In the often narrowly focused world of Bible studies, Paul Achtemeier wielded an unusually wide influence.

Achtemeier was a rigorous and technically precise scholar who also wrote and edited accessible works that helped general readers understand the Bible. He was a minister in the United Church of Christ when, in 1985, he became the first Protestant to head the Catholic Biblical Association of America. And he was a professor who encouraged his students to challenge, in their dissertations and their published work, his own seminal arguments.

Achtemeier, a 1949 graduate of Elmhurst College, died at his home in Richmond, Virginia, on January 28 after a long illness. He was 85.

“More than any other scholar, he was able to bridge various audiences and different denominational perspectives,” said Andrew Das, Professor and Donald W. and Betty J. Buik Chair in Elmhurst’s Department of Religious Studies. Das studied under Achtemeier at Union Theological Seminary (now Union Presbyterian Seminary) in Virginia. “He wrote not just for other scholars, but for pastors and teachers and laity trying to make sense of these 2,000-year-old texts from the ancient Mediterranean world. He opened that world to readers.”

Among his fellow scholars, Achtemeier was perhaps best known for his ground-breaking commentary on 1 Peter, written for the prestigious Hermeneia series. But he also made his mark as general editor of Harper’s Bible Dictionary, published in 1985, an initiative that aimed to make the results of Biblical scholarship available to the general public. The publication became a widely used resource for students, pastors and preachers.

The Reverend Dr. Paul John “Bud” Achtemeier was a native of Lincoln, Nebraska, and the only child of a minister and his wife. At Elmhurst College, where he earned his bachelor’s degree with honors, he studied theology, prepared for the seminary and played football. Even among the high-achieving members of Elmhurst’s now-legendary Class of 1949, Achtemeier stood out.

“He was first in our class, one of the smartest people you’ll ever meet and one of the nicest, too,” said Bill Bauer ’49, senior judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit. “He was very devoted to religion and focused on the seminary. Then again, when you played in a football game against him, you knew you had been in a game. He was accomplished in every field.”

Achtemeier earned bachelor of divinity and doctor of theology degrees at New York’s Union Theological Seminary. He spent more than four decades teaching at colleges and seminaries in the United States and Europe, including Elmhurst, Lancaster Theological Seminary and the Graduate School of Ecumenical Studies of the World Council of Churches in Switzerland. For 24 years, he was a professor at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, where he retired in 1997 as Herbert Worth and Annie H. Jackson Professor Emeritus of Biblical Interpretation.

Many of his former students went on to distinguished scholarly careers of their own. Father Frank Matera, a former student of Achtemeier’s who recently retired as professor of New Testament at Catholic University in Washington, said Achtemeier cultivated intellectual independence in his students. “He didn’t try to impose his views,” said Matera, now pastor of St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Simsbury, Connecticut. “He never said, ‘You have to do this my way.’ That was a very good lesson.”

“He was an extremely warm, kind person, almost a father figure to his students,“ Das said.

Matera and Das co-edited a collection of essays called The Forgotten God as a tribute to Achtemeier to mark his 75th birthday in 2002. In their introduction, they credited him with helping to shape the way a generation of scholars understand Scriptural conceptions of God. But, they wrote, Achtemeier’s impact was not limited to the academic community. “He has always sought to reach beyond the academy to engage the interested layperson or student of the Scriptures.”

Achtemeier’s own scholarly output was prolific: by one count, 17 books, five dozen journal articles and more than 75 book reviews. One of his most highly regarded works was his commentary on 1 Peter. A review in the Review of Biblical Literature called it “a superb achievement” and “a classic commentary” that would endure for decades.

“He was one of the big figures to come out of Elmhurst,” Das said of Achtemeier.

Achtemeier co-authored four volumes with Elizabeth Rice Achtemeier, his wife of more than 50 years. Together, their expertise covered the full range of the Bible; she was an Old Testament scholar, and he an expert on the New Testament. Elizabeth Achtemeier died in 2002.

Paul Achtemeier is survived by his second wife, Sandra M. Levy; his son, P. Mark Achtemeier (Katherine); a daughter, Marie A. Finch (Paul); and five grandchildren. A memorial service was held in Richmond, Virginia, in February.

https://www.elmhurst.edu/news/bible-scholar-paul-achtemeier-49-1927-2013/