

# Grace Reformed Baptist Church

## *2008 School of Theology*

July in New Zealand can be very cold and the day before the School commenced was the coldest day of 2008. Even though the weather was cold, we were in for a warm spiritual experience of education and fellowship. Eleven men, pictured below, from NZ and Australia met at Massey University from 7 to 11 July to study Baptist Church History under the instruction of Dr James (Jim) M. Renihan, the Dean and Professor of Historical Theology at the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies at Westminster Seminary in California.

The first day was a reminder that we were engaged in a University level course of more than 30 lectures crammed into a week. The course covered Baptist history from the Apostles to the present day. We were alerted to the modern liberal tendencies to rewrite history; but were exhorted to be “cautious providentialists” in our view of Church history; duly recognizing the importance of secondary causes. One of our texts (Stander & Louwe) revealed that infant baptism was not the standard practice of the early church as many would have us believe. Furthermore, we were shown that the common successionist view of Baptist history is unsupported by historical evidence and were reminded that the true Church of Christ cannot be reduced to a single doctrine; neither are all those who hold to a single (though important) doctrine part of the true Church of Christ.

Dr Renihan really became animated when we came to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, which is his particular area of expertise. Such was his saturation in the era and his ability to communicate it that many of us felt we were walking down the narrow streets of London, or traveling out to the countryside with Kiffin, Knollys, Keach, Collins and Coxe and those they led. Coming back to the reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century was difficult. History not only shows us the wonderful work of providence, but also warns us of things that lead to decline such as division, insular thinking, wanting to be accepted/respected by the world and false doctrine such as hyper-Calvinism. One of the real “take home messages” was that when men and women openly and genuinely study their bible with a desire to go where it takes them they will most likely come to an understanding and practice of believer’s baptism and that by immersion.

Early Baptist history in America was closely linked to what occurred in England. We traced the Calvinistic Baptist witness from its foundations, through the War of Independence and the Civil War and the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Studying to the present day allowed us to see the emergence of the modern Reformed Baptist movement; to follow some of its early leaders through their struggles and see how their labours have come to touch many of our own lives

The facilities at Massey University were excellent. Through modern technologies of computer, video projector and *Google Earth* we were able to see the many places in the UK and US that were being referred to.

In between lectures and at meal times there were great times of fellowship. New friendships were formed and old friendships renewed. There was a good helping of friendly cross-Tasman banter between the Kiwis and the Aussies (two of the men from NZ churches were Aussies as well as a couple of visitors – the author being one).

None of what we had the privilege to learn could have been possible without the gracious, sacrificial and generous hospitality by the brethren of Grace Reformed Baptist Church in Palmerston North, who not only hosted the School of Theology but provided for our physical sustenance, transport and accommodation during the School, which allowed us to focus fully on the purpose for being there. We bless God for their love and commitment to the extension of Christ's Kingdom.



Written by Mark & Stephen Smith, Lawson, NSW, Australia.

**Postscript:** the members of Grace Reformed Baptist Church are grateful to God for making this year's School of Theology possible. We are particularly thankful for the provision he made through the sponsorship of Jim's flight costs by Escondido Reformed Baptist Church, California; Grace Covenant Church, North Olmstead, Ohio; Grace Reformed Baptist Church, Rockford, Illinois; Sovereign Grace Baptist Church, Ontario, California; and Trinity Reformed Baptist Church, Kirkland, Washington: Thank you, brothers, for your kind and generous support.