

James Nelson, groundbreaking ethics and sexuality scholar, dies at 85

by [Connie Larkman](#) and [Christian Century staff](#)

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James B. Nelson, an author and scholar of Christian ethics in the United Church of Christ, died October 15 in Tucson, Arizona, at age 85.

Nelson took part in the civil rights and anti-war movements in the 1960s and championed LGBT rights beginning in the 1970s.

“His groundbreaking work on human sexuality and ethics help set the stage for a United Church ready to become open and affirming,” said John C. Dorhauer, UCC general minister and president. “He helped us understand that sexual expression and intimacy were gifts of the sacred. He was ahead of his time, and endured much abuse and vitriol.”

Nelson was born in Windom, Minnesota, and earned degrees from Macalester College in St. Paul and Yale University. He was ordained in the UCC and served as a pastor in Connecticut and South Dakota before joining the faculty of United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities in Minnesota in 1963. He taught there for 35 years.

Nelson wrote 12 books and had one in progress at the time of his death.

He was perhaps best known for his 1978 book *Embodiment*. In “Reuniting Sexuality and Spirituality,” a 1987 article for the *Christian Century*, he wrote about how the period after the sexual revolution of the 1960s and '70s saw a shift away from “understanding sexual sin as a matter of wrong sexual acts.”

Instead, he wrote: “Sexual sin lies in the dualistic alienation by which the body becomes an object, either to be constrained out of fear (the Victorian approach) or to be treated as a pleasure machine (the Playboy philosophy). It lies in the dualistic alienation by which females are kept from claiming their assertiveness and males kept from claiming their vulnerability.”

Nelson was also open about his struggle with alcoholism, including in his 2004 book *Thirst*. He [described himself in a 2007 article](#) about addiction as “a Christian ethicist (retired) and a recovering alcoholic (from which there is no retirement).”

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