

The Controversy of Ephesus

“Theotokos” vs. “Christotokos”:

The controversy over theotokos and christotokos is, as is nearly always the case, rooted in one side misunderstanding the other side’s definition for their term. In this case, Nestorius holds to christotokos because to him the definition of theotokos implies that God was born, and thus had a beginning. Cyril holds to theotokos because to him christotokos seems to deny, or at least ignore, the divinity of Christ. Both terms can be interpreted to mean something false and something true. This paper will dissect these two terms.

Theotokos – “God-bearer” or “mother of God”. Theo as we know means God. Tokos means “the bearer of” or “to give birth”. For theotokos to be applied to Mary could imply that God had a mother, which would imply that God was born by his own creation. This meaning is obviously absurd, and Nestorius boycotted the term because this is the meaning he attributed to it. However, theotokos can be given a meaning that that is not so absurd. Since in previous creeds it has been established that Jesus is both fully God and fully man, we can formulate a logical argument for theotokos. It could go as follows: Mary is the mother of Jesus. Jesus is God. Therefore, Mary is the mother of God. Now the term is not so absurd or theologically unacceptable. This is the meaning that Cyril attributed to the term.

Christotokos – “Christ-bearer” or “Mother of Christ”. Christo = Christ. Christokos was a term that Nestorius liked much better than theotokos. To him, it was a perfectly valid and good title for Mary. It did not carry the connotations of God having a beginning or being created, and it also carries the implication that Christ is fully man. However, Cyril fought the term because to him it denied, or at least downplayed, the divinity of Christ. Cyril’s thinking was that since Nestorius denied the term theotokos in favor of Christotokos, he must not believe that Jesus is God. If he had listened to Nestorius’ definition to the term theotokos, he would have realized that the reason Nestorius denied it is because he held a different definition to the term, and thus it meant something different to him.

Cyril and Nestorius had obvious differences in which term they preferred, but their beliefs were very much the same on this subject. Both believed in the divinity and humanity of Christ. However, since they both had different definitions for the two terms, they both became enemies because of the terms. They refused to recognize that they had practically the same beliefs concerning Christ’s divinity and humanity, and instead dwelled on their staunch loyalty to their term of preference.

In my opinion, I tend to agree with Nestorius that Christotokos is a safer term. It is completely true from whichever angle you approach it from. Christ, the title referring to the second person of the Trinity as Messiah and savior of humanity, was certainly the son

of Mary. This term, while it does not tell us that Christ is God, certainly does not deny that he is God. Theotokos, while it does tell us that Christ is God, also can be interpreted to mean that God (which can easily apply to God the Father, Son or Spirit) was born of Mary. Because of this easy interpretation one can make from the term, it is in my opinion a more dangerous term and thus not a very good one, though it can be explained to mean something true.

Difference between “God-bearer” and “Mother of God”?

There is a literal difference between *bearer* and *mother*. To bear is merely to carry, while to mother implies that the mother helped bring the child into existence. “God-bearer” could mean that Mary merely carried God, whereas “Mother of God” implies that God actually depended on Mary for existence and that His origin was in Mary. God-bearer is literally a safer term, but I think “bearer” virtually meant “mother” in the original connotation used by Nestorius and Cyril.

“Mary, Mother of God” in the Bible?

No. The closest anybody comes in the Bible is in Luke 1:43, where Elizabeth calls Mary “the mother of my Lord”. Lord means something much different from God. Lord in this case *is* referring to Christ, but Christ as Elizabeth’s master or ruler (lord), not Christ as her God (though he was).