

By A Cal Grad Founder – Dr.  
Robert Grant

A Historical Account by a Founder of  
California Graduate School of  
Theology.



## THE ORIGINS AND EARLY HISTORY OF THE CALIFORNIA GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY by Robert G Grant PhD

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CALIFORNIA GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

STUDENT BODY 1968-72

The [California Graduate School of Theology](http://www.cgsot.edu) was birthed in 1968 by Dr. W.S. McBirnie and Dr. Robert Grant, then the pastors of the non-denominational United Community Church of Glendale California, and was inspired into being by the brief preaching visit to that Church in 1967 of the late Dr. George Crane, psychiatrist, popular syndicated columnist and very active Methodist layman.

In his day, Dr. Crane, father of then US Congressmen Phillip and Dan Crane, a Christian layman, was renowned as the teacher of one of the largest Bible classes in America in a downtown

Chicago skyscraper and a highly respected national religious leader and thinker.

During his brief visit to the Glendale church, Dr. Crane, in informal after hour conversations with Grant and McBirnie, lamented about the then obvious problems in theological education of that day. Amongst them, he observed, was the lack of training (*as distinct from the traditional teaching in essentials such as languages and theology*) provided in the vital skills needed to be successful in the ministry.

All of the academic disciplines offered by traditional seminaries are essential, he stressed, in order to prepare men and women for the ministry.

But, Crane argued, they also need to be taught the practical skills needed in order to lead great churches. And, he stressed, they need to be taught those skills by those who have a proven track record of success in actually demonstrating those skills in the real world of the local church.

He lamented the fact that, if the average medical doctor received the same level of training that the doctor of souls then received, the survival rate from surgery would plummet.

He observed that, too often, those who taught future clergymen in the traditional seminaries of the 1960s had little demonstrated expertise in churchmanship and had too often earned graduate degrees only to then immediately return to a seminary and teach.

He observed that many of these teachers would be hard pressed to actually grow a thriving church. He stressed the need to have experienced and successful people teaching out of their wealth of experience and proven success.

Crane also berated the current degree standards followed by traditional seminaries of the 60s. While Dentists and Chiropractors and Medical doctors etc., following their courses of education were granted the title of doctor, Clergymen, at that time, were still being given a Bachelor of Divinity degree, even

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though they might have expended the same amount of time in the classroom as these other professionals. He pointed out that this discriminated against the clergymen and did not fairly grant them the *entree* that the *doctoral* title would afford them in the community and to which they were academically entitled.

After Dr. Crane returned to Chicago to continue on with his life, McBirnie and Grant continued to discuss the challenge Crane had thrown to them.

Grant was then a recent graduate of Fuller Theological Seminary, and McBirnie was a highly gifted, vigorous, experienced and innovative man who had been earlier written up by Time magazine in the late 1950s as one of the up and coming young clergymen in America when he was pastor of the then new but booming and thriving Trinity Baptist Church of San Antonio Texas. He was also a very gifted communicator and orator and writer and possessor of an unusually fertile mind.

He was also the host of a highly successful conservative daily radio program heard on more than 150 stations a day and the author of many books and monographs. Controversial because of his strong conservative political stance and his vigorous anticommunist speeches, he was held somewhat at arm's length by more liberal members of the clergy and establishment. Grant was less controversial and so it was a good mix.

Out of those continuing conversations came a growing conviction that God wanted them to give birth to an institution that would give flesh to Dr. Crane's vision.

And so, with the brashness born of youth they set out to establish the California Graduate School of Theology. What followed may have changed the face of theological education in America as a challenge had now been extended to the status quo.

McBirnie brought various important and essential resources to the table as they began, having already built a fine new building that would serve as the Administrative headquarters and the main classroom and initial library for the fledgling school. That took the pressure off and gave the school time to get established without having to worry about paying rent and overhead.

From the beginning McBirnie and Grant both covenanted to serve the Graduate School without salary, and they kept that commitment throughout the entire time they served.

Though offered the position of President, Grant decided not to become the President of the Graduate School. He felt he could best serve the School in other ways. Instead he adopted the title of Executive Dean.

Grant, then in his early 30s, brought to the task the vigor of youth, enthusiasm and commitment to the task and the firm belief that God was in this project and he wanted to be on His side.

McBirnie brought intellectual skills, prescient insight and generous financial resources to the table and provided a ready-made home for the school. He later built a state-of-the-art new library across the street on Kenwood in Glendale. In addition, the excellent facilities of the local United Community Church were also made available free to the Graduate School and its students

Grant then set out to create a unique and unusual curriculum, and to recruit the initial faculty of gifted men who would catch the vision of what they proposed to do and communicate that in the classrooms.

They offered these new faculty members the princely sum of \$25. per hour of teaching.

They initially charged tuition of about \$15. per hour so students could afford to commit, and they offered classes on 2 days a week. Obviously, money was in short supply under these conditions, but the generous support of this local church made this exciting venture possible

At first, they experimented with Quarters and then with Semesters to see what would work best. They adopted the logo of St George slaying the dragon for the School's standard.

Grant designed certificates, created catalogues. everything from scratch.

They challenged the students to write their dissertations in some area of practical theology or church growth techniques

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The initial Graduate School library consisted of McBirnie's and Grant's own personal libraries which were gladly donated to the school. It later was greatly expanded.

Well beloved Scottish Baptist pastor Dr. David Laurie became the first President.

Dr. Holland London, former District Superintendent of the Church of the Nazarene, began his tenure at the school first as professor of Evangelism, a role ideally suited to him as a result of his very successful ministry that took him into many of the largest churches in America and gave him entree to those churches as the school grew and they reached out to many of those churches and pastors.

Later London became the President and was able to parlay his contacts with the largest evangelical churches in America into the establishment of the then unique and very popular *Annual Pastors Conference* attended by hundreds of gifted pastors from around the country. This was totally unique at the time.

And so CGST began.

In retrospect: Where to begin? How to start the process?

An initial mailing was sent out by Grant to hundreds of pastors across Southern California telling them of the vision for a school that would serve them in a very unique way.

The target audience was ministers who had already finished a BD at a traditional seminary, who were already in the ministry, who had the academic side of the equation behind them via their seminary degree, and who were in need of help.

Grant offered them:

- a schedule that allowed them to continue in their pastoral work.
- a faculty of terrific skilled and experienced teachers.
- a unique curriculum that focused on meeting their needs ( *for example, well ahead of the curve,*

*the school created a course on the use of the computer and the church in 1969 when computers were still a mystery to most and PCs were unheard of;*

- a much-needed injection of encouragement,
  - and the opportunity to earn a doctoral degree.
- This was well before the other theological schools caught on and began to offer the D Min degree..... arguably as a direct result to the challenge CGST held out to them.

Responses immediately began to come in from the mailing and Grant quickly found out that each respondent had to be personally interviewed and his questions answered, and his fears relieved.

There was a lot of initial skepticism that needed to be overcome as was to be expected. Denominational leaders were among the most skeptical and perhaps even jealous that they would lose sway over their men..... and some of them had to be placated by Grant. It all took a great deal of time and patience. But the school was launched, and God was blessing this stumbling effort and they took great comfort in that fact.

The first year saw 28 pastors enrolled, many from larger churches in the greater Los Angeles area and from about 10 different denominations.

Dr. David Hocking, then pastor of the large First Brethren of Long Beach enrolled both as a student and also taught a course, and Dr. Jim Kallas.....prominent Lutheran pastor and scholar quickly became one of the most popular lecturers on the faculty.

Dr. McBirnie taught in his areas of interest in Church planning and problem solving and, for example, in Church Architecture, to help those contemplating a building program. This, at the same time that the host church under McBirnie's leadership, had just completed a multimillion-dollar amphitheater auditorium down the street .....and so again, practical skills, taught by those who were experienced in applying them. Dr. James Dobson

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(Focus on the Family) taught practical pastoral counseling skills.

The following year enrollment increased to some 48 and it more than doubled again the following year to well over 100 and the school was well born. By the end of Grant's tenure in 1972 the school had passed the 200 mark in enrollment. Ministers from most of the largest churches in Southern California came and graduated.

Dr. H.M.S. Richards Sr. was at that time (1970) the national voice of the Seventh Day Adventists with his Voice of Prophecy weekly radio program. To the sound of grumbling and controversy, and upon Grant's warm invitation, he joined the faculty and quickly won over the hearts of the most conservative and reluctant of the students who were so impressed with his obvious piety and the richness of his spirit as he inspired them to preach the word. Denominational distinctives took a back seat as they got to know each other in this rare mix.

And this atmosphere of fellowship and cross fertilization became one of the hallmarks of the Graduate School experience as men of very different traditions were suddenly thrust together, many for the first time, and they discovered that the Kingdom of God was perhaps broader than they had ever suspected....Missouri Synod Lutherans .....with Assemblies of God..... with United Presbyterians .....with Pentecostals .....with Four Square Gospel .....with Greek Orthodox.....with Episcopal priests..... with Southern Baptists..... with Presbyterians..... with Congregationalists ..... with United Methodists.....with United Church of Christ.....with Churches of Christ..... with Bible Baptists..... with Seventh day Adventists.....etal.

Friendships flourished, unreasoned prejudices melted, and ministries extended beyond previous bounds.

Early on Grant began to teach a required class

called *Success Motivation in the Ministry* that soon caught on. He had personally been influenced by many of the popular writings of people like Napoleon Hill that focused on the need to set goals and the importance of personal attitudes and how those attitudes could determine the level of achievement one might reach in any chosen path of life.

The students were required to immerse themselves in many of the popular works in that field (*they were required to read 7 books during that Quarter in that one class alone*). Many of these books were totally secular in focus, some even slightly heretical ala shades of Religious Science, but all of them had some important application that could be drawn out and applied to the work of the ministry and the building of a growing church.

Many of the men professed that this course changed their lives and changed their churches. One theme reiterated was “*Your church is you writ large..... and what does that say about you*”.

Well now.....Dr. Crane is long gone from the scene.

Dr McBirnie went home to be with the Lord in `1995 and Grant led his memorial service in that same amphitheater referred to earlier.

Holland London is also gone.

What about Grant? well he says that he has gotten older and he claims perhaps even a bit wiser as he has experienced visiting the Holy Land over 125 times and headed up several national nonprofit organizations based in DC such as Christian Voice and The American Freedom Coalition..

He still looks with real fondness to the days of the beginning of the Graduate school and is grateful that he could play a part in its birth.

Grant left the Graduate School in 1972 to do other things and others have continued with the work and build on the foundation that Crane, McBirnie and Grant laid those many years ago in 1968.

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