his understanding of church government shifted from Presbyterianism to Congregationalism. Three years later, Oliver Cromwell recruited Owen as his chaplain, and afterward he directed Owen to Oxford to serve as dean of Christ Church and then vice-chancellor of the university. It was during these years that Owen wrote some of his most influential books: *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, *Communion with God*, and *Of Temptation*. He left Oxford in 1660 but continued to write, eventually producing more than 80 works. He died August 24, 1683, after communicating his attitude toward his impending death to a friend: "I am going to Him whom my soul has loved, or rather who has loved me with an everlasting love, which is the whole ground of all my consolation.... I am leaving the ship of the church in a storm, but while the great Pilot is in it the loss of a poor under-rower will be inconsiderable. Live and pray and hope and wait patiently and do not despair; the promise stands invincible that He will never leave us nor forsake us."¹

Overview

Can Christians worship separately without being divided? Are various denominations compatible with the love, peace, and unity that Jesus requires of His church? What does Christian love and church unity really look like? Why are there so many divisions among Christians, and what can be done about them? When should believers change churches, and how can they do so without splitting the church? These important and enduring questions are all addressed by John Owen in *A Discourse Concerning Evangelical Love, Church Peace, and Unity* (hereafter referred to as *Love, Church Peace, and Unity*). As a Congregationalist, Owen was a Nonconformist. That is, he was an English Christian who would not conform to all the religious rules prescribed by the Church of England and enforced by the government. Those ministers who refused to comply could be expelled from their churches and communities, forbidden to teach, and even imprisoned. They were also condemned as being unloving and divisive. Owen wrote this book to respond to these accusations (chapter 1), describe the Christian duty to love others (chapter 2), define true love and unity within the church (chapter 3), identify the real sources of Christian disunity (chapter 4), and defend the Nonconformist departure from the doctrines and practices of the Church of England (chapter 5). Although Owen wrote to address pressing issues in his time, his response provides an insightful, Biblical guide to love, church peace, and unity for Christians in all times.

¹ Andrew Thomson, *Life of Dr. Owen*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1851), 1:ciii.

Chapter 1: False Accusations

People care when Christians fight. And rightly so, for everyone knows Jesus' followers should not fight, and everyone is affected when they do. Church conflict is bad for the spiritual well-being of individuals and harmful to the societies whose peace it disrupts. Additionally, the glory of God and the spread of the gospel are directly connected to the love and harmony exhibited by Christ's disciples. Therefore, people are right to voice concern over church conflict, but they must be careful how they do so. Harsh words and personal attacks "open, inflame, and irritate former wounds." Believers usually believe (and believe strongly) that they are right and everyone else is wrong. Each group blames the other for disturbing the peace with their false views and practices. So when addressing the "sinful decay of love," Christians must be careful to do so in a loving way.

Having introduced his topic, Owen offers three reasons why Nonconformists had not previously defended themselves publicly against their accusers: they had not wanted to start new arguments, they had hoped the conflict would die down on its own, and they had expected their godly lives to provide an adequate response. Indeed, they would have been content to live peacefully, walk lovingly, and suffer silently "had they not so openly and frequently been called on either to prove their innocence or to confess and acknowledge their evil." But thus pressured to either repent or respond, Owen now presents "those principles concerning mutual love and unity among Christians and those practices in the worship of God where our own consciences find rest and peace and others have so much misjudged us."

In doing so, Owen readily admits that "there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin" (Ecclesiastes 7:20). He does not claim that his side is innocent of all sin, but he does insist that they are innocent of hateful divisiveness. They have examined themselves as Christ commands (Matthew 7:1–5) and can honestly deny that they are "guilty of the lack of Christian love and peace, of disunity, and a tendency toward all sorts of divisions contrary to the rules and commands of the gospel."² Finding no need to repent of this particular sin, he intends to reply to those who are impartial enough to listen and "who really value and esteem love, peace, and unity among Christians."

As for those who insist that for unity's sake Nonconformists should simply submit to the Church of England, Owen replies that such a truce would be false and fleeting. "It is truth alone that will make such agreements durable or useful. And we are not engaged in an inquiry merely after peace, but after peace with truth. Yes, to lay aside the consideration of truth in an investigation into peace and agreement in and about spiritual things is to disregard God and His authority." The only way to achieve "truth with peace" is for Christians to seek God's will by searching God's Word, trusting in Him to ultimately vindicate those faithful to Him.

² "The principal charge against us ... is our nonconformity to the present constitutions of the Church of England. It is for this that we are accused to be guilty of a lack of Christian love and peacefulness, of schism, and an inclination to all sorts of divisions contrary to the rules and precepts of the gospel."

Chapter 2: Christian Love

“The foundation of our response might be laid by praising Christian love and unity.” God is love, Jesus commanded His disciples to love, and the Bible instructs believers to always act in love (1 John 4:8; John 13:34–35; 1 Corinthians 13:1–3). Love is a test for truth, and if church doctrines or practices lack love “it is a great and weighty judgment against their truth and acceptance with God.”

Owen insists that Nonconformists do indeed value love, church peace, and unity, but only as the Bible defines and applies them. “Whereas all these things—namely, love, peace, and unity—are equally dear to us, yet there are different rules prescribed for the exercise and pursuit of them.”

Our *love* is to be universal, unconfined as the beams of the sun or as the showers of rain that fall on the whole earth (Matthew 5:43–48). . . . But because men’s conditions vary based on their relationship to God, the actual exercise of our love toward them must vary accordingly.

Our duty in the observance of *peace* is equally broad. . . . As to the extent of our efforts toward this end, we are directed, “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:18).

The rule for *unity*, as it is supposed to make up all church communion, falls under many restrictions, for here the special commands of Christ and the institutions of the gospel committed to our care and adherence fall under consideration.

So Christians pursue unity with one another, but only according to God’s guidelines. Christians pursue peace with everyone as much as it depends on them. And Christians love everyone, but they love them differently. A spouse, for example, is loved differently than a neighbor, and unbelievers are loved differently than believers. Owen defines love as a desire for loved ones to have whatever good they lack. This desire makes the lover do whatever he can to provide the one he loves with the good that is lacking. Christian love toward unbelievers compassionately desires that their needs be met and then prays and acts to meet these needs. Prayer is essential because only God can meet people’s needs, and “love requires that we also add all other possible endeavors for their relief (1 John 3:16–17).” This is especially true for the spiritual needs of unbelievers. Because they lack God and Christ, they are destined to spend an eternity in Hell. Therefore, Christians pray and share the gospel so that non-Christians might come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Chapter 3: Church Peace

When it comes to loving other believers, a Christian’s love “ought to be intense and fervent.” To understand the Christian obligation to love other Christians, one must understand the church as it exists in its three forms: the invisible church, the visible church, and the local church.

The Invisible Church

The invisible church is the universal, spiritual body of Christ consisting of His “redeemed, justified, and sanctified ones.” This form of the church exists “wherever there are any societies or numbers of men who regularly profess the gospel and are in subjection to the kingly rule of Christ.” Wherever people confess and obey Christ, there is no doubt that among them are some who belong to the true church. This invisible church of those who love, trust, and serve Christ is the principal form of the church and deserves the believer’s primary love and allegiance.

But this common identity does not prevent diversity in nonessential doctrines. God demands agreement on the essential doctrines necessary for salvation, but He allows differences in other nonessential areas of faith and practice. People are limited in what they can understand, and they see things differently depending on where and when they live. Therefore, Christians will inevitably approach, understand, and apply the Bible differently. When these differences cause tension, God expects His children to pursue love, peace, and unity using the guidance and grace He gives them.

To do this, Christians must “value and esteem the things in which they agree above those in which they differ.” Where differences persist, Scripture demands that believers treat each other with love, humility, patience, and compassion. They should intentionally promote unity wherever possible, carefully guard against anything that might cause or deepen divisions, and continually pray for “the spiritual prosperity of the church ... and especially for the healing of all breaches that are among them.” The driving goal in all these things is that the church as a whole would “enjoy that peace which the Lord Christ has given it, and walk in the way which He has prescribed for it.”

The Visible Church

The spiritual reality of the invisible church takes visible form among those who publicly profess the Lord Jesus Christ. However, not all who confess Christ truly belong to Christ. Jesus warns that He will deny many who call Him Lord if they do not do what He says (Matthew 7:21–23). Obedience to Jesus as Lord proves that one knows Him as Savior. Ultimately only God knows who truly belongs to Him, so the practical criteria Christians should use in recognizing fellow believers is a credible confession of “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5). Sharing a common Lord, faith, and baptism is a sufficient foundation for the love, unity, and fellowship that Christ requires.

Christians should embrace other believers as truly belonging to the body of Christ so long as they:

1. Receive the Scripture as the authoritative Word of God without exception or limitation;
2. Believe in the one true God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ;
3. Trust and obey Jesus Christ as the resurrected Lord and look to Him alone for salvation;
4. Believe in the Holy Spirit as sent by the Father and the Son; and
5. Affirm that holiness is an essential indicator of salvation.

Whatever else may distinguish them, churches that confess these core doctrines should be accepted as members of the universal, invisible church. Indeed, no single denomination can claim to contain all the Christians in the world. It is an “intolerable presumption ... for any to judge that the constant profession of the name of Christ made by multitudes of Christians ... should have no advantage either for God’s glory or their own eternal glory because in some things they differ from them.” This is especially true given the fact that they have often suffered, and even been martyred, for their faith. Owen therefore concludes, “It is, then, the universal collective body of those who profess the gospel throughout the world which we acknowledge as the universal church of Christ.”

The Local Church

Owen discusses the universal church in its invisible and visible expressions to emphasize that the body of Christ is larger than any single congregation or denomination. Every believer owes the universal church love, peace, and unity. But believers should also voluntarily commit themselves to a particular local church to worship, celebrate the sacraments, and grow in their faith.

We believe that our Lord Jesus Christ, as the king, ruler, and lawgiver of His church, has ordained that all His disciples, all persons belonging to His church, should be gathered into distinct societies and become as flocks of sheep in several folds under the eye of their great Shepherd and the respective conduct of those employed under Him. And this gathering of professing believers in and into particular churches, for the celebration of the ordinances of sacred worship appointed by Christ and the participation of His institutions for their edification, is not a matter of accident or common providence but is to be an act in them of choice and voluntary obedience to the commands of Christ.

Sometimes, though, one's church departs from Scripture, and this raises difficult questions of how members should respond when their church adopts unbiblical practices or even rejects the gospel.

Owen insists that no believer must submit to unbiblical demands. Christians obey God whose will is revealed in His Word, not men whose commands lack a Scriptural basis. If a church tries to enforce policies and practices that are not clearly required by Scripture and that violate one's conscience, then that believer has the right to worship elsewhere. Yet he still loves those who stay, for they are still "persons born of God, united to Christ, and made partakers of His Spirit." Christian love is not limited to those who believe and do everything alike. Believers can worship separately without being unloving and divisive, or they are free to worship together when appropriate.

Sometimes believers find themselves part of a group that denies or redefines the gospel or that persecutes those faithful to it. Christians who find themselves in such circumstances will likely hear God telling them to "come out from among them" (2 Corinthians 6:17). If this happens, though, those departing should not deny that some true Christians may still remain inside the false church. There may well be true believers unaware of, opposed to, or even striving to reform the false teaching that has infected the body. Elijah and Elisha faithfully remained in unfaithful Israel not out of compromise or fear but in obedience to call the idolatrous nation to repentance.

Yet leaving a church should be a last resort. "It is a most perverse imagination that separation is the only cure for church disorders.... All other remedies possible and lawful are to be attempted before finally deserting a church." Minor errors may be bearable or correctable, and even more serious sins may be of no immediate risk to the body as a whole. Owen offers two criteria for knowing whether to leave. A believer should remain within his church so long as "nothing sinful in itself or to him be required of him as the condition of full fellowship," and so long as the ultimate goal of the church is for believers to be built up in faith, love, and obedience. And Christians who leave must continue loving believers who stay. "We are to love them as subjects of the kingdom of Jesus Christ in the world, to pray for them that they have all needed supplies of grace and the Holy Spirit from above, that God would send out His light and truth to guide them in their worship and obedience, and to help them in things spiritual and physical as we have the opportunity."

Chapter 4: Christian Disunity

In the preceding chapters, Owen addressed the charge that separation from a church is always unloving and divisive. Believers can worship separately and still be unified, for Christian love, church peace, and unity extend beyond church walls and denominational distinctions. Owen now presents three causes of disunity and five rules for avoiding strife in the body of Christ.

Cause 1: Misconceptions about Unity

“The principal cause of our divisions is the ignorance or misunderstanding of the true nature of gospel unity among Christians along with the ways and means by which it may be attained and preserved.” When a church misunderstands what unity is, it pursues a false end using false means, which creates divisions in the body. Owen addresses this source of conflict in three ways. He explains the true nature of gospel unity, then presents the proper means of attaining it, and finally points out several of the improper means that have done so much harm to Christ’s church.

The apostle Paul defines the nature of true gospel unity in Ephesians 4:3–6: “endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” From these four verses Owen identifies four aspects of Christian unity.

True gospel unity is spiritual. “The real union of all true believers to the Lord Christ as their head, formed by His Spirit which dwells in them and conveys His grace to them, is what we mean. For as they become one with and in Him, so they come to be one among themselves as His body, and all the members of the body are but one body, which is where their oneness among themselves does consist.”

True gospel unity is a unity of faith. Just as there is only one Lord who saves, so there is only one saving faith. Having one faith means two things: holding firmly “the fundamental articles of Christian religion” as defined by Scripture, and holding loosely those beliefs and practices which the Lord makes matters of personal conviction (Romans 14:5, 13; Philippians 3:15). “The unity of faith never consisted in holding exactly the same views of things revealed in Scripture. Neither the nature of man nor the means of revelation will allow such a unity to be morally possible.”

True gospel unity is a unity of love. “Love is the bond of perfection by which all the members of the body of Christ are knit together among themselves.” Love unites in two ways. “It supplies grace, and light, and obedience to other members of the body.” Also, “this love acts by kindness and humility toward the weaknesses, mistakes, and faults of others, so it is useful for the preservation of church peace and order.”

True gospel unity is a unity of Christ’s lordship. The king “has given orders for rule and ordinances for worship that are to be observed in all His churches,” and He provides spiritual gifts to church leaders so that they may build up His body. The church that submits to Christ’s authority and exercises His gifts will have “no such variety or difference” to destroy their unity.

So the nature of true gospel unity as defined by the Bible, the unity for which Jesus prayed (John 17:20–23), is a spiritual unity around the essential doctrines of the faith that lovingly joins those identified with Christ under the lordship of Christ.

God sent Christ to reveal His truth, and Christ sent His Spirit to enable His disciples to understand, believe, and obey it. The Holy Spirit and the Scriptures are Christ's appointed means of unifying His church.

Sadly, many groups in the name of Christ have pursued other ends and means than Christ appointed. Misunderstandings and sinful self-interest have divided rather than united followers of Christ.

Among all the churches in the world which are free from idolatry and persecution, it is not different opinions, or a difference in judgment about revealed truths, nor a different practice in sacred affairs, but pride, self-interest, love of honor, reputation, and power ... that are the true cause of that absence of evangelical unity that is at this day among them. For, set them aside and the real differences which would remain may be so managed in love, gentleness, and meekness, as not to interfere with that unity which Christ requires them to preserve.

Whenever proud, power-hungry men try to force others to submit to their wishes for their profit, conflict and division will be the result. Instead, those committed to following Christ must rely on the Spirit of God to use the Word of God to create a loving, spiritual unity of faith under the lordship of Christ. All other aims and attempts at unity will fail, for "if we will not be contented with the union that Christ has appointed, it is certain that we shall have none in this world."

Cause 2: Neglect of True Gospel Goals

Another chief cause of disunity among Christians is the neglect of the gospel and what God chiefly intends it to accomplish. God gave the gospel to convert, edify, sanctify, and order. Where these goals are neglected, divisions will inevitably occur:

1. *Conversion*. "The first end of preaching the gospel is the conversion of the souls of men to God."
2. *Edification*. "The second end of the dispensing of the gospel in the assemblies of the churches of Christ by the ministers of them is the building up of those who are converted to God and do believe. This consists in the feeding of His sheep and lambs that the Lord Christ has committed to them."
3. *Holiness*. "It is the known and open duty of churches, through their leaders, by all means to support and promote the growth of light, knowledge, godliness, discipline, and fruitfulness of conversation in those members in whom they may be found or do appear in a special manner."
4. *Order*. "In the church also belongs the proper practice of gospel discipline according to the mind of Christ.... The Lord Christ has appointed some to rule and some to be ruled, He has prescribed laws or rules whereby the one should govern and the other obey, and He has determined the matter, manner, and goal of this rule and government. These truths cannot well be called into controversy by those who profess to believe the gospel."

Whenever churches neglect the gospel goals of converting souls, edifying saints, sanctifying believers, and ordering church affairs according to Christ's directions, there will necessarily be conflict and division. Therefore a central aspect to achieving church unity is for the church to focus on doing what Christ created it to do. If the church does not make disciples and obey Christ, it can never hope to be effective for or united in Christ.

Cause 3: Redefining Church Membership

The Puritans wanted to purify the Church of England from the remnants of Roman Catholicism still present in its worship and church structures. To them, priestly robes downplayed the priesthood of believers, the formal liturgy hindered the worship of God in spirit and truth, and additional requirements for full church communion altered the Bible's simple teaching on church membership. Owen explains that any church that demands more for membership than the Bible does divides the body of Christ. Churches should follow the New Testament model that conversion is the sole qualification for church membership and the sole basis of true Christian unity. "This profession of conversion to God by the ministry of the Word and the mutual acknowledgment of each other as so converted to God ... was the foundation of holy, spiritual love and unity among them."

Five Rules for Avoiding Strife

Christians are not merely divided but divisive. Their misconceptions about unity, their neglect of true gospel goals, and their redefinition of church membership all contribute to church disunity, while their self-righteousness makes them hypersensitive to the flaws of others and blind to their own. Believers in each denomination are convinced that they are right and everyone else is wrong, an evil that must "be diligently watched against by all who love unity, truth, holiness, or peace." Owen closes by offering five Scriptural rules to help believers guard against their own divisiveness.

1. Christians should seek to live a quiet life and mind their own business (1 Thessalonians 4:11). "When any persons are prompted by a meddlesome curiosity to interject themselves in the ways, affairs, and concerns of other men beyond what the laws of love, usefulness, and mutual Christian aid require, outbursts, disorders, irritations, strife, and envious rivalries with a world of evils will result."
2. Christians are strictly commanded to not judge lest they be judged (Matthew 7:1).
3. Christians are forbidden to replace Jesus as the Lord over each person's conscience (Romans 14:4).
4. Christians must subdue their own pride, which increases their tendency to meddle, judge, and dominate (Romans 12:3).
5. Christians must guard against "false teachers, seducers, bringers of new, corrupt, and heretical doctrines, who have caused many breaches and divisions" (1 Timothy 6:20–21).

So, says Owen, in order for Christians to be unified they must first define unity Biblically. Church unity is spiritual, orthodox, loving, and obedient to Christ. Second, Christians must pursue unity appropriately. Unity is achieved and maintained by Word and Spirit—teaching God's truth and trusting in God's Spirit to make it understood, believed, and obeyed. Third, churches must embrace as members those whom Christ accepts as members. Salvation is the sole criterion for being in the invisible church, and it should be for the visible church as well. Finally, Christians should be less intrusive, judgmental, controlling, and proud, but more cautious against false teaching. Holiness and truth are essential to church harmony and health. Only by adhering to the Scripture's teachings on unity, membership, holiness, and doctrine can the body of Christ ever enjoy the oneness that its Lord intends for it.

Chapter 5: Defending Nonconformity

Owen concludes with a “more particular account concerning our nonconformity and noncompliance with the church’s observances.” He explains more specifically why he and many others feel compelled to worship separately from the services and rites prescribed by the Church of England. Owen wants the nation to know that Nonconformists are neither unloving nor divisive. They are not to blame for the separation that occurred; they were wrongfully forced out by the state church. Though mistreated and misrepresented, they still pray regularly for “the God of love and peace to take away all of the divisions and their causes among us,” and they welcome “the contribution of any assistance by counsel or brotherly compliance” to promote reconciliation. The ultimate obligation of every person, however, is not to please men or appease authorities but to obey God. “The principal duty for us is quietly to approve our consciences to God, that with sincere hearts we desire in all things to please Him and to conform lives, principles, and practices to His will, so far as He is graciously pleased to make it known to us.”

The primary reason Nonconformists worshipped separately from the Church of England is that it tried to force unbiblical requirements on its members. Christians should not be required to submit to unbiblical conditions to enjoy full fellowship, as several arguments prove. First, Christ is the head of the church, and only He can dictate the terms of membership and fellowship. Second, the apostles and those in the early church were cautious about adding unnecessary restrictions on full communion (Acts 15; Romans 14:1–15:6). Third, if men are allowed to create their own conditions for church communion, then there are no stable guidelines for membership. Therefore it is those who alter Christ’s rules for church fellowship who are responsible for dividing the church, not those who obey God rather than men.

A second reason that many ministers felt it necessary to minister outside the Church of England is that they could not obey Christ otherwise. Owen offers two instances. First, God expects leaders of local churches to meet the spiritual needs of their particular congregations. They are to preach and teach, guide and guard, console and confront, discipline and restore—in short, to do anything and everything necessary for the well-being and edification of those under their charge. However, the hierarchy of the Church of England separates pastors from their flocks and divides the duties of a shepherd into several offices, making it impossible to shepherd as God commands. Second, Christ charges pastors to properly administer baptism and communion, but to do so they must be in direct, regular contact with the members of the church to know their qualifications to receive these sacraments. Therefore, in order to obey Christ, Nonconformist pastors had to disobey Anglican authorities.

Owen closes with a final declaration of the innocence and integrity of the Nonconformist cause:

We are not convinced that any principle or practice which we own or allow is in anything contrary to that love, peace, and unity which the Lord Christ requires to be kept and preserved among His disciples, or those that profess faith in Him and obedience to Him according to the gospel. We know nothing in them but what is consistent and compliant with that gospel union which should be in and among the churches of Christ.... We shall endeavor, also, to exercise all duties of the same love, peace, and gentleness toward them by whom we are hated and attacked.

Appraisal

John Owen initially published this work anonymously, but his writing is recognizable. The thorough analysis, careful reasoning, precise language, Biblical grounding, and constant earnestness are all characteristic of this godly minister. Though persecuted and slandered, Owen does not respond angrily or spitefully. He is honest in identifying his accusers as the principal culprits in causing church divisions, but he is not hateful, and throughout his lengthy defense he maintains a calm, peaceable tone. The author demonstrates the importance of communicating rationally, of defining terms Biblically, of prioritizing the essentials of the faith, and of focusing on what believers share in common rather than what differentiates them. In short, Owen practices what he preaches and demonstrates what it looks like for believers to lovingly seek peace. Like his Lord, when reviled he did not revile in return, and when he suffered he did not threaten but entrusted himself to God who judges righteously (1 Peter 2:23). Because of these many excellent attributes, Owen's book remains an excellent model and helpful resource to help Christians pursue love, church peace, and unity.

Connection to Be United in Christ

The Bible's brief glimpses of the early church present an ideal Christian community living together in loving harmony. "Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need" (Acts 2:44–45). "Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common" (Acts 4:32). Yet sin soon separated the saints (Acts 5:1–11; 6:1–6), and the church has had to fight for unity ever since. That it must be one is clear, for God demands it, Christ prayed for it, and the Holy Spirit was sent to attain and maintain it. Sadly, the church has often been its own worst enemy, and Christians have needlessly divided over matters that do not matter as much to God as unity does. John Owen demonstrates Scripturally the priority of love, the nature of unity, the proper means of pursuing peace, the chief causes of division, the rules for minimizing conflict, and the proper way to respond to personal attacks. In Heaven, the one church will finally worship together as one, but until then Christians must never stop striving to Be United in Christ.

Key Quotations

“We are not engaged in an inquiry merely after peace, but after peace with truth. Yes, to lay aside the consideration of truth in an investigation into peace and agreement in and about spiritual things is to disregard God and His authority.”

“Where any opinion or practice in or about religion or the worship of God impairs the gracious, holy principles of love and peace, or obstructs men in the practice of any duties which those principles require, it is a great and weighty judgment against their truth and acceptance with God.”

“We know that God has called Himself the God of love, peace, and order in the church, because they are originally from Him.... And as love is the new commandment which Jesus Christ has given to His disciples, so He has appointed it to be the bond of perfection to them.”

“It is, then, the universal collective body of those who profess the gospel throughout the world which we acknowledge as the universal church of Christ.”

“It seems, therefore, that the knowledge of the only true God is not sufficient to attain eternal life, unless the knowledge of Jesus Christ also accompanies it.”

“And this is the visible church, where they all universally belong who profess the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours.”

“To this ... church we owe all Christian love, and are obligated to practice all the effects of it, both toward the whole and every particular member, as we have advantage and occasion. And not only so, but it is also our duty to live in constant communion with it.”

“All other remedies possible and lawful are to be attempted before finally deserting a church.”

“In the meantime, we are to love them [professing Christians who worship differently] as subjects of the kingdom of Jesus Christ in the world, to pray for them that they have all needed supplies of grace and the Holy Spirit from above, that God would send out His light and truth to guide them in their worship and obedience, and to help them in things spiritual and physical.”

“The principal cause of our divisions is the ignorance or misunderstanding of the true nature of gospel unity among Christians along with the ways and means by which it may be attained and preserved.”

“We believe that our Lord Jesus Christ, as the king, ruler, and lawgiver of His church, has ordained that all His disciples, all persons belonging to His church, should be gathered into distinct societies and become as flocks of sheep in several folds under the eye of their great Shepherd and the respective conduct of those employed under Him. And this gathering of professing believers in and into particular churches, for the celebration of the ordinances of sacred worship appointed by Christ and the participation of His institutions for their edification, is not a matter of accident or common providence but is to be an act in them of choice and voluntary obedience to the commands of Christ.”

“Let us all labor to stir up those gracious principles of love and peace which should guide us in the use of our liberty, and which will enable us to preserve gospel unity, and there will be great progress made toward peace, reconciliation, and unity among all Christians.”

“The principal duty for us is quietly to approve our consciences to God, that with sincere hearts we desire in all things to please Him and to conform our lives, principles, and practices to His will, so far as He is graciously pleased to make it known to us.”

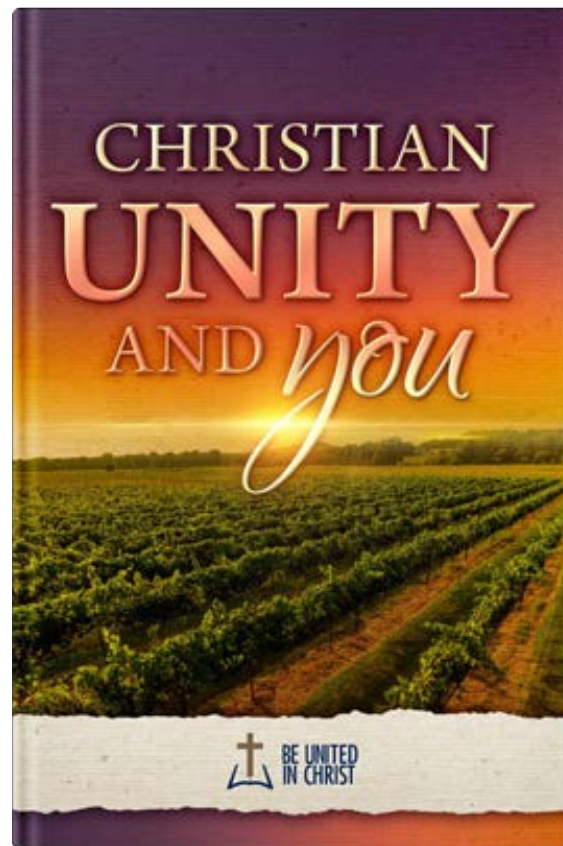
Key Bible Passages (NASB)

“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in Heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:44–45)
“Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.” (Matthew 7:1–2)
“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19–20)
“But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” (Acts 6:4)
“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30–31)
“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” (Romans 12:18)
“Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.” (1 Corinthians 4:1–2)
“For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.” (1 Corinthians 9:16)
“If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” (1 Corinthians 13:1)
“Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.” (2 Corinthians 13:11)
“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone.” (Ephesians 2:19–20)
“Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4:1–3)
“And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:11–13)
“Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you.” (1 Thessalonians 4:11)
“Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.” (Hebrews 12:14)

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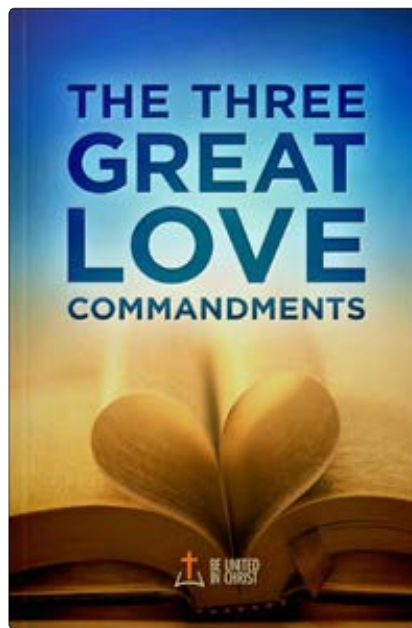
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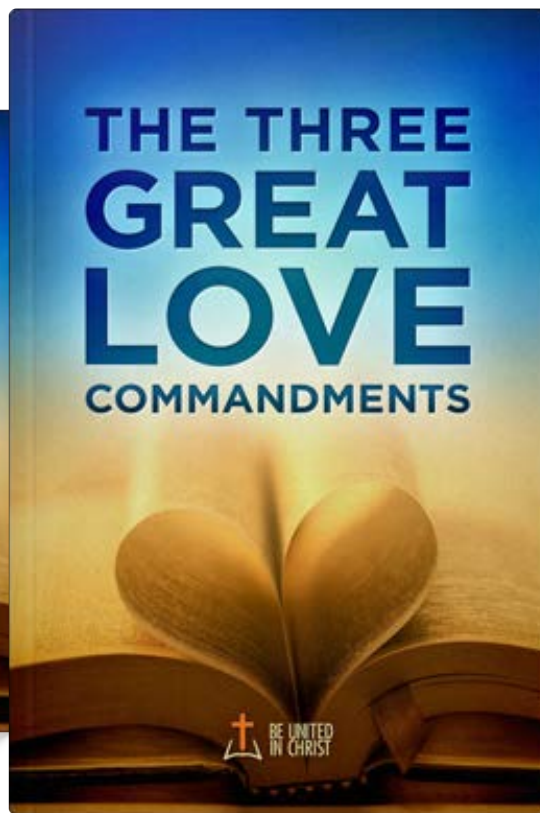
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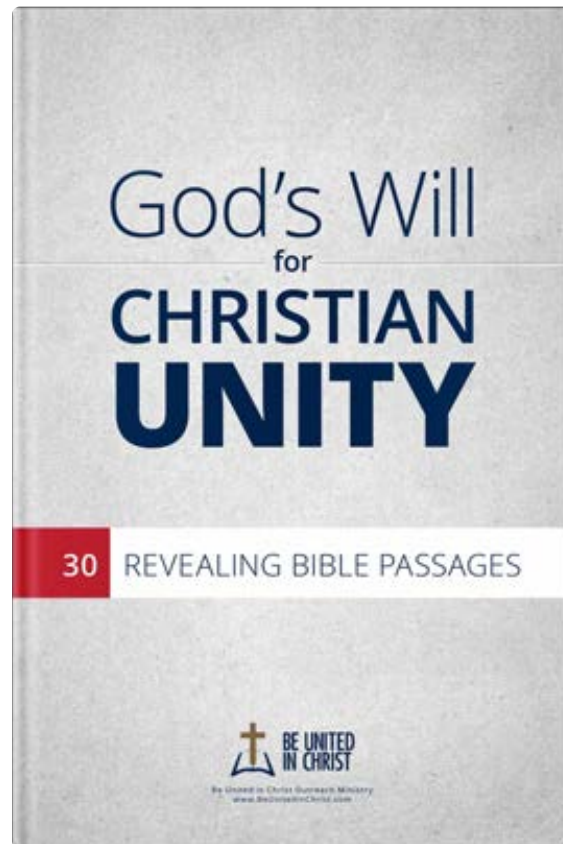
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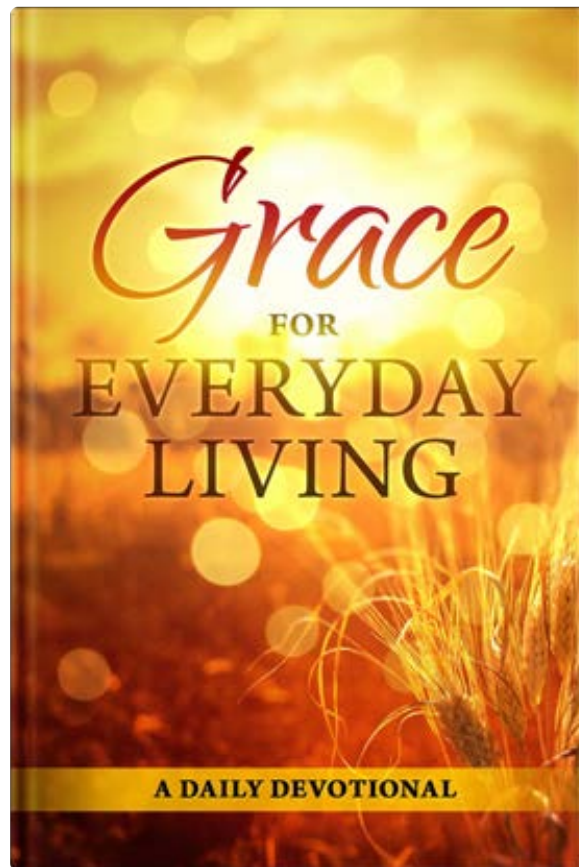
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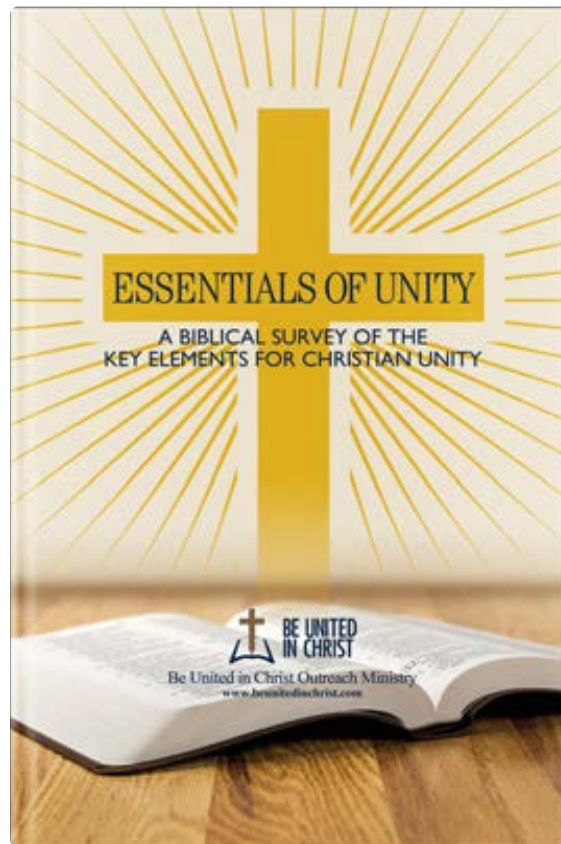
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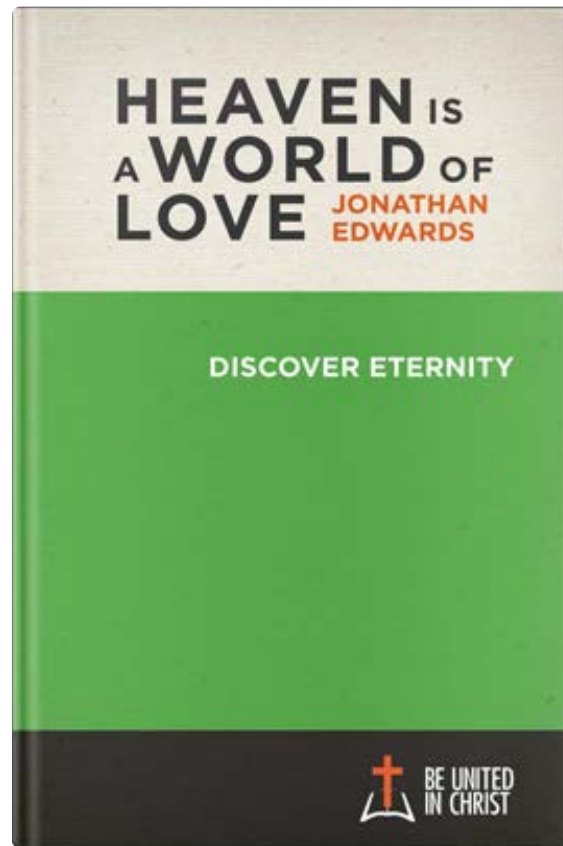
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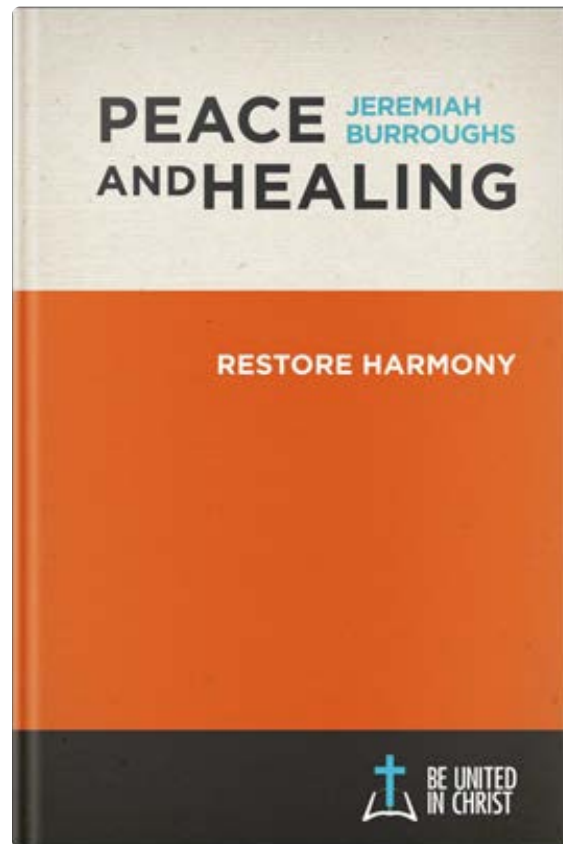


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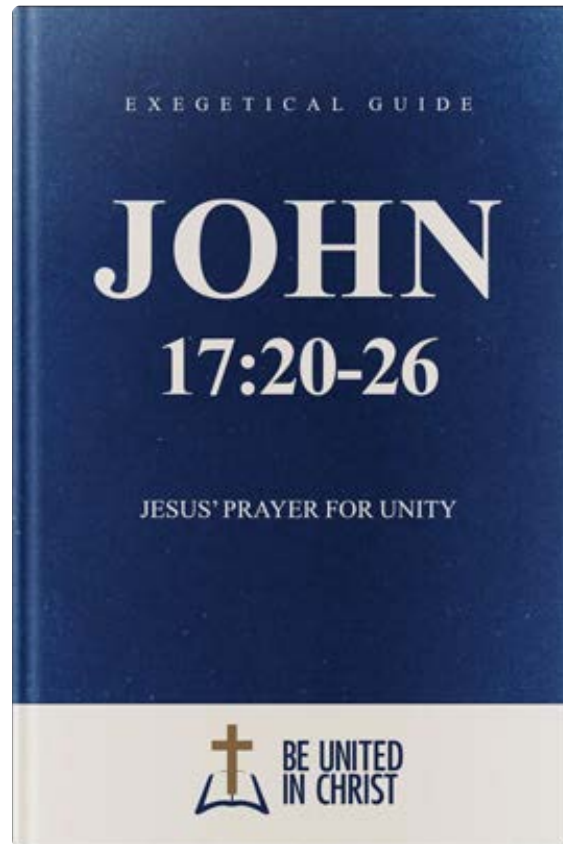
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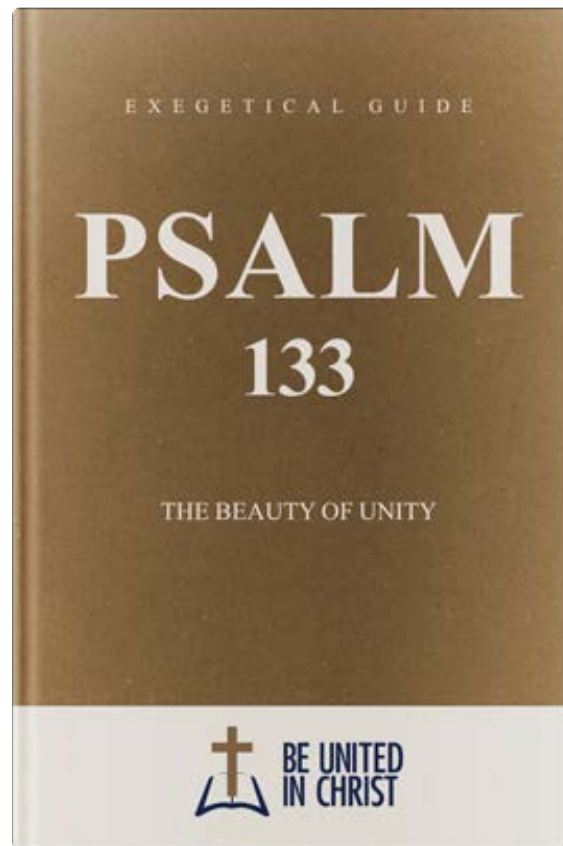


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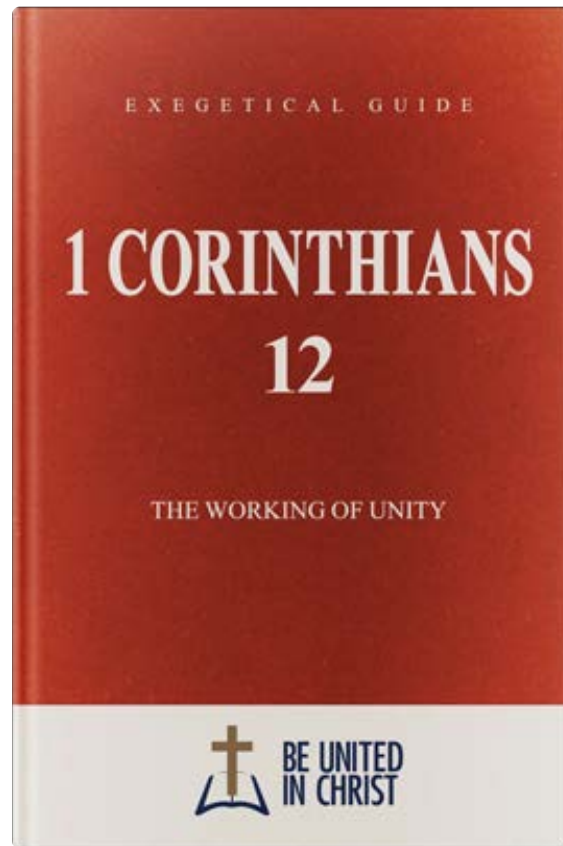


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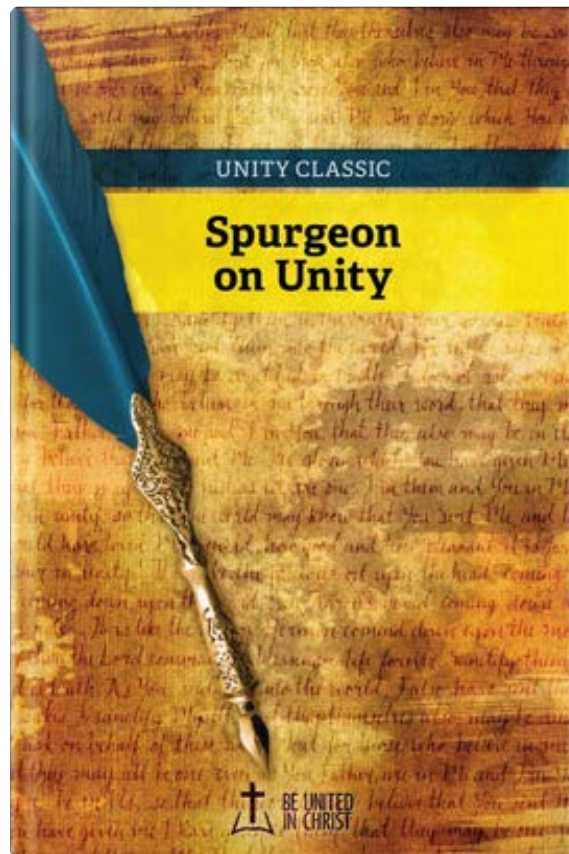


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