

“Reconciled Enemies”
Romans 5:1-11 (Creed: Nicene Creed)
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It’s hard to get a group of people on the “same page” much less have them agree about what is written on that page. This is particularly true when it comes to theology.

Transport yourself back to 325 A.D. Emperor Constantine has called together 318 bishops in the city of Nicaea to try to unify his kingdom theologically as he had already unified his kingdom militarily and politically. Constantine is reported as saying: “Disorder in the church, I consider more fearful than any other war.” Constantine hoped that the decisions made at Nicaea would resolve the theological division in the church and ensure peace in his empire. Good luck with that!

What theological disagreements would warrant this kind of council and several others to follow? How could the Christian Church, not quite 300 years old, already have been so divided that party lines had been drawn and enemies identified?

Three main groups were represented at the Council of Nicaea. They gathered to debate questions related to the Trinity. Specifically, they debated whether the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are of the **same** substance and equally God or whether the Son and Holy Spirit are of **similar** substance to the Father, thus making them subordinate to the Father. They debated the related question: “Was Jesus fully human **and** fully divine?”

A bishop named Athanasius cut to the heart of the matter. He argued that, bottom-line, they were debating salvation. He contended that Jesus was God in the flesh, fully human and fully divine—of the same (not just similar) substance with the Father. He argued that if Jesus were not God, then His death would produce only what one man’s death for another produces. When one person dies for another that may be an act of honor, it may advance a noble cause, it may help or save the life of another, but the death of a human could never reconcile humanity (whom Paul refers to as enemies of God) to God.

Eugene Peterson in his *Message* translation renders portions of Romans 5 in a way that helps me understand.

“Christ arrives right on time to make this happen. He didn’t, and doesn’t, wait for us to get ready. He presented himself for this sacrificial death when we were far too weak and rebellious to do anything to get ourselves ready. And even if we hadn’t been so weak, we wouldn’t have known what to do anyway. We can understand someone dying for a person worth dying for, and we can understand how someone good and noble would inspire us to selfless sacrifice. But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him.

“Now that we are set right with God by means of this sacrificial death, the consummate blood sacrifice, there is no longer a question of being at odds with God in any way. If, when we were at our worst, we were put on friendly terms with God by the

sacrificial death of his Son, now that we're at our best, just think of how our lives will expand and deepen by means of his resurrection life! Now that we have actually received this amazing friendship with God, we are no longer content to simply say it in plodding prose. We sing and shout our praises to God through Jesus, the Messiah!"

Perhaps you are thinking right now: "That's nothing new. That's all theology I know and understand." If so, let's reflect on some of the possible implications of these truths. God's goal was reconciliation—reconciling humanity to Him. God desired this reconciliation so much that God was willing to come in the flesh and die for humanity. Paul does not mince words when he says that we were "enemies" of God. This was no mere disagreement that occurred when humanity sinned against a holy, just and perfect God. What remains amazing to me is that God, the One sinned against, took the first step in reconciliation while we were weak . . . while we were enemies of God. God did more than "extend the olive branch." God laid down His life . . . for his enemies.

When I ponder God's initiative in reconciling His enemies to Himself I am challenged when I consider my own relationships in which reconciliation is needed. Despite the fact that God's enemies were in the wrong—they were the offenders—God reached out to do what it took to heal the broken relationship. How often do we do that? Most of us find it very difficult to take the first step in reconciliation. "It wasn't my fault our relationship is messed up." "He needs to take the first step." "She isn't interested in reconciliation, why should I be?"

Many years ago I watched on the news as two political leaders in the Middle East signed a peace treaty. A reporter noted how pained the one leader looked during the process. When asked about his obvious struggle, the leader said: "You don't make peace with your friends. You make peace with your enemies. And that's not easy."

It wasn't easy for God. It's not easy for us. It wasn't easy for those bishops in the fourth century who wrestled with key doctrines of Christianity. Some of them were enemies. Some of them stayed enemies. Yet, somehow, over the course of some 56 years following the Council at Nicaea, many church leaders agreed upon the Nicene Creed which we will recite today. At the heart of this creed is the doctrine of salvation through Jesus Christ—fully human and fully God. Through Him we are reconciled to God. Through His mercies and guidance, we can be reconciled to others—even our enemies.

(I am indebted to Jack Rogers' book *Presbyterian Creeds* published by The Westminster Press in 1985 for the historical and theological information about the Nicene Creed.)