

Introduction

On Friday Time Magazine issued its list of the greatest inventions of human history. Interestingly, the actual title of the article is “15 of the Most Important Inventions of All Time According to AI”. Even more interesting is the fact that AI is not among the fifteen most important inventions!

Some of them are obviously among the greatest inventions. The wheel, for example, is the single most important invention in human history—well, there’s one greater, but Time Magazine skipped that one for some reason. The wheel affects transportation and machinery and is used by literally every culture on earth in some form.

Second is the printing press. The mass production of literature, whether novels or treatises or news and information, has helped distribute knowledge and has advanced technology and scientific understanding. The printing press continues to reap dividends throughout the world. Third is the atomic bomb. It is great in its magnitude. Nuclear energy? Great stuff! Nuclear weapons? Nah. Though as a weapon nuclear fission is a profound evil, mastery of nuclear fission has been world-changing as a power source.

Time Magazine lists other inventions such as the telephone and computers and penicillin and the light bulb, all of which are great inventions but Time Magazine asked AI to produce the list, which explains why it skipped over perhaps the greatest invention by humans. It is very difficult to trust a list of the world’s “most important inventions” that fails to include bacon, so take the list with a grain of salt.

There is another invention that failed to make the list, though to be fair to AI, it’s not a human invention. While religion may be a man-made construct—at least most versions of it throughout history—the church is something conceived of by God himself, implemented by God himself, and sustained by God himself.

The church is the locus of God’s work in the world. He is working in and through his churches all over the world. It is where his Spirit dwells on earth and his power is seen most clearly.

Old Covenant

Today is the day of Pentecost, celebrated by the church 50 days after Easter Sunday. “Pentecost” means “fiftieth”—as in the fiftieth day after Easter. The day we think of as *the* Pentecost, was merely another annual Pentecost.

The Israelites were instructed to observe the Feast of Weeks, an annual celebration of the wheat harvest. The Feast of Weeks was seven weeks long, and was to begin the Sabbath after Passover. Passover was on a specific date like Christmas. On the Sabbath day of the week in which Passover fell was the beginning of the Feast of Weeks. The last day of the Feast of Weeks was the fiftieth—the fiftieth day after that sabbath day. It was the day of Pentecost. Jewish scholars would later associate the giving of the law with the day of Pentecost.

When the law was given God descended in a cloud and there was thunder and fire and then 3,000 people died. While Moses was receiving the law the people made the golden calf and claimed the golden calf they had just made was the god who rescued them from Egypt. Exodus 32:38 tells us “about three thousand men of the people fell” that day in judgment. Moses then remade the tablets of stone with the words of the covenant—his law—written on them.

The covenant given was a gracious covenant for the law gave Israel the means for God’s presence among them. It was limited! When God descended on the mountain in a cloud they couldn’t touch the mountain because God is holy and they weren’t. God gave them the tabernacle so that his presence would be in their midst yet they could not simply walk into the tabernacle. Its walls protected the people from getting too close.

As gracious as the covenant was, it was limited: it could not change the hearts of God’s people. Centuries later God promised a new covenant, one that would, in fact, change them.

Jer 31:31 “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Jeremiah 31:31–34

The new covenant God promised would replace the old covenant for it would be based on better promises. The first significant difference is the new covenant cannot be broken. Notice the promise mentions the covenant he made with them that they broke immediately. While Moses was on the mountain they were actively breaking the covenant they were *in the process of receiving*. The new covenant will not be breakable. Then he explains why.

The new covenant’s law—God’s self-revelation—will be written on their hearts rather than on tablets of stone. Their hearts will be changed by the new covenant such that every person who is a member of the new covenant will have a new heart. This is another significant difference between the two covenants. Under the old covenant a faithful believer in the Lord could be a covenant member alongside another person who was not a believer in the Lord. Hence in the new covenant no one shall say to another, “Know the Lord”. Why? “For they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”

New Covenant

Every member of the new covenant knows the Lord. Under the old covenant, simply being born to parents who were covenant members meant you were also a covenant member. This has changed in the new covenant. Now one must be *born again* into the new covenant,

for every new covenant member knows the Lord. There is no such thing as an unbelieving covenant member in this new covenant God has given.

Notice the final promise: I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sins no more. Under the law of Moses Israel repeatedly offered sacrifices to atone for their sins. They had to repeatedly offer them because as the book of Hebrews says, it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. But then, Hebrews says, Christ offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, and then he sat down for the job was finished.

Jesus offered himself as the final sacrifice, the one that ushers in the new covenant with its promises of transformation and forgiveness of sins. The new covenant is, in every way, dependent on Jesus and his faithfulness. This is why the new covenant cannot be broken! *Jesus cannot break.* He will never fail to be faithful. He will never fail to be perfect and sinless. His righteousness is the righteousness that is granted to all those who trust in him.

On the third day after he offered himself as the true Passover Lamb, he rose from the dead, conquering death. Forty days later he ascended into heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father. The disciples were told to wait in Jerusalem. Ten days after this—fifty days after Passover—something extraordinary happened on what was an otherwise ordinary day of Pentecost.

Acts 2:1 When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place.
2 And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Acts 2:1–4

On the day of Pentecost God descended once again, though not in a cloud, and not at a distance. Instead, God the Spirit came down to dwell among his people. As Paul told the Corinthians, the local church is now the temple of the Holy Spirit, the place God dwells on earth. Rather than fire from heaven threatening doom, tongues of fire settled on each of God's people. Whereas at Mount Sinai 3,000 people died for breaking the covenant, what happens on *this* day of Pentecost? Three-thousand *are added to the church!*

Even more, the Holy Spirit writes his law, God's self-revelation, on their hearts. Here's how the prophet Ezekiel saw this day:

Ezek 35:25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Ezekiel 35:25–27

On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came down with the fullness of the new covenant and began transforming the hearts of his people so that they would be faithful to do all he

has commanded. As we walk in newness of life, the presence and activity of the Spirit of God in us is the sign that we are in the new covenant. For this reason Christians have been celebrating the day of Pentecost every year for it is a celebration of the work performed by the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit.

Brotherly Affection

With that, we come to our text for today. Our culture tends to be very individualistic. We even present the gospel of Jesus in this way, as if following him is this personal, private thing you—singular you—do all by yourself. This even affects Bible publishers. In the ESV, the translators have added section headings, making it much easier to find a passage. For example, at the beginning of Romans 12 is the heading, “A Living Sacrifice”. This makes sense since in that paragraph Paul writes about this.

He says true worship entails presenting your bodies as a living sacrifice and being transformed. Rather than being conformed by the world and its systems, we must be transformed by the Spirit of God. This is the promise of the new covenant. The Spirit’s presence and activity in our lives results in the constant renewal of our minds.

The next heading is “Gifts of Grace”. Being transformed by the Spirit and thereby offering our bodies as living sacrifices, we ought to serve according to our giftedness. When I say “giftedness” I don’t mean I am gifted or you are gifted in the way a student may be gifted. I mean gifted in the sense of having received a gift. If you give me socks for my birthday, I have *gifted* socks. I don’t mean the socks are exceptional—though they might be. They’re gifted in the sense of having been *given*.

Because every believer is gifted by the Holy Spirit, every believer has a responsibility to serve according to his or her gift. This is captured well in the heading “Gifts of Grace”. God’s grace given to each believer enables each believer to serve, whether in teaching or in exhortation or in generosity or in mercy.

The next section heading is unfortunate. It’s unfortunate because it fails to grasp the communal aspect of Paul’s instructions. Right before verse 9 it says, “Marks of the True Christian”. The verbs are all plural in the text, however. These are more accurately “Marks of the True *Church*”. These instructions cannot be kept by one’s self. They are necessarily commands for the entire church. We begin in verse 9.

Rom 12:9 Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.
¹⁰ Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Romans 12:9–13

Remember the context: present yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Serve one another with your spiritual gifts. Then Paul says let love be genuine. When love is genuine, the necessary outcome is to abhor what is evil. “Have a vehement dislike for” evil (BDAG). New Testament scholar Havilah Dharamraj points out that love does not mean accepting everything. In fact, love necessarily leads one

to hate evil. In order for love to be genuine, we must hate what is evil and then hold fast to what is good.

Paul describes the kind of love he means in verse 10. We are to love one another with brotherly affection. The word for love is a family sort of love. We are to have familial love for one another and then he doubles down: *with brotherly affection*. This is not affection in the sense of fondness. Paul is not commanding us to adore one another or even to *like* one another.

The word for love here is a combination of two words. The first means to have a special interest in someone. The second means to have a *benevolent* interest in someone, especially of a family member. Here we see Paul piling up words to make a point. True worship is found in having our minds renewed and presenting our bodies as living sacrifices, first in serving according to our giftedness and then in loving one another as brothers and sisters, with a disposition of benevolent interest in each other.

This benevolent disposition toward one another has a very real and direct application: Paul says to outdo one another in showing honor. Honor is a financial term and indicates the value ascribed to something. To show honor to someone is to value that person. We must seek to outdo one another in valuing one another.

Mutual Care

Paul continues in verse 11. We must not be lazy in zeal. That is, in our pursuit of Christ and of holiness, we must not be slothful. We shouldn't hold back or shrink from it. We shouldn't be lazy or hesitate in our obedience to the Lord. Instead, Paul says we must be fervent in spirit. Rather than merely avoiding the negative, that of failing to pursue holiness, we should actively pursue it. We should be fervent in this as we serve the Lord.

We rejoice in hope, and we are patient in tribulation, and we are constant in prayer. These three instructions are directly related. What drives and motivates the Christian life is not the attainment of salvation. We don't pursue holiness in order to gain something. Rather, we pursue holiness because we *have* attained something. In the words of the late Tim Keller,

Religion operates on the principle "I obey—therefore I am accepted by God."
But the operating principle of the gospel is "I am accepted by God through what
Christ has done—therefore I obey."
Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*

This is our motivation for living! We rejoice in hope of what God has promised. We rejoice in hope, the confident expectation that he will do all he promised he will do. Because we are convinced of *his* faithfulness, we are free to pursue *our* faithfulness. Part of this faithfulness is being patient in tribulation.

Notice the assumption Paul makes: there will be tribulation. Life can be difficult. We have health struggles, financial struggles, relationship struggles, personal struggles, job struggles. Life can be very hard. Paul says be patient in this tribulation that you *will* experience. This comes about, in part, by being constant in prayer.

In prayer we worship the Lord. We call on him in praise and in supplication. That is, we spend time with the Lord who wants to hear from us and we bring our needs and our struggles and our sorrows to him. That includes our tribulation.

In verse 13 Paul adds another instruction. We must contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. In the fourth century, Diodore of Tarsus commented on this instruction to contribute to the needs of the saints.

The point here is that we should honor the saints and take care of their needs until they no longer have them.

Diodore, Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church

We tend to think of benevolence as a one-time need that we meet *one time*. It often is a one-time need, but not always. The point is that in the church no one should go without. We live in a very affluent world. There are, from time to time, financial needs we have that we—notice the first person plural pronouns here!—*we* have needs that *we* should meet. We're in this together! This is a responsibility given to the local church, the responsibility to care for one another by meeting the needs of one another.

Part of this need is for hospitality. Hospitality is so much more than sharing a meal with one another. It is not *less* than sharing a meal! We should eat together and eat together often, but that's the entry point into hospitality. We must share our lives with one another. There's a reason Paul connects contributing to the needs of the saints and seeking to show hospitality. There are material needs to meet *and there are spiritual and social needs to meet*.

We all need friendship and companionship. This is why we emphasize our City Groups so much. A City Group is where you become known. It is where mutual care happens most effectively. It is where each one of us can serve according to our giftedness. This doesn't mean we're all gonna be best friends but at the very least it means none of us is *friendless*. We may have natural affinity with others, whether we're in a similar stage of life or we have mutual interests, but the sort of benevolence and hospitality Paul means goes beyond these natural affinities. As the great preacher wrote in the fourth century while preaching on this passage,

You should love one another because you are brothers and have been born from the same spiritual womb.... There is nothing which makes friends so much as the earnest endeavor to overcome one's neighbor by honoring him.

John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans 21

All these instructions flow from letting love be genuine. Genuine love will hate what is evil and will cling to what is good. Genuine love is brotherly love that loves with brotherly affection. Genuine love leads to outdoing one another in showing honor. Genuine love means not being slothful in pursuing the Lord but being fervent in the pursuit of holiness. Genuine love rejoices in hope, is patient in tribulation, is constant in prayer. Genuine love contributes to both the material needs of the saints and the spiritual and social needs of the saints.

Application

Notice these instructions cannot be kept by one's self. Too often Christians like to think of themselves as Reggie in M. Night Shyamalan's movie "Lady in the Water". Reggie thought of himself as a scientist, wondering how much a difference between his two arms could be created by only working out one arm. It is far too easy for us to act the same, to assume that marks of a true *church* are marks of a true individual *Christian*, as if one could have brotherly affection by himself or outdo another in showing honor by herself.

We tend toward individualistic pursuit of holiness and of following the Lord—as if such a thing were even possible. I've known a number of people who have been hurt greatly by churches and have resolved to follow Jesus apart from the church. I am truly sorry for the hurt so many of us have experienced but this is impossible. You cannot follow the Lord apart from his church. Let me explain.

One of the remarkable things about Paul's metaphor for the church as family is the ancient understanding of siblings. In the ancient world in which Paul lived, siblings were the foundation of society—not the parent / child relationship. There is an inequality between parent and child as parents have authority over their children, and parents are necessarily a full generation older. Siblings grow up together and while siblings have their own power dynamics and such, they are, essentially, equal.

Paul does speak of himself as a father to various folk, so that metaphor is there as well, and the overseers or elders do have spiritual authority, but Paul's primary metaphor for the church is that of siblings. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. Having brotherly—or *sisterly*—affection for one another ought to be a priority because, as John Chrysostom put it, we come from the same spiritual womb. We have the same Father. As the ancient church pointed out, we also have the same spiritual mother, the church.

Joseph Hellerman gets right to the heart of the problem so many have with their individualistic approach to following Jesus.

If you are like most American evangelicals, you likely assume that your personal spiritual formation—not the growth of the body—is the goal of the Christian life. And the church is the means to help you become more like Jesus. Our consumer culture has socialized us from birth to attend church primarily to get something out of it: "I am not here for the church. The church is here for me!"

Joseph Hellerman, *Why We Need the Church to Become More Like Jesus*

We feel this when we come to a text like Romans 12. We read about love being genuine and hating what is evil and we tend to think of this in terms of individual application. How do *I* love in a genuine manner? That's a great question, so long as you understand this can only be accomplished *in Christian community*, in the church God himself has created. Love always has a recipient. There must be something to receive love. I love tacos; tacos receive my love. In a very different way, I love my wife; my wife receives my love. I cannot just "love".

The apostle John tells us God is love. God has always existed as one God in three Persons. The three Persons who make up the one God have each other as recipients of love. This is why God has created everything he has created! He created recipients for his love! The

point is you as an individual cannot let love be genuine without the body of Christ. There must be someone to love! Similarly, one cannot be fervent in spirit, serving the Lord *alone*. These are communal instructions. New Testament scholar Richard Longenecker explains the relational dynamics of these seven instructions.

This list of admonitions was not given as a “checklist” of Christian duties, which are to be expressed in some legalistic fashion. Rather, these exhortations function as an explication of what it means to love genuinely (i.e., “without hypocrisy”) as one of God’s children. The focus of a Christian’s attention is not on some list of responsibilities or duties. The Christian’s focus must always be on the personal relationship with God that God himself has brought about through the person and work of Christ Jesus and the ministry of God’s Spirit—with all these seven listed matters flowing quite “naturally” (or, rather, “supernaturally”) from the relationship that God has established between himself and his people.

Richard N. Longenecker, NIGTC

The motivation for these instructions is the love of God to us in Christ through his Spirit. This love flows through us to each other. We love one another because of our shared experience of God’s love to us. This is what Tim Keller was saying. We are accepted by God. We know this because God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. We are accepted because he became sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

It is because the new covenant is based entirely on the faithfulness and righteousness of the True Israel, the Lord Jesus himself, that we are acceptable to God. It is because of Christ and his righteousness that God forgives our iniquities and remembers our sin no more. The evidence that God loves as and saves us and calls us his own is this: the Holy Spirit of God now dwells in our midst.

Under the old covenant the Spirit would, from time to time, come upon a person to empower that person for some task. Under the new covenant the Spirit dwells among us as a permanent dwelling. The Holy Spirit mediates the presence of Christ in our lives, for he is Immanuel—God with us. This is why the prophets declared that in the new covenant God would pour out his Spirit and will put his Spirit *within you*.

We celebrate the day of Pentecost because of what it means. Pentecost means God is with us, always and forever. This has tremendous implications for how we live our lives. This is no bit of knowledge meant to make you feel all warm and fuzzy inside because somebody loves you. God’s love to us in Christ through his Spirit changes us, transforms our relationship to one another. Joseph Hellerman explains Paul’s metaphor.

Church as family is primarily about relationships. It is not about meetings, events, or structures. Such rubric questions do not make sense when discussing relational issues.

Joseph Hellerman, “When the Church Was Family”

This thing God has created called the church is the place where God himself is present and active in this world. God’s presence and activity is seen first and foremost in his people—together—loving God and loving one another. Let’s celebrate Pentecost by being the church.