

## Richard I. Pervo (1942 – 2017)

Richard Ivan Pervo was born on May 11, 1942 and died on May 20, 2017. The cause of his death was an acute episode of chronic leukemia, a condition he had lived with for over seven years. His most recent teaching appointment was Professor in the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Minnesota—a position he held from 1999 until 2002. He specialized in New Testament and Christian Studies. The quintessential scholar, an Episcopal priest (until 2003), and religious educator, Pervo is best known for his pioneering views on the Acts of the Apostles. His death reverberates across all continents.

Born in Lakewood, Ohio to Ivan Alexander and Elizabeth 'Betty' (Kline) Pervo, he went to grade school and high school (kindergarten through 11<sup>th</sup> grade) in Fairview Park, Ohio. In 12<sup>th</sup> grade, he attended the six-year Concordia College program in Milwaukee where he received his high school diploma after one year and a finishing diploma in 1962. He accepted his B.A. from Concordia Senior College in Fort Wayne, Indiana in 1964. After a short stint in social work and community organizing (St. Louis), Pervo earned a Master's of Divinity at the Episcopal Divinity School (EDS) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He earned his Th.D. from Harvard University under Dieter Georgi in 1979. Helmut Koester, George MacRae and John Strugnell served on Pervo's dissertation committee. A revised version of his dissertation appeared as *Profit with Delight: Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Fortress, 1987).

From 1971-1975, Pervo taught Greek at EDS while working on his doctorate. In 1975, he was appointed Assistant Professor at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois. In 1979, he was promoted to Associate Professor at Seabury-Western and in 1989, to Full Professor. Pervo taught at Seabury-Western until 1999. He also served as Treasurer to the Board of Directors for the *Anglican Theological Review* in Evanston, Illinois from 1984-1989. At the time of his death, he was a member in good standing of the Society of Biblical Literature, the North American Patristics Society, Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, the Midwest Patristics Seminar, and the Chicago Society of Biblical Research.

Throughout his career, Pervo enjoyed a reputation as a superb teacher, amiable faculty member, and popular lecturer. He published books, articles, and reviews on countless topics in major North American and European journals. His interactions with other scholars were generous to a fault. Even his most scathing book reviews leave a generally laudatory impression. He dedicated the bulk of his career to understanding the Acts of the Apostles and related literature. In addition to *Profit with Delight*, he contributed four seminal scholarly works: *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Polebridge, 2006), *Acts: A Commentary* (Hermeneia, 2008), *The Making of Paul: Constructions of the Apostle in Early Christianity* (Fortress, 2010), and *The Acts of Paul: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Cascade, 2014). In the course of his research, he came to regard the Acts of the Apostles as comparable to ancient fiction. The various episodes about Peter, Paul, and the other apostles were

composed, he argued, with an eye to entertaining (“delight”) as they evangelized (“profit”). In addition to a new vision of the genre of Acts (i.e., “fiction” rather than “history,” although he rejected the categories for other than heuristic purposes), he also shifted scholarly consensus of the date of Acts (to half a century later, ca. 115 CE) and argued for the author’s reliance on an early corpus of Paul’s letters, despite obvious discrepancies between these two data sets. He was thinking critically right up until his death. His most recent article entitled, “When in Rome: The Authorship of Acts in the Late Second Century”—appearing in the month that he died—argues that Irenaeus may have invented Acts’s attribution to “Luke.” With this contribution, Pervo cast doubt, for the first time in his career, on the long-held thesis of Henry Joel Cadbury and others that the author of the Third Gospel wrote Acts (*Biblical Research* [2015]: 15-32; n.b., issue was published May 2017 despite 2015 publication date). An additional manuscript on Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians was one month away from completion when he died.

Pervo’s extensive knowledge of ancient history and ancient languages, combined with his keen sensitivity to human nature, made him an exegete of Christian literature *par excellence*. Beyond pioneering theses about the authorship, date, provenance, genre, sources, and purpose of various New Testament and early Christian writings, Pervo was known for playfully provoking the guild with an Anglophilic wit that was often too highbrow for even the most sophisticated to parse. Richard’s rule of thumb seemed to be: a little something to offend everyone. As the ‘Robin Williams’ of New Testament studies, Pervo was a stiff ivory-tower intellectual who loved a good joke as much as a dry cocktail and possessed conceit in inverse relationship to his I.Q. That said, each spoonful of sugar was intended to help audiences swallow his squarely rational, frequently anti-dogmatic arguments. A few weeks before his death, on the occasion of a new contract to write a commentary on the Epistle of Barnabas, Richard conveyed his congratulations to me with a single droll quip: “Splendid! So pleased (although this means reading Barnabas).” In the first email Richard ever sent me the subject line read: “R.I.P.,” the way he often signed his name. Ironically, I like to imagine him not ‘resting in peace,’ but cavorting with the saints in heaven until everyone’s sides ache.

A Festschrift volume in his honor is scheduled to appear this Fall with the title: *Delightful Acts: New Essays on the Canonical and Non-Canonical Acts*, ed. H. W. Attridge, D. R. MacDonald, C. K. Rothschild, WUNT (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017). Pervo was aware of the volume, which contains a comprehensive bibliography he himself compiled only a month or so before his death. He is deeply missed by those who remember him affectionately as colleague, mentor, and friend.

Richard I. Pervo is survived by his wife, Karen E. Moreland (married April 2, 1967), his twin brother, Charles Alexander Pervo and his sister, Pamela Pervo Clifton. His wife will be present at the Society of Biblical Literature meeting in Boston on November 19<sup>th</sup> from 9:00-11:30 A.M. to receive the Festschrift volume. A funeral mass is scheduled to take place on July 6<sup>th</sup> at 10:00 A.M. at St. Mark’s

Cathedral in Minneapolis (<https://www.ourcathedral.org/>). His widow requests your R.S.V.P. to the following email address: [rkpervo@comcast.net](mailto:rkpervo@comcast.net).

Clare K. Rothschild, Professor of Scripture Studies, Lewis University (Chicago, IL) and Professor Extraordinary, Department Ancient Studies, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, Stellenbosch University, South Africa. See more at: <https://www.sbl-site.org/>