

# Thanksgiving Service

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 21 September 2019

Preacher: James Buchanan

[ 0 : 00 ] A company is often caught on their logos, established in 1892 or since 1921.

! Why do they do that? More clearly it's to show their longevity, to see that they have stood! the test of time, they are reliable, they are trustworthy. When I was researching for this I did find a few restaurants and a barber shop and a running club that all proudly proudly presented the fact that they were established in 2019. I think they are playing the long game. But you get the point, when you have been around a while there is something to take note of. And so today, here we are, Ealing IPC established in 1969. And you are in good company.

Gap were also established in 1969, as were the Australian florist chain Pearsons, Null steam cleaners and everyone's favourite Townsend tractors. So, you find yourselves in a rich company today.

And yet of course there is a great difference, isn't there? Because for a business, you want to know that you have been around for a long time to say, this we are a solid company, you can trust in us. And it is pretty easy for them to evaluate their success. For a business, they will point to their market share, or to their profit margins, or to their expansion, or to their global reach. And of course those things inform their business strategies going forward. But what about for a church? What about for a church? How do we evaluate what's gone before and plan for what's coming in the future? That's really one of us to be thinking about as we turn now to look at Colossians and just these opening verses. And the first point is that we look for gospel fruit. We look for gospel fruit. Paul is sitting down to write to write to this church in Colossae, a church he's probably never visited, but he's heard good things about them. And so when he sits down to write, what is it that he's interested in? What is it he remarks on? Well, it's not primarily their size, their quality of their music, the quality of their coffee, the new building that they've just built, the fact they've been in the local press. He's not interested in any of those things. What is it he's interested in? It comes up in verse 4. He says, we've heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, the love you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. That's what

I've heard about and that's what I'm interested in. Your faith, your love and your hope. You're an ordinary bunch of people who have been drawn together. And so he says in verse 6, you heard and understood the grace of God in truth. That is what has united you. You were going about your business in all sorts of different walks of life, but now you have heard and believed the gospel. You have been brought together into a form, this one faithful congregation.

[ 3 : 22 ] You're displaying faith, love and hope. Isn't this what we would love to be known for as Christians, as churches? We'd love to be known as people, oh yeah I've heard of that church.

They really believe in the Lord Jesus. They really love one another. So I fear for us down in the list. We are the second oldest IPC congregation, but we've got the oldest building. And I fear that in our little village there in Hampshire, that we're known really more for our lovely old building. And there's a danger for you as a current congregation here that you could become known as, oh that church has got the lovely new building. But isn't this what we want to be known for? For what goes on inside our buildings? For what goes on inside our fellowships?

That we are those marked by faith, love and hope. And so Paul describes this as gospel fruit. It's a great image of fruit. The gospel is bearing fruit. I'm not a great gardener, but you don't need to be to know. Apple trees produce apples. Pear trees produce pears. Strawberry plants produce strawberries. Gospel produces gospel fruit. We see in verse 5, he says, you've heard before in the word of truth. The gospel. The word of truth, that takes us back to Schaeffer, doesn't it? Schaeffer was one who kept emphasising that Christianity is truth with a capital T.

It is true. Truth. And so the gospel, that word that means good news, is the word of truth about the Lord Jesus. And this then is a true message. It is an objective message that does something that

produces gospel fruit. So what's the gospel fruit here in Ealing over these last 50 years? Well, it's not simply in terms of numbers and growth, although those are good things. It's not just the public things that we might point to. The fact that you here are part of this denomination, which is still small, but is growing. It's not exciting projects you've been involved in, such as the building or the planting of Emmanuel Brentford. But it's also the more low-key things. It's the everyday things that are signs of the gospel fruit.

It's wonderful hearing those interviews earlier and thinking back over the years, and I'm sure people here have got your own stories of how Ealing IPC has been involved in your life and in your Christian life. But every person who's understood the grace of God through walking through these doors, every person who's had their faith strengthened, even when they've been walking through the darkest of times, every display of love in the Spirit. Did you notice that in verse 8, when he's describing their love again, he says, we've made known to us your love in the Spirit. This is a God-given love that is being shown amongst you. Every display of that love in your church family. As a family you gather together, rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep. Every quiet, hopeful confidence in the face of death, knowing that there is a hope of heaven laid up for you. Every life decision you have made that has been shaped by the Lord Jesus. You see, all these little ways that we see the gospel bearing fruit in our lives, the ways that the gospel is bearing fruit through the life of this church. So whatever your connection to Ealing IPC, past or present, long-term or short-term,

[ 7 : 41 ] I hope that today you are encouraged by seeing what God has done. Speak about it later. When we're at the barbecue, let's be sharing those good news stories about how the fruit was born in our lives and in the lives of those we knew. So firstly, we look for gospel fruit, but secondly, we thank God for gospel fruit. Because as Paul sees this little outcrop of gospel fruit, they're springing up in this pagan soil. He writes to them. But you notice he writes to them not in congratulations, but in thanksgiving. It's so important. Verse 3, we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we've heard of your faith and your love and your hope. Now a business might well congratulate itself in its 50 years of ingenuity, of marketing, of its hard work, of its breakthroughs into the marketplace and its great success. But as I'm sure you know, that's not what we're doing today. We're not here to congratulate the church or to congratulate one another. Because we know that a gospel church doesn't act like that. A gospel church knows that unless the Lord builds a house, the builders labour in vain. We owe everything to him. And so Paul says, we've heard about your faith and you know that makes us thank God for it. Epaphras preached the gospel. You responded in repentance and faith. We know that. But it was God at work all the time. That doesn't demean your efforts.

That doesn't put you down, Colossians. No. But rather it recognises that deeper than that surface level that you experienced, something else was going on. Behind all of those good things that we've heard about in your lives and in your church is a good God.

There's a subtle danger for us, isn't there? There's a subtle danger for us. Just in terms of salvation, we have a natural tendency to want to rely on our own efforts and works rather than rely on the grace of God as it's described in verse 6.

We want to rely on ourselves because we think we want to earn something from God so that in some way we can congratulate ourselves. But of course the gospel is all of grace, a completely undeserved gift. And perhaps you're here today as somebody who doesn't know that grace, who you've been invited along or you've had contact with the church, but perhaps you wouldn't call yourself a Christian. Well just indulge me for a moment and glance to a few verses later on in this chapter. This is what it means to be a Christian from chapter 1 and verse 13.

Talking about that the Father has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

[ 11 : 06 ] God who takes the initiative in drawing us to himself. It's God, the one who delivers us, who transfers us, who redeems us and who forgives us. And because it's all of God, that means it's open to everyone. There are no qualifications, there are no hurdles that you must get over.

This is open to each one of us and it's open to you today if you've never turned to him. But you see, just as it's that subtle danger in our lives to start relying on our own efforts, so there's a subtle danger for our churches, and even when we see good things going on in our Christian lives, to have that tendency to pat ourselves on the back, to think we deserve a little bit of praise here. Now of course, there's a right sense of celebrating what has gone on. There is a right sense of encouraging

each other when you see people doing acts of service in the gospel. It's right to encourage one another and thank people for what they've done. But as we do that, we must remember all the time that the credit goes to God.

The credit always goes to God. And so this today is a thanksgiving service and not a congratulations one. So we thank God for gospel fruit. Thirdly, and finally, we trust God for gospel fruit.

50 years is both a long time and a short time, isn't it? 50 years is a long time and a short time. It is tremendous to think about this congregation starting there in that living room in Cleveland Road and hearing about it today and there's others in our congregation at least who've told me a lot about those early days. It's tremendous to think 50 years later, we're still here. Particularly as this church and this denomination has remained faithful in a time when churches are increasingly giving in to liberalism and the culture in which we live in has moved further and further away from even a nominal Christianity that we find ourselves now in a very secular culture. So 50 years is worth noting.

And yet 50 years is also a very short time, isn't it? It might seem just yesterday for those of you who were back there in Cleveland Road. And we want to be here for the 100th anniversary of Ealing IPC, don't we? Might be pushing it for some of us. But we want the church to be here to celebrate its 200th anniversary, 500th anniversary if Jesus hasn't yet returned.

[14:15] So 50 years is a long time but it's also not a long time. So how then do we look to the future? How do we look to the future of this church and of the church wider?

Well if again we return to the idea of a business. Businesses have very clear strategies, don't they? This is what we want to achieve in the next 5 years, 10 years, 50 years. And we put everything in place to make it happen, at least if you want to be a successful business.

You've got your targets, you've got your strategies, you've got everything geared to maximise your profits at some future point. Now as a gospel church we want to do that as well, don't we?

As gospel churches we want to be those who plan and who strategise and who think about the future and try and do everything that we can to put things in place so that our church and our denomination are still here and are growing in 10, 20, 50, 100 years time. And yet as we do that with all the God given wisdom that we can muster, we gladly accept that our profits are in God's hands. There's no magic formula for making your church grow and be successful and be long lasting. The profits are in God's hands. Have a look in verse 5 again in this passage. He's given thanks for their faith and their love and their hope. And then halfway through verse 5 he says, of this you have heard before in the word of truth the gospel which has come to you as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing as it also does among you since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.

He's heard about this church and he's writing to them saying the gospel is bearing fruit in your little insignificant town. You're always in the shadow of Ephesus, we know that. That's where everyone wants to go, isn't it, on business. You're kind of tucked in. But in your little town of Colossae the gospel is bearing fruit. In your individual lives the gospel is bearing fruit. And you know it's not just that, it's all around the world. Imagine if Epaphras could have just jumped into a time machine and brought himself here today. What would he have thought?

[17:03] He could have told us about how the gospel bore fruit in Colossae and we could have said what Epaphras, you don't know the half of it. Because the gospel has just kept bearing fruit.

In those early centuries despite the fiercest persecution and martyrdom of many Christians the gospel kept bearing fruit. When the empire collapsed and we entered the dark ages it seemed like even civilization itself was collapsing and yet the gospel bore fruit and continued to grow and spread. Different rival ideologies have grown up to try and take on the church, haven't they? The rise of Islam and of secularism, of modernism, post-modernism. All of these things have risen up against the church and each of them have found that the church keeps bearing fruit because the gospel is a powerful thing.

And so from Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria it has reached to the ends of the earth. It has even reached our own green and pleasant land. But more personally than that it has reached our own dark and unpleasant heart. Isn't that the wonder of the gospel? That it comes into my heart and bears fruit in my life? It's the nature of the gospel to bear gospel fruit. And it will continue to do so. Isaiah says, the grass withers and the flowers fall but the word of our God will stand forever. Okay, so how does this help us as we think about the future? As you think about the future for yourselves

as a congregation? Well there is no guarantee that Ealing IPC will last another 50 years. There's no guarantee is there? But Christ's church will last. And it is exactly that that gives us the confidence to pray that he would continue to use Ealing IPC and the IPC more widely. But it's God who gives that growth. So we trust him for the gospel fruit. Our part is simply to remain faithful. John Owen has been described as the greatest the greatest theologian England has ever produced. I'm not sure if anyone's ever agreed on the greatest theologian Wales has ever produced. Answers on a postcard as they say. But John Owen, you might have heard of him, he lived in the 17th century. Through that time of the English Civil War, he was dean of Oxford College, he was a chaplain in Cromwell's army. He wrote huge books and books which are still studied and influential in churches in the church today. If ever there was a big hitter, if ever there was an A-lister in the history of the church in this country, then John Owen was it. Was he late dying in 1683? He wrote a letter.

[ 20 : 32 ] It's his last known letter. And in that letter he considers his own death and he says this. I'm 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. I'm 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. Humanly speaking, Owen's death would be a huge blow to the church. But he knew it wasn't about him. And why I use this story is because in the nicest possible way, Ealing IPC, I want you to know that it is not about you.

Owen viewed himself as just a rower in the bowels of the ship. The great pilot, the Lord Jesus, is the one steering it. Isn't that our hope for the church? If it was us at the helm, it would only lead to catastrophe and disaster.

But because Christ is at the helm, then we can rejoice in whatever it is he calls us to do, whatever he calls you to do. Whichever oar he tells you to pull, whichever job he assigns you on deck. Because he is in charge. And so we trust him for gospel fruit.

So as we draw these things together this afternoon, what I wanted to speak to you about was gospel fruit.

That we look for the gospel fruit that we've seen, that we thank God for it and we trust him for more. But something else happened 50 years ago, didn't it? 50 years ago was the moon landings, which we've heard so much about.

[ 22 : 29 ] Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, stepping on the moon. Ealing IPC meeting in the living room of Cleveland Road. Which was more significant?

Which was more significant, friends? Can I put it to you that there is no giant leap greater than somebody understanding the gospel.

Than somebody then living a new life in service of Christ and being joined into a faithful congregation of his people to live for him and to serve him.

And through our churches we have the joy and privilege of seeing him do just that. 50 years old. Congratulations. Thanksgiving. Praise God for all his mercies. Let's pray.