

## BOOK SUMMARY

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# Rules for Walking in Gospel Fellowship

John Owen

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# BE UNITED IN CHRIST BOOK SUMMARY

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# **Be United in Christ**

Book Summary

*Rules for Walking in Gospel Fellowship*

John Owen

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## **Author**

John Owen is one of the most influential writers and thinkers in Christian history. He was born near Oxford, England in 1616 to a Puritan family. At age twelve, he entered Queen’s College at Oxford and obtained both his bachelor’s and master’s degrees by the age of twenty. Owen had a broad knowledge of the Scriptures and had disciplined himself to live a righteous life, but he struggled with doubts regarding his salvation. While in London, however, his heart was transformed after hearing a sermon from the Gospel of Matthew, “Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?” (8:26).

Owen was a devoted husband, father, writer, pastor, and chaplain in the British army. Owen and his wife, Mary, had eleven children, none of whom outlived their parents. He left behind a vast body of writing that has been immensely influential to other Christian leaders, including John Bunyan and Jonathan Edwards. His compiled works fill twenty-four volumes and include *The Mortification of Sin*, *Communion with God*, and *The Holy Spirit*.

Owen lived in a time of significant religious conflict. Europe was plagued with spiritual unrest and strife between denominations. Owen’s career changed multiple times as various factions took control of the church, for he was constantly pressured to align himself with whoever was in power. But Owen desired unity among Christians more than his own personal advancement.

Centuries later his works continue to be studied for their profound insights into faith and Christian living. At the same time, he was, very simply, a devoted, loving servant of Christ. Two days before his death, in 1683, Owen dictated his last words:

I am going to Him whom my soul has loved, or rather 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 insignificant. Live and pray and hope and wait patiently and do not despair; the promise stands invincible that He will never leave you nor forsake you.<sup>1</sup>

## **Overview**

Jesus calls His followers to walk together in fellowship. This allows believers to encourage each other through trials and keep each other from straying from the truth. Owen urges Christians to live in close relation to one another and to respond in love by God’s grace. It is easy for believers to be distracted from their walk with God by differences of opinion in doctrine, lifestyle, or worship. Owen’s goal is to “recall the minds of men from the entanglements of controversies about church affairs, and to engage them into a serious, humble performance of those duties which are, by the express command of Jesus Christ, necessary for them” (53–54).

However, Christians often hesitate to follow God and experience the sweetness of fellowship with Him and with other believers. They allow fear, distractions, and love for the world to come between them and the blessed life that Christ offers, rather than experiencing the joy and peace that comes from obedience to God.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Correspondence of John Owen (1616–1683), with an Account of His Life and Work*, edited by Peter Toon (Cambridge, England: James Clarke, 1970), 174.

Owen records twenty-two rules, or duties, that church members must have toward pastors and each other. The rules, divided into two sections, offer practical direction on Christian fellowship, encouraging readers to actively love their pastor and love one another. The first section states seven rules that church members should follow regarding their pastor. The second section is composed of fifteen rules regarding godly behavior between church members. For each, Owen briefly states the rule, then supports it with Scripture, and concludes with an explanation and motivation for it.

His work is both practical and insightful, giving explanations and applications for his rules. Owen clearly shows God's desire for unity and outlines how believers are to live and work together from Scripture. He draws from his experience in pastoring and his study of the Word to write this simple but powerful collection of rules for his fellow believers. Following them not only encourages believers to grow spiritually but also helps Christians to honor God and achieve Christian unity.

### **Part 1: Rules Toward the Pastor**

The first part of Owen's book consists of seven duties that church members have toward "the pastor or minister that watches for our souls" (55). These duties emphasize the respect that is due to pastors and focus on both spiritual and physical needs. Since God has placed pastors in unique positions of leadership, it is the responsibility of the church to follow them well.

#### **Rule 1: Follow His Instruction (55–56)**

Christians should diligently pay attention and submit to the preaching and teaching of their pastor "with ready obedience in the Lord." He bases this first rule on the following texts: 1 Corinthians 4:1; 2 Corinthians 5:18, 20; 2 Corinthians 4:7; Galatians 4:14; 2 Thessalonians 3:14; Hebrews 13:7, 17. God ordained "the work of preaching unto the conversion of souls," and "the appointment of some to the performance of that work" is from Him.

Since the pastor's role is to teach God's Word, the church's duty is to learn and apply it. This is not merely for the pastor's benefit. The church that fails to apply what is taught will become spiritually weak and lazy. "There is nothing but a respect for the truth and authority of God in the administration of the Word that will establish in the minds of men a sober and profitable attention to it. Men are not weary of hearing until they are weary of practicing."

Owen gives several Biblical reasons to respect pastors. First, Christ Himself established the office of pastor, and thus pastors are merely following Christ's example. Second, God calls specific people to this office. Finally, the church affirms this call by appointing them as pastors. These men are entrusted with "a stewardship in the house of God that is the special flock over which, in particular, they are made overseers (see 1 Corinthians 4:1–2)." A pastor is not only a leader but also a protector, watching over his sheep and urging them to understand and follow the truth of God's Word. Therefore, church members should "obey those who rule over [them], and be submissive, for they watch out for [their] souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for [them]" (Hebrews 13:17).

## **Rule 2: Follow His Example (56–58)**

The second rule urges church members to observe the pastor's life and "diligently follow, so far as he walks in the steps of Jesus Christ." He supports this rule with these Biblical texts: 1 Corinthians 4:16; Hebrews 13:7; 2 Thessalonians 3:7; Philippians 3:17; 1 Timothy 4:12; 1 Peter 5:3. A pastor, then, must live as an example for his church: "A pastor's life should be vocal; sermons must be practiced as well as preached... If a man teaches uprightly and walks crookedly, more will fall down in the night of his life than he built in the day of his doctrine."

Pastors, though, are imperfect like everyone else. Owen recognizes this and specifies that Christians are to imitate only their pastor's "purity and holiness." At the same time, "their flaws [are] to be covered with love (Galatians 4:13–14)." The apostle Paul instructed the church to "imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). A pastor is to be an example of Christ and his flock is to follow his lead.

## **Rule 3: Pray for Him (58)**

Because a pastor still wrestles with temptation, weakness, and discouragement, Owen encourages prayers to be "continually made on his behalf for assistance and success in the work committed to him." The following texts support this rule: Ephesians 6:18–20; 2 Thessalonians 3:1–2; Colossians 4:3; Acts 12:5. Church members should be moved to prayer as they remember "the greatness of the work" their pastor undertakes, "the strength of the opposition" against him, the importance of the human souls to whom he ministers, and "the glory of God in Christ," which is the ultimate goal of his ministry.

Pastors face extreme spiritual opposition, and so as "their temptations are multiplied, so should prayers be multiplied on their behalf." As the pastor watches over the souls of his church, so they should also "remember their pastor in private," not only attending church to listen to his teaching but also praying for the church leaders throughout the week.

Prayer benefits both the pastor and his people. "That for which he stands in so much need of prayers is the saints' good, and not particularly his own. Help him who carries the burden." As Paul also asked of the church in Thessalonica, "Pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you, and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for not all have faith" (2 Thessalonians 3:1–2). United together, Christians can battle against wickedness and evil by praying for their leaders.

## **Rule 4: Respect Him (58–59)**

Ministers are worthy of honor, respect, and submission because God appoints them to their office. The following texts are provided by Owen to support this rule: 1 Corinthians 4:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13; 1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Peter 5:5; Hebrews 13:17. Scripture designates them as ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20), stewards (1 Corinthians 4:1), and men of God (1 Samuel 2:27), among other titles. Yet, Owen warns that some pastors may be "negligent, treacherous, tyrannical, or foolish," and in such cases they forfeit this respect. Believers must be discerning of the pastor's character but also should be diligent in showing honor to those God has placed in authority.



While church leaders face persecution and scorn from the world, their brothers and sisters in Christ are to “esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake” (1 Thessalonians 5:13). Owen notes that “the honor of the minister is the grace of the church, and to regard him is a gospel duty acceptable to God in Christ.”

### **Rule 5: Provide for Him (59–61)**

The church has a duty to provide for a pastor’s material needs. Owen uses the following texts to support this rule: 1 Timothy 5:17–18; Galatians 6:6–7; 1 Corinthians 9:7, 9–11, 13–14; Matthew 10:9–10. “The burden, or rather the labor of love, in providing for the pastors, lies upon the churches themselves, which they are to do in such a manner as is suitable to the condition where they are, and the increase given them of God.” It is necessary and just for a church to provide for its pastor, that he may devote himself to “prayer and to the ministry of the Word” (Acts 6:4). Pastors “are to give themselves wholly to the work of the ministry.” Therefore, to “withhold his wages is a crying sin.”

### **Rule 6: Encourage Him (61)**

Ministers often suffer for their work. Yet their hardships should be shared by the church, and ministers should be encouraged through difficult times. Owen supports this rule from 2 Timothy 4:16 and 2 Timothy 1:16–18.

A common cause should be carried on by common assistance. That which concerns all should be supported by all. When persecution rises for the word’s sake, generally it begins with the leaders (1 Peter 4:17–18). The common way to scatter the sheep is by injuring the shepherds (Zechariah 13:7–8). It is for the church’s sake he is reviled and persecuted (2 Timothy 2:10; Colossians 1:24), and therefore it is the church’s duty to share with him and help to bear his burden.... While a pastor lives, if he suffers for the truth, the church cannot desert him, nor cease the performance of all required duties.

To abandon a pastor at such a time is the equivalent of marital unfaithfulness. “Should a wife forsake her husband because he is in trouble for her sake?” As a family, the church should stand together, especially in times of hardship.

### **Rule 7: Assemble with Him (61–62)**

The final duty of a church towards her pastor is to gather “in the assembly upon his appointment.” Owen supports this rule with Acts 14:27, “Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.” Unity among believers is vital for both personal and corporate growth, and there is no substitute for regularly meeting with the body of Christ. Believers should consider how to motivate one another “to love and good deeds, not forsaking [their] own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as [they] see the day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:24–25, NASB).

Owen concludes Part 1 by encouraging believers to perform these duties in God’s strength rather than their own: “Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it” (Colossians 4:17).

## **Part 2: Rules Toward One Another**

Owen now turns his attention to fifteen duties that church members have toward one another. Christians should not only see each other on Sunday mornings but should also live life together and “walk in fellowship” (62). This includes frequent interaction to encourage each other and confront each other’s sin when needed. Christian unity is expressed through side-by-side living.

### **Rule 1: Love One Another (62–64)**

The rule of “affectionate, sincere love in all things, without falseness towards one another, like that which Christ bears to His church” is of first importance. Owen supports this rule to love with the following texts: John 15:12; John 13:34–35; Romans 13:8; Ephesians 5:2; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 4:21; Romans 12:10. He further defines love:

Love is the fountain of all duties towards God and man (Matthew 22:37), the substance of all rules that concern the saints, the bond of communion, the “fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:8–10), the advancement of the honor of the Lord Jesus, and the glory of the gospel... It is the fountain, rule, scope, aim, and fruit of gospel communion.

Owen emphasizes that love is not only encouraged but commanded in the Bible. God shows “eternal, peculiar, distinguishing, and faithful love” to believers. Finally, without love it is “impossible to perform any other duty.” If Christians do not love each other, they will fail at all of the other rules of the Christian life.

Believers should look to the “intense, inexpressible love of Jesus Christ, in His whole humiliation and laying down His life for us ... as an example for us.” Jesus told His followers, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34–35).

### **Rule 2: Pray for the Church (64–65)**

The first expression of Christian love is “continual prayer for the fruitfulness of the church, in God’s protection towards it.” Owen supports this rule from the following Scriptures: Psalm 122:6; Philippians 1:4–5; Romans 1:9; Acts 12:5; Isaiah 62:6–7; Ephesians 6:18; Colossians 4:12. Prayer is “the well-traveled way of the soul’s communion with God.” Church members are to pray for the church and for its “good, prosperity, flourishing, peace, increase, edification, and protection,” keeping in mind that this “is a duty every day required of all the members.”

Believers should pray both for the church as a whole and for individuals in need. Psalm 122:6 instructs the Israelites to pray “for the peace of Jerusalem,” and Acts 12:5 states that, when Peter was imprisoned, “constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.” Both of these are instances when believers came together with united hearts to petition God in their requests.



### **Rule 3: Work for the Purity of the Church (65–66)**

Believers should work together to preserve the teaching of truth and freedom found in Christ. Owen supports this rule with these texts: Jude 3; Hebrews 12:3–4; 1 John 3:16; Galatians 5:1, 13; 1 Corinthians 7:23; Song of Solomon 6:4; 1 Peter 3:15. He gives four ways to work toward this goal.

First, he calls Christians to be “diligently laboring in the Word, with fervent prayer, to acquaint ourselves with the mind and will of God concerning the way of worship which we profess, and the rules of walking which we desire to practice.” Second, believers are to draw together when under persecution. Attacks against the church or individual Christians are really attacks against Christ; that is, “Christ wounded through the sides of His servants.” Third, Owen states that believers should defend “the church against lies.” Persecution is to be expected, but Christians cannot be silent when the church is falsely accused. Fourth, Christians are to refuse to be subjected “to any persons or things which ... labor for power over the church.” Anyone who attempts to seize power and force unbiblical ideas on the church must be strongly resisted (Galatians 5:1, 13).

### **Rule 4: Preserve Unity (66–67)**

Owen next calls believers to the “care and endeavoring for the preservation of unity.” He provides the following texts as support for this rule: Philippians 2:1–3; Ephesians 4:3–4; 1 Corinthians 1:10; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Romans 14:19; Romans 15:5; 1 Corinthians 6:5–7; Acts 4:32. While love is the greatest rule by which church members relate to one another, unity “is the main aim and most proper fruit of love.”

Unity has three parts: spiritual, ecclesiastical [church-related], and civil. It is spiritual by the “participation of the same Spirit of grace and communication in the same Christ,” which bonds all Christians throughout history by a common faith. Unity is ecclesiastical in that the church is “opposed to schism, divisions, evil assumptions, self-practices, causeless differences in judgment in spiritual things concerning the kingdom of Christ, or whatever else is contrary to closeness of affection and oneness of mind.” Unity is also civil. Christians are to be “seeking the welfare of each other” by continuing “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

Owen next gives five motivations for preserving unity: Christ’s earnestness in His teaching and His prayers, the shame that disunity brings to Him, the joy and comfort that comes from unity, the sorrow and pain brought by disunity, and the dangers to a church when it is living in disunity.

Because unity is so crucial in the body of Christ, Owen provides four additional directions to aid in preserving unity. First, believers are to “labor by prayer and faith to have our hearts and spirits thoroughly seasoned with that affectionate love.” Second, Christians should “carefully observe, in ourselves or others, the first beginnings of strife; which are as the letting out of water, and, if not prevented, will make a breach like the sea.” Third, we must be watchful and diligently “apply ourselves to the removal of the first appearance of divisions.” Finally, the church must work hard and “strike at the root of all division” by conforming itself to Christ daily.

### **Rule 5: Be Separate from the World (67–69)**

Owen supports his call to be set apart from the world from these texts: Numbers 23:9; John 15:19; 2 Corinthians 6:14–18; Ephesians 5:8, 11; 2 Timothy 3:5; Hosea 4:15; Revelation 18:4; Proverbs 14:7. “He that will not separate from the world and false worship is separate from Christ.”

By separation, Owen does not mean physically withdrawing from others. This separation should not limit those within the church from caring for the physical and spiritual needs of non-believers. Nor is Owen calling his audience to break ties with their family members who do not love God. Rather, his challenge is that church members should have a distinct way of life, showing kindness in the face of opposition and selflessly serving others rather than pursuing selfish pleasures.

Owen lists three ways for Christians to separate themselves from the world. They are to be different in their “manner of walking and conversation.” Also, the believer’s response to persecution should be gracious and loving rather than bitter and hateful. Lastly, Christians should exercise moderation in all areas of life.

In order that believers “not be infected and plagued” by sin, it is important that they “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness” (Ephesians 5:11). Christians are to display the love of Christ to the world but not to find their satisfaction or pleasure in the world. Instead their aim and delight should be “the glory of Christ, the honor of the gospel, the joy and crown of the saints.”

### **Rule 6: Speak Godly Words to Each Other (69–70)**

God calls Christians to have “frequent spiritual communication for the building up of one another, according to gifts received.” Owen provides the following texts to support this rule: Malachi 3:16; Job 2:11; Ephesians 4:29; Colossians 4:6; Ephesians 5:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 3:13; Jude 20; Hebrews 10:24–25; Acts 18:26; 1 Corinthians 12:7. He asserts that “every man should labor that he may walk and dwell in knowledge in his family. That we should also labor to do so in the church or family of God is no less apparent.”

To accomplish this, he gives three occasions for speaking godly words to each other: on ordinary occasions, on particular occasions, and when assembling in a group. In ordinary situations, believers “ought to be continually making mention of the Lord, with pleasant words tending to edification, and not waste their opportunities with foolish and light speeches that are not convenient.” On particular occasions, when “anything of weight and concern to the church is brought up,” believers should also speak carefully, encouraging one another. And whenever believers assemble for worship, they should remember that they have a duty “for the increasing of knowledge, love, charity, experience, and the improving of gifts received, everyone contributing” to the building up of the church.

### **Rule 7: Bear with One Another (70–72)**

Christians are to “bear with each other’s frailties, weakness, tenderness, failings, in meekness, patience, pity, and with assistance.” Owen supports this rule with the following texts: Ephesians 4:32; Matthew 18:21–22; Mark 11:25–26; Romans 14:13; Romans 15:1–2; 1 Corinthians 13:4–7; Galatians 6:1; Colossians 3:12–14. As we spend time with other believers, we will learn their sins and struggles, and our duty is to show love and patience. “Free pardon is the substance of the gospel, the work of God in perfection (Isaiah 55), proposed to us for imitation (Matthew 18:23–35).” It is the “great glory of the gospel” to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

Everyone needs grace on a daily basis. “While we are clothed with flesh we do all things imperfectly. In many things we offend all; who knows how often?” Rather than rejoicing, raging, or plotting revenge at the failings of others, Christians should remember their own weakness and how much they need “others’ patience, forbearance, and pardon.”

Owen offers several motives for bearing with each other. First, God gives the perfect example. His “infinite mercy, patience, tolerance, long-suffering, and free grace toward us” despite our “hourly failings” should be our model. Additionally, Christ shows love and patience by His constant pleading on our behalf in spite of “our continual backsliding.” Finally, we should be greatly motivated by the knowledge that showing grace to each other will be to “the great glory of the gospel.”

Meekness, patience, long-suffering, and forgiveness, hiding, covering, and removing of offenses are the footsteps of Christ. Do you see your brother fail? Pity him. Does he continue in it? Earnestly pray for him, rebuke him.... When your brother offends you, wait until you take a faithful view of the patience of God toward you, and then consider His command to you to go and do likewise. Let, then, all tenderness of affection ... towards one another be put on among us, as is fitting for saints.

### **Rule 8: Bear One Another’s Burdens (72–74)**

Owen next urges believers to have “tender and affectionate participation with one another in their states and conditions, bearing each other’s burdens.” He enlists the following texts to support this eighth rule: Galatians 6:2; Hebrews 13:3; 1 Corinthians 12:25–26; 2 Corinthians 11:29; James 1:27; Matthew 25:35–36, 40; 2 Timothy 1:16–17; Acts 20:35. To successfully bear one another’s burdens requires compassion, courage, wisdom, and a strong desire for the thriving of the church and each of its members.

Though difficult, Owen speaks strongly against those who would ignore this rule. “It is a rotten member who is not affected with the anguish of his companions.... They who are not concerned with the troubles, sorrows, visitations, wants, poverties, persecutions of the saints, not so far as to pity their wounds, to feel their strokes, to refresh their spirits, help bear their burdens upon their own shoulders, can never assure themselves that they are united to the Head of those saints.” God calls His followers to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

### **Rule 9: Support the Poor (74–76)**

Jesus told His followers that they would always have poor people among them (Matthew 26:11). Whether believers are wealthy or not, they have a responsibility to aid those in need. Owen supports this rule with these texts: 1 John 3:17–18; 1 Corinthians 16:1–2; 2 Corinthians 9:5–7; Romans 12:13; Galatians 6:10; 1 Timothy 6:17–19; Hebrews 13:16; Leviticus 25:35; Matthew 25:34–36, 40.

Giving does not necessarily mean donating money but being willing to spend time and effort to assist others. Not all are able to share financially, so “those who have nothing but their labor should spare out of that for those who cannot work.” Owen echoes the apostle John regarding the one who sees a need and will not meet it: “How does the love of God abide in him?” (1 John 3:17).

All believers know what it means to be poor and in need of help. God has taken believers from a spiritually bankrupt state and given them an inheritance as His children. Owen reminds Christians that giving to those who are in need causes the gospel to be “exceedingly exalted,” and God has promised rewards to those who give. Additionally, Christ told His disciples that when they ministered to another’s needs, they were serving Him. As Jesus said, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (Matthew 25:40).

### **Rule 10: Avoid Divisions (76–79)**

Owen urges Christians to identify and “avoid carefully all causes and causers of divisions.” Believers should take special care to avoid those who bring false teachings that contradict sound doctrine. His supporting texts for this rule are: Romans 16:17–18; Matthew 24:4–5, 23–25; 1 Timothy 6:3–5; 2 Timothy 2:16–17; Titus 3:9–11; 1 John 2:18–19; 1 John 4:1; 2 John 10–11; Acts 20:29–31; Revelation 2:14–16.

False teaching can slowly creep in and destroy church families if they are not careful. One result of bad Bible teaching is disunity in the body. “If the preservation of unity should be our aim, then certainly the causes and causers of division should be avoided.” Few things are more dangerous to the church than lies spread among the body by those who are entrusted to teach the truth. Often lies are covered with false appearances of innocence and holiness, so believers must be careful to avoid being deceived (Acts 20:29–31).

Owen offers seven instructions about the dangers of division. First, a Christian needs to understand “the main truths of the gospel and the essential doctrines of the faith, so that on the first suspicion of evil they may turn away from him who brings it.” A person must know the Scriptures well in order to know the difference between truth and lies (1 John 4:1).

Second, believers must be careful to whom they listen—they must “attend to nothing but what comes to them in the way of God.” Third, Christians should be aware of the disguises that false teachers often use, false appearances of innocence and holiness. Fourth, when such teachers have been identified and warned, but continue in their ways, Christians are to “utterly reject and separate” from them.

Owen's fifth directive is "not to receive anyone without testimony from some of the brothers of known integrity in the churches." Sixth, we must not accept "the doctrine of anyone that is not known to and approved by the churches." Seventh, Owen warns the reader "to remove far away all delights in controversies, disputes, and conflicts about words not promoting godliness."

### **Rule 11: Persevere with the Church (79–80)**

Christians should be willing to "cheerfully accept the circumstances of the whole church, in prosperity or suffering, and not to turn away upon any occasion whatsoever." Owen supports this rule for perseverance from the following texts: Matthew 13:20–21; Hebrews 10:23–25, 32–39; 2 Timothy 4:10, 16. Anyone who fails to endure in this way reveals that he is not a genuine part of the body.

Owen strongly warns against backsliders: "Every unrecovered step backwards from any way of Christ makes a discovery of falseness in the heart, whatever former pretenses have been." In fact, "Backsliding from the practice of any way of Christ ... is in no small degree an abandonment of Christ Himself." So, believers should work hard to resist sin and endure their sufferings well.

Instead of backsliding, believers should imitate those mentioned in Hebrews 10:34, who "joyfully accepted the plundering of [their] goods, knowing that [they] have a better and an enduring possession for [themselves] in Heaven."

Let this, then, with the danger and abomination of backsliding, make such an impression on the hearts of the saints, that with full purpose of heart they might cleave unto the Lord, and follow hard after Him, in all His orders ... being loyal one to another, receiving such mutual assistance and support so that their prayers may prevail with the goodness of God, and their sufferings overcome the wickedness of men.

### **Rule 12: Treat Everyone Equally (80–82)**

Christians should not show partiality, which Owen demonstrates from the following Scriptures: James 2:1–6; Matthew 20:26–27; Romans 12:16; John 13:12–16. Among the body of Christ, all "are equal, all are naked, before God."

All are brothers in the same family, servants of the same Master, employed about the same work, acted by the same precious faith, enjoying the same purchased privileges, expecting the same reward and eternal home. From where should any difference arise? Let, then, the greatest account it their greatest honor to perform the humblest necessary service to the lowest of saints.

Equality, though, does not mean that all believers are identical. God preserves "many differences and distinctions among the sons of men, caused by power, authority, relationships, enjoyment of earthly blessings, gifts, age, or any other" and we are to show due "respect, reverence, duty, and obedience" to those God has placed in authority. What is ultimately important is a person's standing with God rather than his standing among men. Since Christ was an example of humble service to others, believers are to follow His example and serve one another in love without favoritism.

### **Rule 13: Pray for the Suffering (82–83)**

Believers who are “in distress, persecution, or affliction” are in need of the prayers of the church. Owen supports the rule to pray for the suffering from the following texts: Acts 12:5, 7, 12; Romans 12:15; 1 Corinthians 12:26–27; 2 Thessalonians 3:1–2. The apostle Paul acknowledges that “if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually” (1 Corinthians 12:26–27).

Owen gives several motivations for fulfilling this duty. First, “the will of God is thus fulfilled.” Also, praying for those in distress brings glory to the gospel and “preservation and deliverance to the whole church.” It also allows believers to participate with Christ in His suffering. Finally, praying for others leads to a deeper fellowship and love for fellow believers.

### **Rule 14: Watch Vigilantly (83–85)**

Owen next points believers to “careful watchfulness over each other’s conversation, attended with mutual warning in case of disorderly walking.” This rule is supported by the following texts: Matthew 18:15–17; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; Hebrews 3:12–13; Hebrews 10:24–25; Hebrews 12:13, 15–16; Leviticus 19:17; 2 Thessalonians 3:15; Romans 15:14; James 5:19–20; Proverbs 29:1. Christians should care for the well-being of their fellow believers by lovingly acknowledging the struggles and temptations that their brothers face.

Correction has a threefold duty: imitating an excellent example, encouraging one who falls short, and warning one who willfully sins. Correcting a believer is not easy but is necessary for his sake and the sake of the church. Owen also gives two types of correction: authoritative and brotherly. Sometimes strong correction is needed, using the authority of Scripture, for those who persist in sin. At other times, though, a brotherly word is all that is necessary.

Owen gives eight considerations for correcting in a godly way. The first task is to do everything in love. Second, a person must test his own heart for sin before pointing out another’s. Third, his only goal should be God’s glory and his brother’s benefit, not personal pride or gain. Fourth, the correction should be entirely based on Scripture “so that the authority of God may appear in it, and without the Word let him not presume to speak.” The fifth consideration is to carefully set up the time, place, and circumstances of the confrontation to create a loving environment. Sixth, Christ has “a special regard” for the necessity of correction, so Christians should be encouraged to show love in this way. Seventh, Christians should be careful that they are not reacting to “personal injuries” but to real sin that needs to be addressed. Last, before correcting another, a Christian should turn the examination inward to see if he has similar sin issues.

“Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins” (James 5:19–20). Owen acknowledges that “much caution and wisdom, tenderness and moderation, is required in the persons performing this duty.” This should not be an opportunity to gossip or to delight in the failings of another, but simply to encourage each other to walk in truth.



He then provides three reasons for humbly accepting reproof: the authority of God, the “privilege and mercy he enjoys by such a spiritual prevention of such a danger,” and the warnings throughout Scripture for those who ignore correction (Proverbs 29:1). A friend who is willing to gently point out sin is showing true love, and the one who is corrected can be thankful for such love.

If a church member will not accept correction and refuses to admit his sin, Owen points to Jesus’ directions for church discipline in Matthew 28:15–17. He emphasizes that it is not the duty of the church leadership alone but “rather that of the whole congregation” to love their brother by correcting him and urging him to turn back from sin to walk rightly with God.

### **Rule 15: Walk in Holiness (85–87)**

Finally, Owen calls Christians to “walk in all holiness and godliness of conversation, to the glory of the gospel, the building up of the church, and conviction of those who are outside.” This final rule is supported from the following passages: Psalm 24:3–4; Matthew 5:16, 20; Matthew 21:19; 2 Corinthians 7:1; 2 Timothy 2:19; Titus 2:11–12, 14; Ephesians 4:21–23; 1 Peter 3:1–2; Hebrews 12:14; Ephesians 5:15–16; 2 Samuel 12:14. Walking in holiness sets Christians apart from the world, which honors God and helps conform church members to the image of Christ.

Christ died to wash His church, to present it before His Father without spot or blemish; to purchase unto Himself a special people, zealous of good works. It is the kingdom of God within us, and by which it appears to all that we are the children of the kingdom. Let this, then, be the great distinguishing character of the church from the world, that they are a holy, humble, self-denying people. Our Master is holy; His doctrine and worship are holy: let us strive that our hearts may also be holy.

Owen lists several motives for walking together in holiness. First, he lists the “utter insufficiency” of any church practice to bring a person into “communion with God” without holiness. Also, those who ignore the importance of holiness are “deceived souls, with their barren, empty, fruitless faith.” The gospel is greatly glorified when its transforming effect is seen in the lives of believers, and the “shame of the church, and fierce wrath of God” are avoided. Finally, Owen points his readers to “the sweet reward which the practice of holiness brings along with it even in this life, with that eternal weight of glory where it leads after—to which the holy Son of God brings us all, through the sprinkling of His most holy blood!”

## **Appraisal**

*Rules for Walking in Gospel Fellowship* clearly communicates John Owen's passion for Christian unity and the practical ways he believes it should be applied. He leads believers through ways to love each other and honor God, using God's commands in Scripture as his foundation. Obeying these rules is not only required by God, but leads to great rewards, including unity with other believers that enriches our lives and brings glory to the gospel.

In this life, Christians are on a temporary journey to their heavenly home that God has promised. In addition to the written Word, he has given the companionship of fellow believers to strengthen one another along the way. Christians can experience a far deeper joy when they share in each other's lives. Acting like Christ to those in need and experiencing sacrificial love in return brings a new dimension to life and a greater understanding of God's nature. Serving and giving to others allows believers to participate in the hardships and triumphs of the church, acting as parts of a single body.

The rest of the world will take note when believers are unified in love. Throughout *Rules for Walking in Gospel Fellowship*, Owen declares that our motive for obeying the rules is bringing glory to God by relating to both Him and His children in the way He desires. Obeying is impossible without God's power, but the rewards are beyond comprehension. Walking together in Christian fellowship is perhaps the greatest joy, the closest to Heaven, a believer can experience in this life.

## **Connection to Be United in Christ**

Believers must love each other, not only within their own church family or denomination but also throughout the world. The gospel creates a new family that stretches beyond church buildings so that all believers can walk together in unity. Owen begins with instructions for church members on how to treat their pastors and moves to rules regarding how to treat one another. His final rule encourages all believers to walk together in holiness.

Unity is an essential part of Christian fellowship. Early in the book, Owen explains that unity "is the main aim and most proper fruit of love." He continually reminds Christians of the reasons behind the rules. The rules are not only to develop personal holiness but also to produce a healthy church body that brings glory to Christ. When we embrace our identity in Christ and obey the rules God has given to guide us, we are able to walk in gospel fellowship and, thus, Be United in Christ.

## Key Quotations

<p>“A pastor’s life should be vocal; sermons must be practiced as well as preached.... If a man teaches uprightly and walks crookedly, more will fall down in the night of his life than he built in the day of his doctrine.” (57)</p>
<p>“When persecution rises for the word’s sake, generally it begins with the leaders ... and therefore it is the church’s duty to share with him and help to bear his burden.... While a pastor lives, if he suffers for the truth, the church cannot desert him, nor cease the performance of all required duties.” (61)</p>
<p>“Love is the fountain of all duties towards God and man (Matthew 22:37), the substance of all rules that concern the saints.... It is the fountain, rule, scope, aim, and fruit of gospel communion.” (62)</p>
<p>“Prayer, as it is the great engine whereby to prevail with the Almighty, so it is the sure refuge of the saints at all times, both in their own behalf and also of others.” (64)</p>
<p>“[We must be] diligently laboring in the Word, with fervent prayer, to acquaint ourselves with the mind and will of God concerning the way of worship which we profess, and the rules of walking which we desire to practice.” (65)</p>
<p>“Unity is the main aim and most proper fruit of love; neither is there anything or duty of the saints in the gospel pressed with more importance than this.” (66–67)</p>
<p>“Carefully observe, in ourselves or others, the first beginnings of strife; which are as the letting out of water, and, if not prevented, will make a breach like the sea ... and apply ourselves to the removal of the first appearance of divisions ... and daily strike at the root of all division by laboring for universal conformity to Jesus Christ.” (67)</p>
<p>“He that will not separate from the world and false worship is separate from Christ.” (68)</p>
<p>“Every man should labor that he may walk and dwell in knowledge in his family. That we should also labor to do so in the church or family of God is no less apparent.” (70)</p>
<p>“Let it suffice that we have neglected so many precious opportunities of growing in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, and doing good to one another; let the remainder of our few and evil days be spent in living to Him who died for us.” (70)</p>
<p>“Meekness, patience, long-suffering, and forgiveness, hiding, covering, and removing of offenses are the footsteps of Christ. Do you see your brother fail? Pity him. Does he continue in it? Earnestly pray for him, rebuke him.... Let, then, all tenderness of affection ... towards one another be put on among us, as is fitting for saints.” (72)</p>
<p>“If one member be in pain, the rest have little comfort or ease. It is a rotten member who is not affected with the anguish of his companions.” (73)</p>
<p>“If the preservation of unity should be our aim, then certainly the causes and causers of division should be avoided.” (77)</p>
<p>“Not that we should curiously pry into one another’s failings, much less spitefully search into doubtful unknown things ... but only, out of a sense of the glory of God, the honor of the gospel, and care of each other’s souls, we are to observe their walking, that what is worthy of imitation within may be followed, what fails may be directed, what is amiss may be reprov’d, that in all things God may be glorified and Christ exalted.” (84)</p>
<p>“Christ died to wash His church, to present it before His Father without spot or blemish; to purchase unto Himself a special people.... Let this, then, be the great distinguishing character of the church from the world, that they are a holy, humble, self-denying people.” (86)</p>

## **Key Bible Passages (NASB)**

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” **(John 13:34–35)**

“I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.” **(Acts 20:29–31)**

“Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.” **(1 Corinthians 11:1)**

“And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.” **(1 Corinthians 12:26)**

“It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery... For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” **(Galatians 5:1, 13)**

“Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.” **(Galatians 6:2)**

“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. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling.” **(Ephesians 4:1–4)**

“Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” **(Ephesians 4:32)**

“Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves.” **(Philippians 2:2–3)**

“But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another.” **(1 Thessalonians 5:12–13)**

“The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.” **(1 Timothy 5:17)**

“And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.” **(Hebrews 10:24–25)**

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.” **(Hebrews 13:17)**

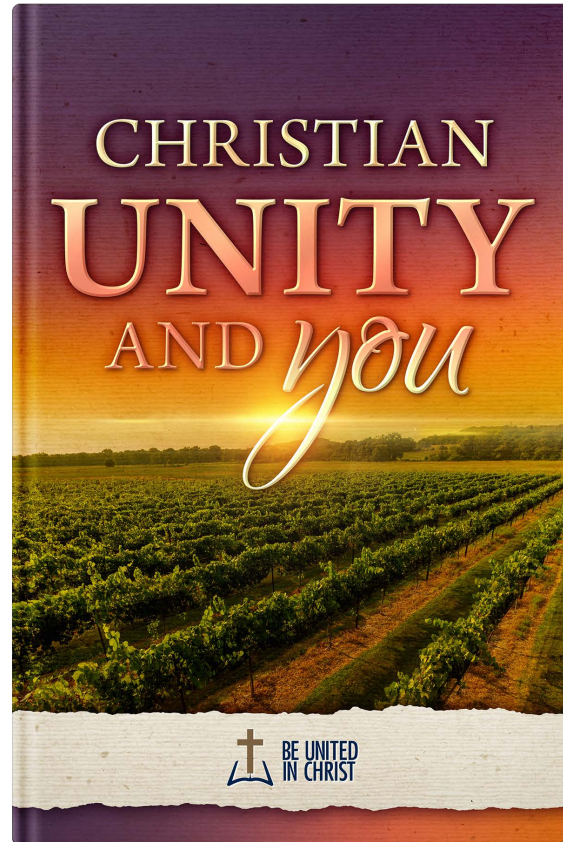
“My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.” **(James 5:19–20)**

“But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?” **(1 John 3:17)**

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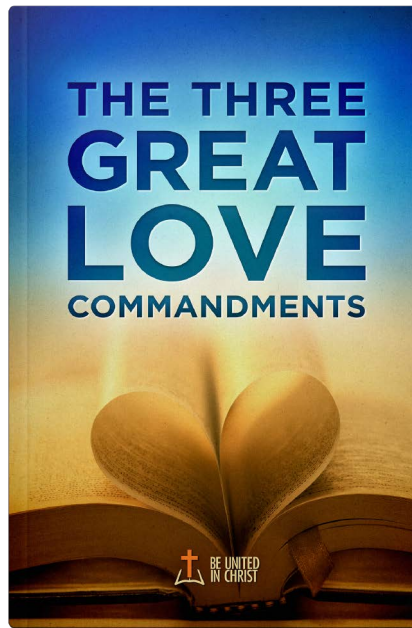
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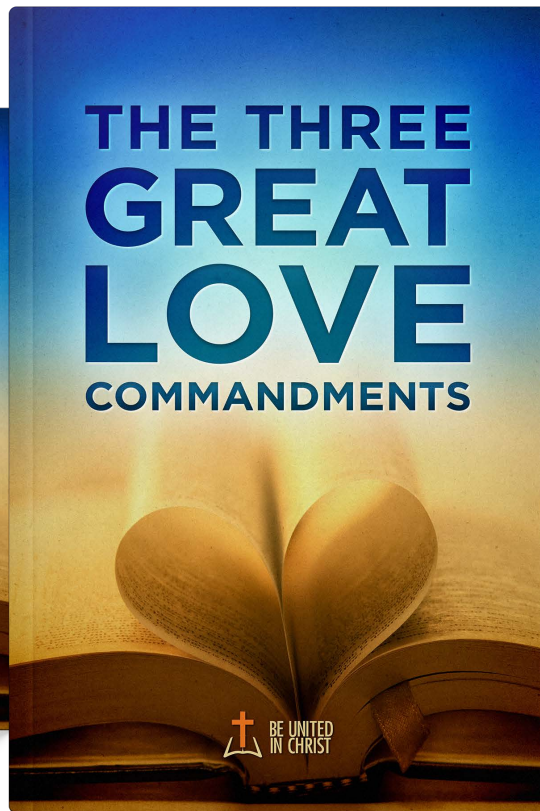
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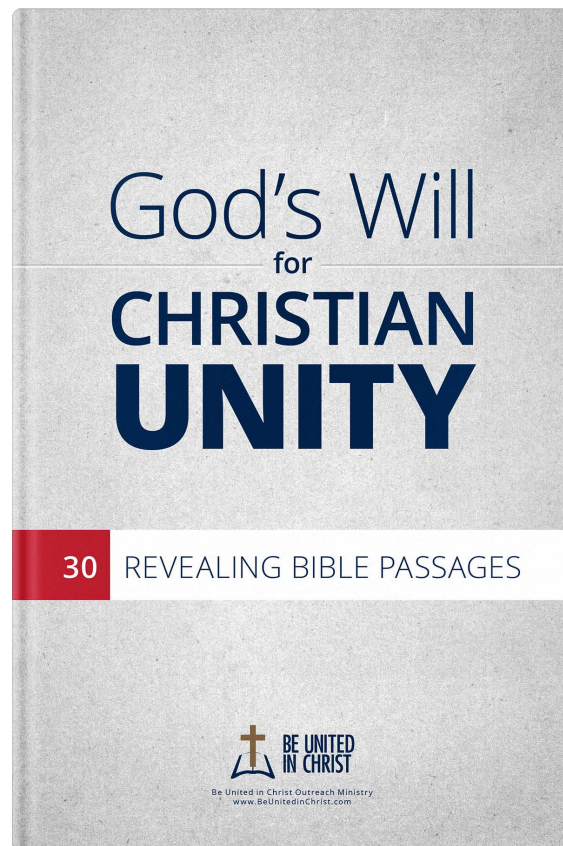
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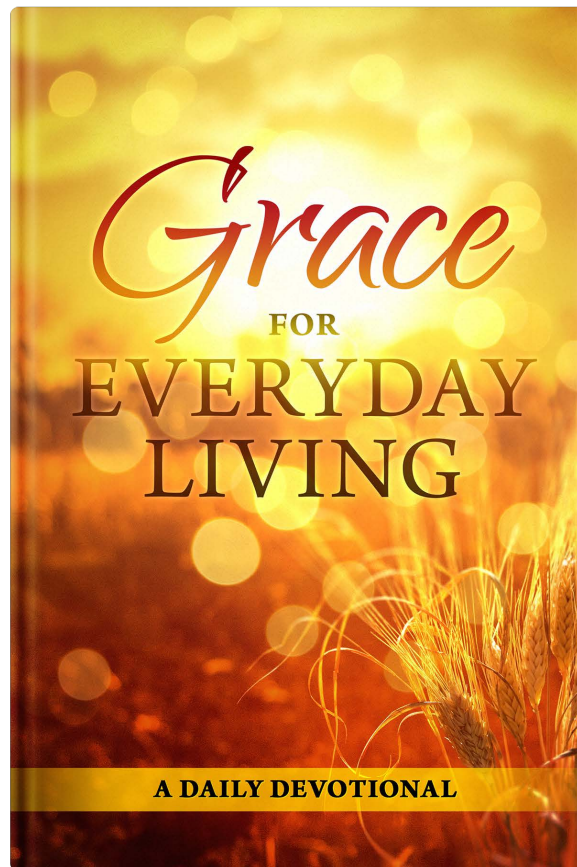
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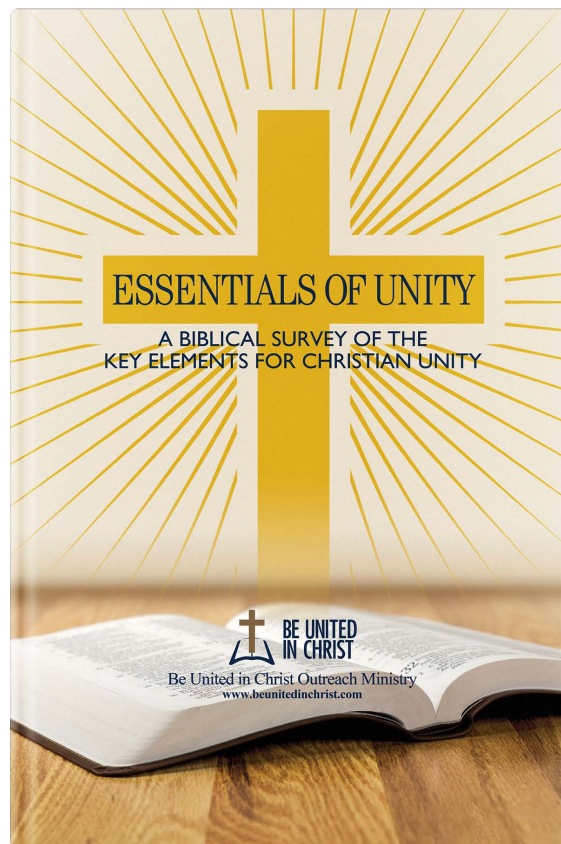
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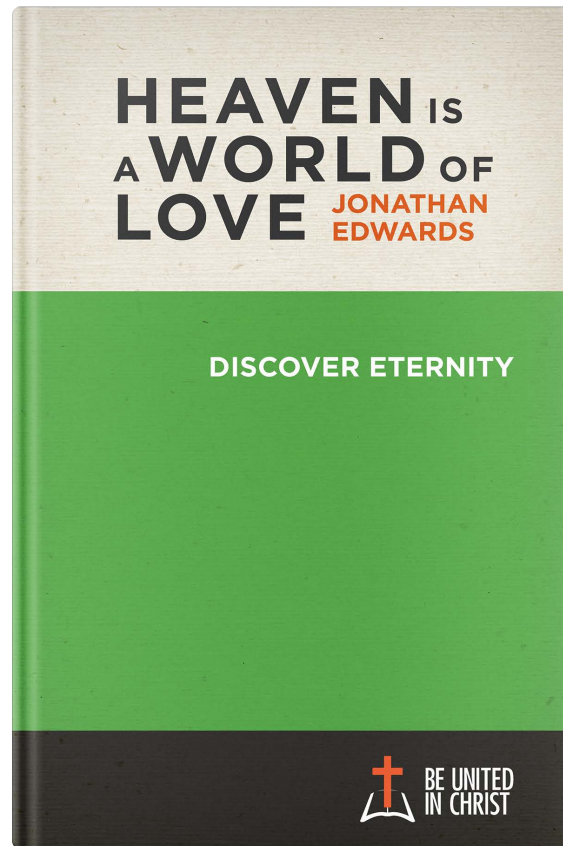
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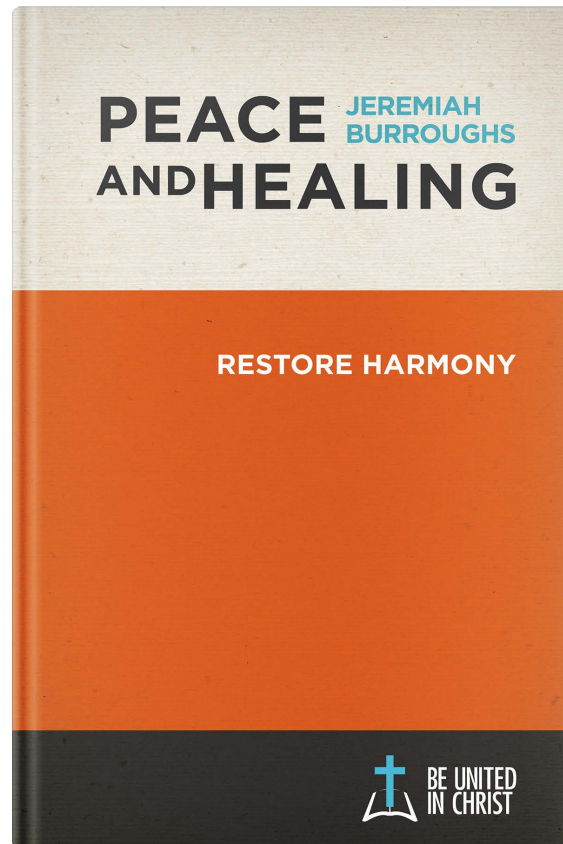
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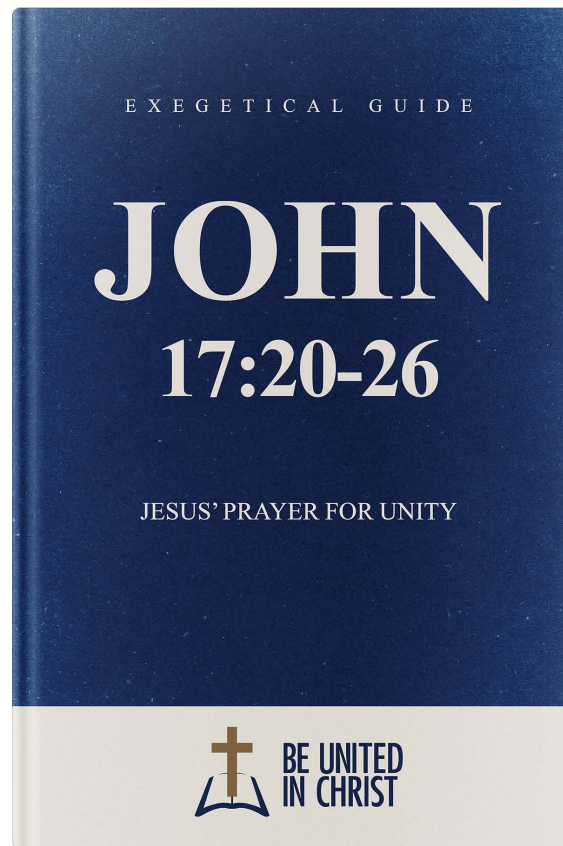
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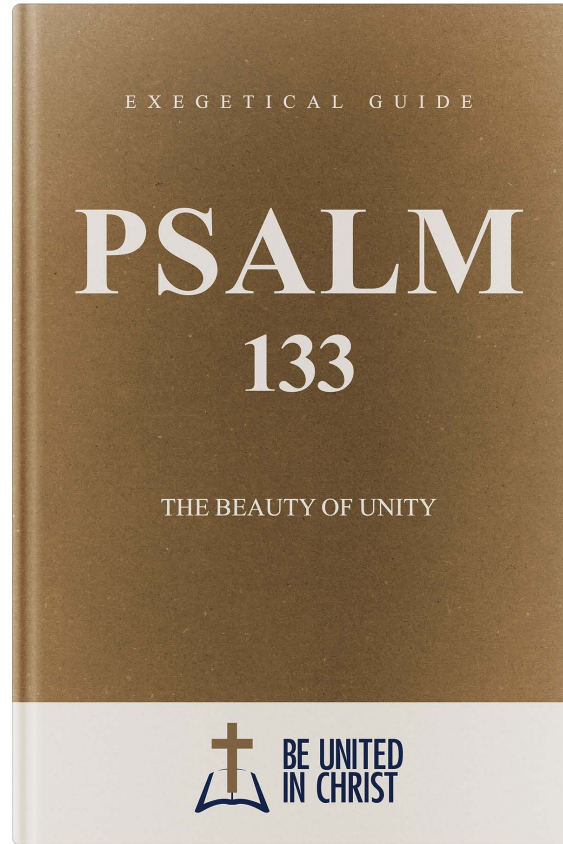
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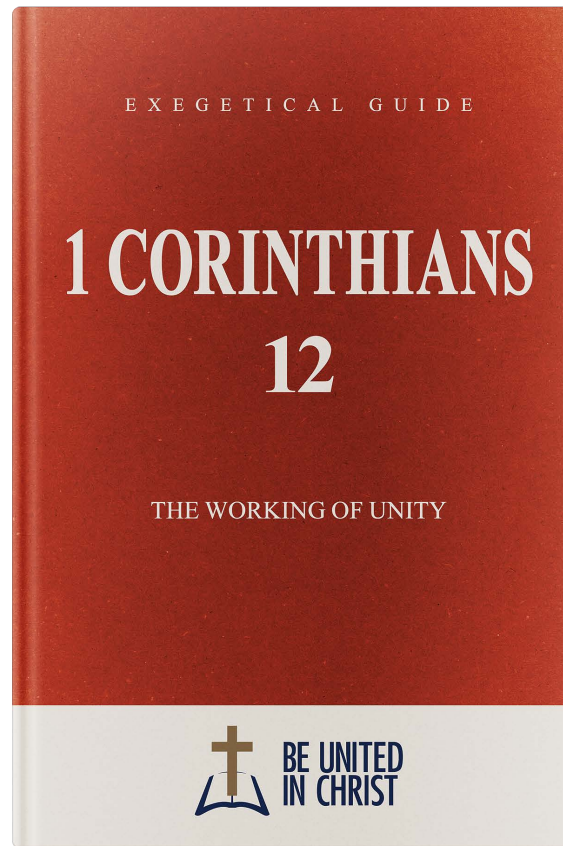


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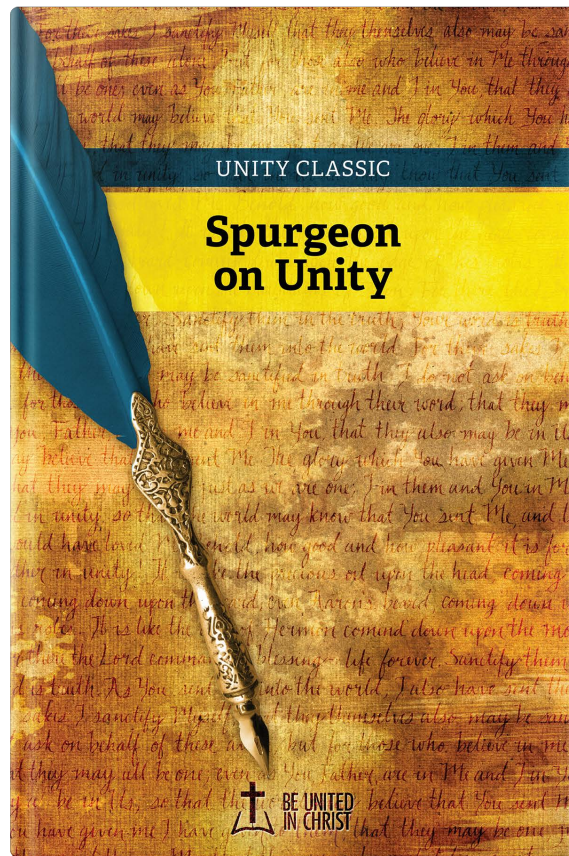
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