

Interview with Pete Steen



by Bert Witvoet

Pete Steen may not be an expert on the phenomenology of the joke (shall we call it humorology?) but certain things qualify him to make some very spontaneous remarks about humor. First, he laughs a lot, even though he is in the middle of a very serious discussion. Secondly, he has suffered a lot. Since 1973 he has fought against Hodgkin's disease, submitting himself to chemotherapy that weakens him severely. For these and other reasons, not the least being Pete's unswerving ambition to show the relevance of the gospel to academic studies and the rest of life, I thought it worthwhile to catch this philosophic prophet in midflight and without preparation submit him to an interview. With Steen's warning still ringing in my ears - "I am just thinking off the top of my head, Witvoet. If you do anything nasty with my words, I'll never forgive you. That's a sin against the Holy Spirit" - I am happy to glean the following exchange from a somewhat more extensive interview with him. The thing that struck me most was that I had been talking with a man totally in love with God's revelation: creation, Word and Christ. Thank you, Pete, for an inspiring hour with your spirit.

Vanguard: Pete, I've heard you talk about the Bible and humor, about the fact that God laughs when, for example, the nations plot against Him. I got the impression from you that we should be in on the joke. Would you say that Christians don't laugh enough or laugh for the wrong reasons?

Steen: I think they laugh for the wrong reasons. Everything can be laughed at just about. Humor is the other side of seriousness. But to laugh for the wrong reasons, out of unbelief, that's what I'm afraid of. The laugh of faith can be about anything that is common to man. In

spite of all the bizarre things God allows to happen, he won't allow anything to happen that is not common to man, that is not under his law word. No temptation or trial is not common to man. That means that he allows us to laugh about almost everything.

Vanguard: Because it's at the same level as we are?

Steen: Yes.

Vanguard: And by laughing we relativize?

Steen: Well, I think we then surrender it to God's care. Now it's your problem, God. In a proper way, you know. I mean, I am at the end of my rope; that's where prayer situations come in. That's a nice check on the humanist notion that we can take on the responsibility for everything, that there is no other appeal beyond ourselves. The joy goes out of life. When you read *The Joyless Economy*, a book that critiques Soviet economy, you know why socialism has no future. It's too joyless. And capitalism not either for that reason.

Vanguard: So laughter is really a sign of hope?

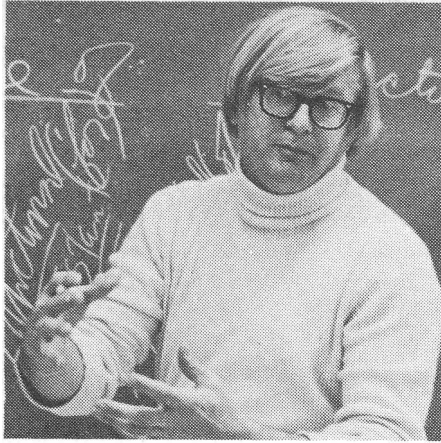
Steen: That's right, that's right, if it is done in faith. But not if you have to learn to laugh so that you can endure the pain of past mistakes. The Neo-marxists, who are very much for the pleasure principle, the play principle, which is their way of bringing a critique on technocrats and on the science side of the dilemma in order to get on with their utopian designs for the future, laugh the present mess into the ground. But they are laughing at themselves because they are the same autonomous man as the previous Marxist. But they can't laugh without intense pain. They can't really surrender in laughter; they can't really have a good ol' belly laugh.

Vanguard: You would say that laughter is in fact an expression of freedom?

Steen: Yes, freedom from your own autonomy. Trying to be sovereign is always enslaving yourself in the process. There goes the humor, right out of your own sovereignty.

Vanguard: How does sadness play a role in the life of the Christian?

Steen: Sadness is often caused by unbelief around us. I would not say that all sadness is caused by the fact that God is not recognized, that his rights and his honor are not acknowledged, but a lot of it is. Jesus wept.



something that's absolutely good for nothing. That's what tempting amounts to. You know, God's got to have his rights realized on this earth; his righteous rule on earth must come to complete fulfillment, but he never steps in and makes that happen prematurely. To tempt God is to try to get that to happen.

We always enjoy a demonstration on the part of God; it's great to see. But there in too lies the very malicious character of tempting God. He loves his own reputation. He loves to have his creatures desire his name and honor above all things. And there's nothing that gets into his heart quicker than to say "Blot me out of the book of life for your own great name's sake. Do it not for us, not for our children's children." But now, if you want that revelation because you're tired and you're begging off because it's that hard and you're sick of suffering and you call in fire power, that's tempting the Lord your God - as they tempted me in the wilderness by saying "We want water, make it come, just do another miracle for us, and if you don't, we'd rather go back to Egypt."

Some people say he wept because the Jews, his fellow believers, did not see that Abraham's God was the god of the living and that He the living waters himself was in their midst. He was the resurrection and the life, and here they were crying their eyes out because Lazarus was dead. I know you're gonna raise him in the last day, you know. So most of the time the sadness is due to the fact that we perceive the blindness and unbelief in other people. We're sad because they don't see our faith.

Vanguard: *What about the sadness of say losing someone you loved?*

Steen: That's probably the reason why Jesus wept, the real reason that verse is in the Bible [laughter]. Sure, Jesus cried "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Endurance comes through suffering, and we learn obedience through the things we suffer. Jesus too learned obedience through the things he suffered. Sadness is involved in that. Jesus wept because he was sad.

Vanguard: *That's part of being human.*

Steen: It's also part of being in a fallen world where God because He is God just takes his own sweet time, for time is his creature. He never steps in in a way that he annihilates his creation. So we're in it deep and there's no way out ... and there's no rush. Everything needs its own time.

Vanguard: *Are you saying that we should not ask for too many miracles?*

Steen: Tempting the Lord your God is one of the big sins in the Bible. It's vanity. Vanity just means that you're good for nothing. Well, there's hardly anything that's good for nothing. I mean you just have to stretch your imagination a lot to come up with

because God always answers one way or the other. We have to be careful what we pray for. If we are serious about it, there's nothing greater than to bring it to his attention; on the other hand, you've got to be circumspect.

The charismatic movement just runs into the holy of holies - fools rush in where angels fear to make requests. And angels are right at the throne: they're guardians of the throne, they are the bodyguards of God; and one mistake they don't make is to rush in there. Man alive, if the book of Revelation does not scare the pants off people. You know, getting super familiar with God is against the whole idea of the reverence and awe that ought to be. That's why the Bible, particularly because of sin, because of its vanity, its stupidity and its emptiness, lays a heavy hand on the holiness of God. And any kind of familiarity with Him ought to be handled carefully until we grow up to the point that we have enough experience to know what to laugh at and what not to laugh at. Charismatics is a stage along the way in the school of life, the covenant school of life.

Vanguard: *I enjoy the charismatics, but they often have a simplistic way of looking at life. They're always looking for short cuts too.*

Steen: I think they are lucky; happy go lucky. They get a lot of answers too. And we don't even pray half the time; we get to be old and cynical. But anyone that really learns knows that prayer's a real thing. The charismatics drop everything and run fast. When you take off all your clothes you can run like crazy. But then you get cold and start looking for your clothes again.

Vanguard: *The charismatics seem to enjoy the freedom of real laughter though. Sometimes they even laugh in their prayers. Can you laugh during prayer and still retain a sense of awe?*

Steen: I have thought a little about that. There are different kinds of prayer situations. The more the situation is intimate, the more people can do that. Families can hardly have a prayer every night at the supper table when something funny does not happen in the middle of the prayer. You say, "God, you understand why this happened."

Vanguard: "One of my kids just farted."

Vanguard: *This makes me think of Robert Carvill [former Editor of Vanguard] when he was dying of cancer. He said, "It isn't as if I don't believe in miracles, but I am not going anywhere" [to Kathryn Kuhlman, for example, who was going strong at that time] "to see if it is going to happen." To him that didn't seem to be the right thing to do. He didn't want the miracle of God unless it was put in his lap. He died happy, with a lot of hope.*

Steen: That's right. I feel that prayer is a very dangerous thing. It's probably the most dangerous thing in human experience because we always have what we pray for answered. Even the fallen angels had that when they prayed to be sent into the pigs and Jesus answered their request. They were beseeching Him, struggling with Jesus in prayer to get their request answered, and He answered it

Steen: Yeah [laughter] or "the dog did." You know, what are you going to do? But church is the place where you do that at least. It depends on what room of creation you are in: family, school, social get-together; that has something to do with it.

Vanguard: *and the kind of people you are with.*

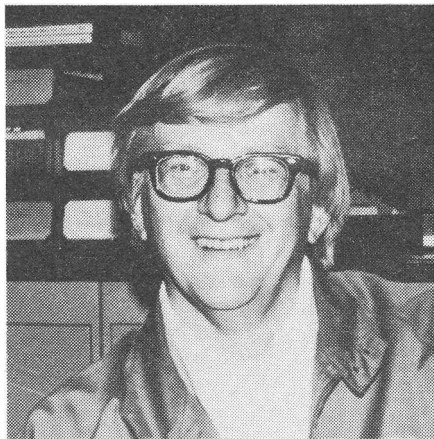
Steen: That's right, the kind of people, how well you know them, what tradition they're in. Young Life probably takes intimacy to its extreme. That's one feature I am more and more impressed with: the fact that there are all kinds of people making the mistake of breaking through in public ecclesiastical prayer. People share too much of personal marital problems in church situations. Obviously there are limits on prayers. The more trusted the situation the more room for humor and seriousness.

Vanguard: *And the more you can share about your marital problems?*

Steen: That's right. I think the best place to do that is in the marriage, even if you can't share it with your own children.

Vanguard: *I heard you talk about "the new conservative" in a way that suggested that you approve. Can you elaborate on this?*

Steen: Yes, I don't mean the conservatism that comes from humanism, of course. What I am talking about is a new respect for the good things of the past. We are a little short on covenant history, God's dealings with mankind and the earth. The more we know about this history the more we know that nothing can happen in one generation: it is spread over the generations. "My years are in all your generations," says God; so we better know that and not try to reform too much or we won't have any fun. We'll be so serious we'll destroy ourselves. It'll be the joyless economy all over again. The work of other people has to be appreciated otherwise we duplicate it. The fool is the one who because of his lack of historical knowledge builds the wheel all over again. The fool is the one who doesn't count the cost of the struggle before he gets going. He doesn't look at what God has done through obedient men and women. What we must do is not just go back but simply take the old and splice it into where we are at. And we must slow down the new.



Vanguard: *How do you apply this in your own life?*

Steen: One way I do it is by jumping into the car. That way nobody can reach me. It's one way of getting away from the telephone. One way of redeeming the car, and if you can redeem a car, wow [laughter]. I mean, what's good about a car? It's turned the world upside down. So there's something we can do with it. You see the breadth of creation when you travel. The car is in many ways a wonderful thing, but it probably came fifty years too early and then it's something not everybody should have. But we've got it now and everybody has two or three, although people are trying to get rid of them more and more. So just for the little bit of gas it takes, it's a good thing to just take your family for a joyride, to look around.

Of course, around Pennsylvania you have to look really hard. It's the armpit of the United States, western Pennsylvania, with the stripmining and steel industry. Everybody is into football and beer drinking, deer hunting and trout fishing. People eat a lot of junk food. And the obesity of people in western Pennsylvania is incredible. They have been sold the whole bill of goods. So you have to take a little trip in your car to look around and just see how many things, old things, were around that were beautiful.

That Allegheny River is just an amazing river. I can get to it in half an hour. The amazing history of it! Washington went across that thing in the wintertime. He was a surveyor. Hardly anybody knows that. And the

oil industry got started in Titusville and went down the Allegheny River to Oilcity, Pennsylvania, where Dewey definitively gave up the supernatural. He was teaching in an elementary school, where he gave up God and said, "Now we've got to have a civilization where we ban the supernatural in order to have commitment to just this earth, taking all the responsibility on ourselves." That's in Oilcity. And then I can take a little trip to see ... I imagine they have a little monument to Dewey somewhere, and if they don't they ought to, you know. He was a great man.

Vanguard: *One last question. What is the funniest thing you have observed in the christian life?*

Steen: Well, I think it has got to be the kind of situation where something happens in church, when we are forced to laugh, okay? We are right in the middle of that time when hardly anybody laughs - we're right in the kitchen and the oven is on full blast and we're standing right before God; we've come to surrender ourselves wholly as human beings "Here, take me as I am, take it all" that's a sacred time: and now, right in the middle of that time, something happens. Even the minister has to take time to laugh and let it all out. When he gets over it and the congregation is finally over it we can get on again with the show, the production. Worship. is a drama.

Vanguard: *Do you like that aspect of worship?*

Steen: Oh yes, that's what I like about the Episcopalians: they get out all the banners, the gala costumes, like they did in the Old Testament. I think that's great. It's the sin of Calvinism that it tried to get at the sovereignty of God by the theoretic realm, thus making God anything but sovereign. Then people who want to know who God is are so serious in his presence that they can never laugh.

The funniest thing to me is seeing a bunch of Calvinists laugh in a worship service. That has got to be the joke of jokes. That's an impossible situation [Pete laughs heartily]. But with God all things are possible, even making Calvinists laugh in church.

Pete Steen is Director of Christian Educational Services, a Pittsburgh organization. He lectures at various colleges and communities in the area, often teaching a Christian Perspectives course. One of the tasks he has taken upon himself is the collection and duplication of papers written from a Reformational perspective. He and Jan have two teenage children.