

FOREWORD

Many readers of the eight short chapters of this fine meditation by Mark Ashton will instantly think of the much longer book by Mark Dever, *9 Marks of a Healthy Church*. Although these two books are quite different – what you are holding in your hand is the pastoral reflection of a man who knew he had no more than a few months to live, while Mark Dever’s book is a theological/pastoral treatise – what is striking is how much agreement there is between them. Yet both can be read with enjoyment and profit, for they make their appeals in fundamentally different ways.

Christ and His People: Eight Convictions about the Local Church is a touchingly personal book, clearly written with the people of his own charge in mind. Mark Ashton tells many stories of his predecessor, Mark Ruston, who served as vicar of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Cambridge – a church building always referred to as ‘The Round’ or ‘The Round Church’, a usage which no one who has seen it will think strange. Under Mark Ruston’s ministry the church grew steadily, reaching out into the University. Mark Ashton succeeded Mark Ruston in 1987, and after the congregation outgrew the building, it moved to a refurbished church building that was no longer being used, but which was much larger. So here was the congregation of The Round Church meeting in St Andrew the Great – almost inevitably referred to colloquially as STAG. Here the faithful ministry of Mark II, as some referred to him, combined with the unceasing hospitality and cheerful witness of his wife Fiona, served generations of students while reaching out steadily into the city – a wonderful mixture of town and gown. Mark Ashton has chosen to articulate his eight convictions about the local church by summarising, in each case, his principal point, and then fleshing it out with stories of the ministry of The Round / STAG across more than half a century.

Everyone who knew the man will never forget the first letter he circulated to his congregation shortly after he was told that he had contracted terminal

gallbladder cancer. He calmly told his flock that he had been given a great privilege: he knew, more or less, when he was going to die (though he lived about a year longer than the doctors had initially predicted), and thus he could prepare for his death – a privilege denied those who have no idea when they will die. His attitude reminded me of the old Puritan hope that it would be given to them to ‘die well’.

This is the man who has left us this short book. Each chapter has a mix of aphorisms, wise pastoral judgments, and that most uncommon gift, common sense. Under ‘Bible’, we are told that ‘[t]he Word of God does the work of God by the Spirit of God in the people of God.’ The primacy of the local church leads Mark to talk about the dangers of becoming too big and the importance of church planting. While stressing the importance of public meetings, he provides some culture-specific judgments about length of meetings and length of sermons. I must say in passing that he was a master of the 20-25 minute sermon. Dick Lucas has been known to argue that there are some 20-minute preachers, some 30-min preachers, some 40-minute preachers, and so on. One of the problems is that most of us think our number of minutes is higher than most of our hearers do. Several times I heard Mark at large conferences preaching for 45 minutes, and he was faithful to the text, but vaguely uncomfortable. But in the 25-minute range, no one was clearer, more succinct, more telling, in a time allotment that

some preachers use just to get their motors warmed up. His chapter on 'Focus' – encouraging the local church to do a few biblically-mandated things very well, rather than trying to do everything – is sheer gold. As one of his curates put it, 'We are not trying to prevent people divorcing: we are trying to get people to heaven' – knowing full well that such gospel-centred ministry not only prepares people for the new heaven and the new earth, it also transforms people so they live differently here and now, thus preserving many marriages. Mark kept a plaque in his study with the words of William Perkins on it. Perkins, of course, was one of the connecting links between the continental reformation and England. He preached in the STAG building toward the end of the sixteenth century, so his words are especially *à propos*: 'Thou art a minister of the Word; mind thy business.'

Mark Ashton minded the business God gave him, and I am thankful beyond words that his pastoral wisdom shines forth in the pages of this little book. He, being dead, yet speaks, and we do well to listen.

D. A. Carson



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.
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