

Perspective

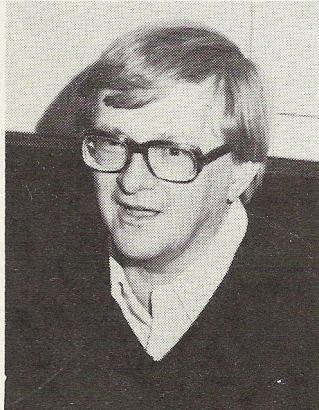
Newsletter of the Institute for Christian Studies

Volume 18, No. 3 — June 1984

On the Death of Dr. Peter Steen

by Al Wolters

At 7:40 p.m. on June 23, 1984, Dr. Peter Steen, long time advocate of reformational scholarship, and part-time staff member of the Institute for Christian Studies, finally succumbed to the cancer which he had been battling for a decade. He died at the Roswell Park Memorial Institute in Buffalo, New York, in the presence of his wife, Jan, and his parents. He was 48 years old.



Pete Steen (as everyone called him) had degrees from Calvin College and Westminster Theological Seminary, and studied for a year at the Free University of Amsterdam in the early 1960s. His doctoral dissertation (recently published by Wedge Publishing Foundation) dealt with the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd, of whom Peter was both a very knowledgeable critic and enthusiastic advocate. He taught philosophy at Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Illinois, at Geneva College in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, and for the Coalition for Christian Outreach, based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. During the last decade of his life he was the animating spirit of an organization called Christian Educational Services, which organized reformational lectures (mainly on philosophical and ethical topics as these related to contemporary American culture) to college students all over western Pennsylvania and Ohio. His teaching had an enormous and lasting impact on Christian students in that area, many of whom found their way to the Institute for Christian Studies. It is not too much to say (humanly speaking) that Pete Steen single-handedly brought about the strong and widespread interest in things reformational in the heartland of American

Presbyterianism. He was the single most tireless promoter of the ICS in North America (and probably the world), as well as its most effective student recruiter. It was Pete, more than anyone else, who gained a hearing for the reformational vision among non-Dutch American evangelicals.

Probably more than anyone else, Pete Steen could be said to personify the reformational movement in North America in the last three decades. He was the living incarnation of all that was best (and some of what was worst) in the movement for reformational thought and action in the United States and Canada during the last three decades. In him we saw the burning zeal, the broad cultural vision, the uncompromising insistence on Christ's universal sovereignty, the deep-rootedness in Scripture, the passionate commitment to societal reform, the tenacious allegiance to sound doctrine, the gift for unorthodox eloquence, the respect for the highest standards of scholarship, the fearlessness in challenging the idols of a secularized establishment, the commitment to evangelism, the willingness to be reviled for Christ's sake, the strategic sense of what is historically important and possible, the childlike trust in a holy and forgiving Jehovah, the deep bond of confessional solidarity with believers in every walk of life, and the inspiring leadership, which has marked the reformational movement at its best. And in him we also saw reflected some of the weaknesses of that movement: polemical exaggeration, coarseness of language, insensitivity to persons, lack of organization, prophecy disguised as scholarship, neglect of family, theological imprecision, and a host of other major and minor sins. In many ways Pete was not an easy person to get along with, yet it is telling that his larger-than-life personality (in many ways he resembled Martin Luther) won him hundreds of critical admirers, but few lasting enemies.

Not only did Pete personify the reformational movement; he also did more to advance its cause in North America than any other human being apart from Dr. Evan Runner of Calvin College. His life was a bright flame that burned for Christ's honour in all of culture, and that set on fire the hearts of hundreds of college students, both in the wider Pittsburgh area and far beyond. His life was a magnificent testimony to the power of God's grace in the concrete dimensions of earthly history.

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