




CHAPTER I

**Mark Ashton's**


**Eight convictions about the local church**



**T**his book is a modest affair. It is not an attempt to paint the last fifty years of the Round Church at St Andrew the Great in glowing colours. It is rather a celebration of the ordinariness of dogged, persistent Bible ministry in a local church setting.

It might be objected that the Round Church (or the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, to give it its official title) at St Andrew the Great in Cambridge is not an ordinary local church, being a city-centre, student church. There is certainly some truth in that. No local church is entirely ordinary. Every church has its own specific characteristics, some advantageous, some disadvantageous. Being in the centre of a city, without any parish to speak of, the St Andrew the Great building is hard for the congregation to reach, with parking increasingly restricted and expensive even on a Sunday. There are also a number of alternative churches of all sorts only a few streets away.

Being a student church does have benefits, but the student ministry is also a big drain on the resources of the church. Students are hungry for Bible teaching and require a lot of pastoral care, but their financial circumstances are such that they can contribute very little themselves toward the costs of their own ministry. Moreover, students are always leaving! In the student work we lose up to thirty





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percent of the congregation every year. Every summer, the final-year undergraduate students, on whom the church has poured resources for the preceding three or four years, graduate and leave Cambridge.

Like all other churches, the Round Church at St Andrew the Great has a particular blend of opportunities and challenges, advantages and handicaps. But it is the contention of this book that the ministry there has been ordinary; normal rather than exceptional. Ordinary in the sense that, while the Lord is remarkable, the ministry that has gone on at the Round Church has been an ordinary, unremarkable, routine business of regular Bible teaching, while the Holy Spirit has been at work, convicting people of sin and changing lives.

That ministry has been based upon a number of convictions, which have grown up over time, and which are outlined and explained in the rest of this chapter. They are neither exhaustive nor prescriptive. Not all of them would have been owned by my predecessor Mark Ruston, but they are in line with his ministry. My years of leadership were the natural and logical development of his thirty-two years of ministry. Indeed it was my intention when I became vicar in 1987 to maintain at all costs the inheritance I had received from my predecessor.

So this book is not a triumphant account of success. There is plenty of Christian publishing about how churches can be successful. There are some excellent books on the doctrine of the church and on how to lead a church in a biblical way. This book is neither purely theological nor purely practical. It is inevitably somewhat anecdotal. But it is our hope that reflecting on half a century in the life of a local church and on some of the convictions that have shaped this piece of history, will encourage others to persevere in ordinary local church ministry, trusting God to keep his word.

*For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength (1 Cor. 1:21–25).*

*Mark Ashton  
November 2009*

## *Eight Convictions about the Local Church*

### **Eight convictions about the local church**

These eight convictions are not intended to be an exhaustive account of how a church should run, but they are distinctive characteristics of the ministry of this particular church, and I dare to think they are sufficiently normative (as well as normal) that they may be a help to others.

1. *BIBLE: The word of God does the work of God through the Spirit of God in the people of God*
2. *LOCAL CHURCH: The local church is the primary place where the Kingdom of Heaven impacts the kingdoms of this world*
3. *EXPOSITORY PREACHING: Consecutive expository preaching by the pastor-teacher is the best normal diet of the local church*
4. *MEETINGS: The meetings of the local church are for both edification and evangelism (with no sharp distinction between these)*
5. *MINISTERS: The ministers of the local church are all its members*
6. *FOCUS: The local church should focus on doing a few things really well*
7. *SACRIFICE: The local church exists for the sake of others*
8. *PRAYER: Prayer lies at the heart of the local church*

**1) BIBLE**

**The word of God does the work of God through  
the Spirit of God in the people of God**

From the creation of the world ('And God said', Gen. 1:3) to the end of this present age ('with a loud command', 1 Thess. 4:16), God speaks his will into being. God the Son is called 'the Word' (John 1:1,2). God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit use the word of God to bring about all God's purposes. That word is living and active (Heb. 4:12). The Triune God creates and shapes his people by it. It is not the people who create the word. So, although the early Christian community wrote the New Testament documents, it was the word of the gospel that had brought that community into existence in the first place.

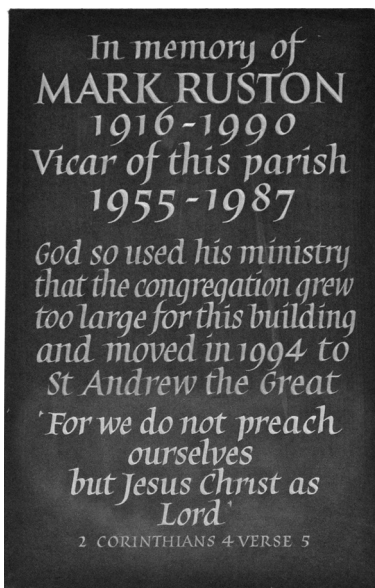
When Simon Peter acknowledged Jesus to be 'the Christ, the Son of the living God' on the road to Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:16), Jesus called him the 'rock' on which he would build his church. When, six verses later, Peter denied that Jesus must suffer and die, Jesus called Peter 'Satan' (Matt. 16:23). So Peter was the 'rock' when he affirmed the gospel (that Jesus was the Son of God), but he became 'Satan' when he denied the gospel (that Jesus must suffer and die). It seems that the 'rock' was not Peter himself but the affirmation of the gospel on Peter's lips. The church is formed on and by the gospel, God's message of salvation. It is founded on Jesus Christ as preached by the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20).

The gospel is the message that we cannot save ourselves – neither by trying to be good nor by being religious – but that only God can save us, because he sent his son Jesus to die in our place. So through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God did for us what we could never do for ourselves: he paid the penalty for our sins. Now through his Spirit he can grant us eternal life, which is to have a relationship with him in Jesus' name (John 17:3). This is the greatest and best news our world has ever heard: that individual men and women, young and old, can be in their own relationship with the God who made the universe.

Mark Ruston preached faithfully about Jesus for three decades, and that word did the work of building up a congregation to the point where it could no longer fit in the Round Church building. The history of this particular congregation has followed that pattern

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for half a century. It is not a story of strategies, plans, and visions for future development. The regular teaching of the Bible has shaped the strategy through the shared leadership of the church. It is the preached word that has led the church forward. Human agency has



*A plaque in the Round Church building celebrating Mark Ruston's thirty-two years of gospel ministry.<sup>2</sup>*

been shaped and guided by the Spirit of God through the word of God preached weekly. Trying to respond obediently to God's word as it has been taught week by week has been the way the congregation has discovered what God plans for our future. Present obedience has been more important than blue-sky planning. One of the biggest changes that has occurred in the history of the Round Church was the move from the Holy Sepulchre (Round Church) building to the St Andrew the Great building in 1994. No individual can claim the credit for that. I went on record a few months earlier saying that I would resign if the church adopted a major

building project. But through regular Bible teaching God led the leadership of the church to the point where that decision was made by an overwhelming majority in the church council.

It is my belief that change has come about through the preaching, as God has spoken through his word week by week. I did not succeed with any plans to change the Round Church. I came to try to preach as faithfully as my predecessor had preached. But change happened. The word caused it to happen. No doubt we do not always hear aright, nor do we always obey what we hear. But the word of God has the power both to bring the church into existence and to direct its life.

It has been my endeavour to allow God's word to do that and not to impose human systems upon it. Neither Mark Ruston nor I were



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systematic theologians. But both of us were committed to teaching the word of God as faithfully as possible, and then allowing it to do its work. Therefore, we have never sought greater clarity or more precision than there is in the word of God. For example, we baptise because the word of God tells us to do so. We do not try to indicate precisely what happens at the moment of baptism, nor at what age, nor in what manner it is appropriate for it to be administered, beyond the basic guidelines of Scripture: that baptism should be with water, in the name of the Trinity and in the context of faith. Similarly, we celebrate the Lord's Supper because we are commanded to do so in the Bible, and not because we understand precisely what it signifies. Indeed, we pray because Scripture tells us to do so, not because we understand fully how prayer works.

This is not to say that we should not ponder these matters of Baptism, the Lord's Supper or prayer. But nor should we seek to achieve a clarity beyond Scripture. That way much disagreement lies, and no edification or evangelism occurs. We do not expect to get God's will exactly right. We expect the word of God to be constantly correcting us. God said through his prophet Isaiah: 'Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it."' (Isa. 30:21). It is a mistake to think of Christian discipleship as a straight arrow. It is more of a constant zigzag, as we veer first too much in one direction and then too much in the other – just as Simon Peter needed to be affirmed when he called Jesus, 'the Christ, the Son of the living God' and rebuked when he sought to deflect him from the Cross. Such is the nature of our human state. That means we need a word from God to correct us *every* day. This is true for churches as well as for individuals. Both need a constant touch on the rudder, correcting each effort we make to obey. God's word provides that.

The word of God doing the work of God will also mean that gospel work must always be done in a gospel way. There is never room for cutting corners, or selling people short, when it comes to the gospel. We have to seek to teach the whole counsel of God, however counter-cultural that may be, and however unpopular to contemporary ears.

The greatest single conviction about the local church that characterises the Round Church at St Andrew the Great is this: that the word of God does the work of God through the Spirit of God in the people of God.

## 2) LOCAL CHURCH

### **The local church is the primary place where the Kingdom of Heaven impacts the kingdoms of this world**

To return to Matthew 16, Jesus told Peter that he would build his church on that rock of gospel affirmation on the lips of his disciples. He then made it clear that this church community would be an expression of divine power on earth, able to conquer evil: ‘The gates of Hades will not overcome it’ (Matt. 16:18). Indeed, the church would so incarnate the gospel message of God’s saving love through Jesus Christ that Jesus went on to say, ‘I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven’ (Matt. 16:19). What the gospel community does on earth reverberates in heaven. The rest of the New Testament is the story of small Christian communities being brought into existence by the gospel (the word of God) in different locations around the Mediterranean world (Acts 14:21–28; 15:41; 18:23; 1 Pet. 1:1–2, etc.).

The local church is not spoken of in the New Testament as a part of the universal church, but as the full local expression of the universal church in a particular place. It is ‘the church of Jesus Christ at a particular place’ rather than ‘the little bit of the church of Jesus Christ at a particular place’. So, we need to view the local church in the light of God’s calling – ‘a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light’ (1 Pet. 2:9). Or, in the quotation attributed to G.K. Chesterton, the church is ‘rushing through the ages as the winged thunderbolt of thought and everlasting enthusiasm; a thing without rival or resemblance, and still as new as it is old’. Therefore the honour of teaching a local church is enormous. Thomas Carlyle is said to have asked, ‘Who, being called to be a preacher, would stoop to be a king?’ I remember Giles Walter (curate at the Round Church 1986 to 1993) asking me at the Round Church door after the evening service one Sunday, ‘Can you think of anything in the world we could have better spent our time doing these last twelve hours?’ I could not.



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The key characteristic of both Mark Ruston's ministry and mine is that we concentrated on the all-absorbing demand of running a local church, in the belief that this is a great task – greater than climbing the structural hierarchy of the Church of England, greater than getting involved in denominational politics, more significant than speaking at conferences, or travelling the world, or even writing books about the local church! Not all Christian leaders are called to this work; God sets people apart for all sorts of different roles within the body of Christ. But the best leader of a local church will be the person who is convinced that there is no higher calling in the world and that the New Testament role of pastor-teacher in the local congregation is *the* job above all others, and who is grateful to God every day for the privilege of serving in that way. Such are the men needed to lead our local churches.

Para-church organisations (like denominations and Christian campaigning groups) are necessary to help co-ordinate Christian work in a fallen world, which is full of misunderstanding and miscommunication even among Christians. But the size and the glamour which can accompany the work of such organisations should not distract from the top priority gospel work of the local church. The size and glamour of a very large local church have some of the same dangers. After moving from the Round Church building to the St Andrew the Great building in 1994, the Round Church at St Andrew the Great took the decision not to try to go on growing in Cambridge city-centre, but rather to try to reproduce other medium-sized churches in the Cambridge area. We did not wish to become a mega-church, not just because this does not seem to be in line with New Testament practice, but more because it is not in line with New Testament principles, where God does his work through things that are weak in the eyes of the world (2 Cor. 4:7–12). Some of the consequences of this decision are described in Chapter 10.

It is because of this primacy of the local church that longevity in ministry is usually desirable. There may be a few men who are particularly gifted at leading a church through the early stages of growth, and then do best to pass the baton to someone else. But in general the best pastor-teacher will not be the one who is constantly wondering whether he should move on to new pastures or whether there is a better job on offer somewhere else. Patterns of church life which constantly move pastors from one church to another (as in the



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contemporary Methodist circuit) rarely build a local congregation over the years. It is characteristic of most of the strongest evangelical churches in the UK at the beginning of the twenty-first century that they have all enjoyed prolonged ministries by their main preachers. Mark Ruston served the Round Church for thirty-two years (and declined tempting offers to move elsewhere), and I have served the Round Church at St Andrew the Great for twenty-two years (and would have loved to serve longer). As time passes in a preacher's ministry, it gets harder and harder to lead purely by innovation or human energy. But it is only with time that a minister gets to know and understand his congregation, and to be known and understood by them (even the changing congregation of a student church). Only by faithfully teaching the word of God will an individual's leadership stay fresh and revitalising over decades.

The second conviction that has shaped the ministry of the Round Church at St Andrew the Great is that the local fellowship of believers is at the very centre of God's purposes for the human race.

### **3) EXPOSITORY PREACHING**

#### **Consecutive expository preaching by the pastor-teacher is the best normal diet of the local church**

A third conviction is that the healthiest and most nourishing diet of the local church is the pastor-teacher teaching the congregation the whole counsel of God – in other words, taking them through consecutive Bible passages week by week. If God is the perfect communicator and the believer lives by every word that comes out of his mouth (Matt. 4:4), then there can be no better diet for a congregation. Human lectionaries that 'butterfly' around Scripture, flitting from one passage to another, will never feed a congregation adequately. Too many local churches, while paying lip service to the authority and sufficiency of God's word, insert the filter of the minister's own thinking and taste between the congregation and God's word when deciding on the church preaching programme. So the congregation only gets to hear from those parts of the Bible which the minister likes or thinks appropriate for his congregation.

Clearly there is a role for sanctified common sense. The wise teacher has to ponder, search out and set in order many things (Eccles. 12:9). So a planned preaching series is not inappropriate,