

Washington Cathedral Stained-Glass Windows

By Helena Niemann Erikstrupp (University of Oxford)



*Robert E. Lee Stained Glass, National Cathedral, DC.
Wikicommons*

'All too many others have remained more cautious
than courageous and have remained silent behind
the anesthetizing security of stained glass
windows'

Martin Luther King,
Birmingham, 1963

Sitting behind bars in Birmingham City Jail, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote his now-famous letter in response to eight clergymen (including two Episcopal Bishops), expressing his disapproval of their statement that the law should 'peacefully be obeyed' in the fight for civil rights. In that letter, he wrote of the moral obligation to stand up for injustice, since we are caught up in an 'inescapable network of mutuality'. He expressed his grave disappointment with the white moderates who advocated for the nonviolent protests of the African-American community to take place in court, not on the streets. King writes that 'the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice.'

For King, the imagery of the stained-glass window became a powerful metaphor for the removed position of the Church in the contemporary fight for freedom, justice and equality. As is so often the case with King's words, the argument he put forward holds relevance today: the community of the National Cathedral of Washington, the Church where King gave his last Sunday morning sermon, used King's letter as the starting point

for one of their public panel discussions, part of a long-term process of reflection on their memorials. Their discussions have particularly revolved around the two stained-glass windows honouring Confederate heroes Robert E. Lee and Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson. The debates serve as an example of how a religious and national institution might handle past decisions to worship a different interpretation of the Civil War, decisions which involved ignoring the harsh realities of the Southern secessionist government and its war against the United States – a war conducted to uphold the South’s system of chattel slavery.

Eternalised in the brilliant red and blue stained-glass windows, the Generals Lee and Jackson were remembered as dutiful Christian soldiers with their outstanding accomplishments on the battlefield honoured, and represented, as biblical stories: a political move made by the sponsoring organisation, the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC). By positioning the heroes of the Confederacy within the sacred and civic space of the National Cathedral in Washington, the UDC ensured that these men were seen as constitutional parts of American history and remembered as such. The religious setting also reminds us of how religion became another battlefield in the conflict between North and South: each side had its ‘martyrs’, just as each side looked to God for meaning and for legitimisation of their cause as well as to make sense of a world crumbling around them. The Confederacy, when envisaged as a holy institution by its white statesmen and citizens, was grounded on the premise of the God-given right to own slaves, a position which was often justified through biblical citation, and the argument that white and black people were not created equal in the image of God. With its display of Lee and Jackson, the Cathedral asserted that this vision of the gospel, as embodied in the representation of the two Confederate soldiers, belonged in and was to be honored by the national seat of the Episcopal Church.

The stained-glass windows were installed in 1953 after two decades of conversation between the clergy and the UDC about the possibility of creating a memorial to Lee and Jackson in the Cathedral. It is no surprise that the UDC wished to sponsor a monument in Washington, D.C. In 1923, the organisation sought to fund a monument honouring the 'Faithful Coloured Mammies of the South' on Massachusetts Avenue, an example, which demonstrates the organisation's wish to establish public memorials that romanticised the institution of slavery and the experience of being enslaved in the US capital. To the relief of many, the project, fiercely opposed by African-American activists, remained on the drawing board. The organisation, however, continued to recognise the force of public, visual displays honouring their Confederate heroes and financially supported many monuments (both in the South and in the North) in their attempt to revise the history of the Civil War and collaborate with other groups sympathetic to the Confederacy at the particular moment when the battle for equal rights was underway.

In 1931, the Cathedral's Committee on Monuments and Memorials passed a resolution, accepting the UDC's offer to fund a tablet with a relief portrait of Lee for the Cathedral crypt, under the condition of the Bishop's approval. Instead of placing the memorial in the crypt, the Dean John Suter (Cathedral Dean from 1944-50) wrote in a 1947 letter to Mrs. Ferguson Cary (UDC historian general) that 'In view of the greatness of General Lee as a character, and the high place which he occupies in American History, the Cathedral authorities would be reluctant to have his name and memory honoured in a way that would seem inadequate'. As a solution, Suter suggested that the UDC should collaborate with other organisations to fund a memorial on the nave level, which would face the Potomac River and Arlington, the site of the Lees' former home, an antebellum mansion-turned-National Cemetery. Suter also suggested that the other half of the bay window next to Lee could be created to honour Jackson, the two figures venerated by

followers of the Lost Cause and known for their intimate military partnership. The memorial would then be placed on the same floor as the Cathedral's memorials dedicated to, amongst others, George Washington (1732-1799), to whom Lee had a personal relation: he was the son of Washington's most famous eulogist and he married Mary Anna Randolph Custis, the daughter of Washington's adopted son. The former US Secretary of State and Nobel Laureate, Frank Billings Kellogg (1856-1937) was also honoured on the same level. He is best known for his involvement in the Pact of Paris of 1927 (commonly known as the Kellogg-Briand Pact) that renounced war as an instrument in national policy, seemingly countering the Lost Cause narrative of the Lee-Jackson windows. Eventually in 1949, the stained-glass window memorial to the two confederate generals was approved and the funds were secured from the UDC and an anonymous northern beneficiary.

As the sun shines through the two windows, the reflection of the Lee and Jackson windows hits the walls and moves their presence further into the sacred space, making a visual impact on the viewer's experience of the Cathedral. The windows reimagine and idolise what the two men fought for during the Civil War: the preservation of a society built on chattel slavery, dehumanising people of colour and exploiting them as properties to gain personal economic wealth. Considering the time of the memorial's creation, it suggests a deliberate attempt to erase the histories of enslavement and diminish the nascent civil rights movement. Elizabeth W. Clarke of the UDC argued, in 1949, that the memorial is important because 'future generation must be made visually aware of the tremendous significance, for instance, of those doctrines of government promulgated by the Confederacy'. She continues to write that the Confederacy was 'The most heroic movement in American history shall not pass into oblivion.'

The Cathedral's 1952 press release, announcing the creation of the memorials to Lee and Jackson, stated that 'The memorials will honour the two Civil War generals not as soldiers, but as Christian gentlemen. Biographies of both men allow that they placed faith in God always in the foreground of their military lives.' It writes that the UDC selected the Cathedral as a 'natural site as a "House of Prayer for all People."' The stained-glass windows were dedicated on the 10th November 1953 to coincide with the annual convention of the UDC. The day before, President Dwight D. Eisenhower addressed 1000 members of UDC at the Shoreham Hotel, from a stage decorated in the flag of the Confederacy, the Confederate battle flag and the flag of North Carolina (the home state of the UDC's President). To the gathered ladies, Eisenhower mentioned that Lee featured in one of the portraits that he had in his office at the White House and spoke of both Lee and Jackson's great character as soldiers. He said: 'They hold before us a veneration for ideals, a conviction that to rise high in your profession you do not have to surrender principle. You can stand for what you believe.' The next day, the Cathedral held a dedication service with Dean Francis Bowes Sayre Jr., officiating.

Created by the Boston artist Wilbur Burnham for the cost of \$4,600, the windows are placed side by side, one dedicated to Lee and the other to Jackson, in the nave of the Cathedral. They each consist of two panels with four separate images, which are subdivided by a band of flags in the middle and topped by a canopy. Each portrays a different episode in the Generals' lives, praising their Christian nature and career achievements. Imagining Lee's bay window back in October 1931, the Bishop James E. Freeman suggested that 'it should be as beautiful in character as was his notable life'.

In one window medallion in the top left corner, Lee sits straight and bold on his favourite horse, Traveller, finely dressed in uniform as the ideal military man in the hours before his most important victory at Chancellorsville. As Evie Terrono reminds us, the

image references the painting 'The Last Meeting of Lee and Jackson' by Everett B. D. Julio (1869), which was widely distributed in print, and one of the many visual celebrations of Lee to circulate amongst a general public after the war. The African-American orator Frederick Douglass criticised the endless, popular memorialisation of Lee after his death, noting that:

It would seem from this that the soldier who kills the most men in battle, even in a bad cause, is the greatest Christian and entitled to the highest place in Heaven [...]. We are beginning to get the cause of General Lee's death. Jeff Davis says that 'he died of a broken heart;' and one journal has declared, that he died being sadly depressed at the condition of the country, that he could stand it no longer. From which we are to infer that the liberation of four millions of slaves and their elevation to manhood, and to the enjoyment of their civil and political rights, was more than he could, and so he died!

For Douglass, the national press published 'nauseating flatteries' of the late Lee that glossed over the realities of the cause for which he fought for instead cast him as a hero for all Americans, glorifying the enslavement of millions of people.

In the abovementioned window scene, Lee reaches his arm out in the middle of a conversation with Jackson, in a gesture, which reveals his reputation as a skilled strategist and leader. The meeting depicted would be their last, as Lee's most important victory would also be Jackson's final battle: one of the Confederacy's most popular Generals, Jackson died at Chancellorsville two years before the Confederate defeat. The other scenes represent Lee as a military engineer the US Army Corps of Engineers, particularly his 1838 project of creating dykes to direct the Mississippi River and making the St Louis harbour easier for vessels to reach. They also show his distinguished accomplishments first as a commander of West Point and, later, as President of Washington College (now Washington and Lee University). In the medallion of the

upper right corner, Lee directly faces the viewer with his arms and palms open as if embracing the viewer, with an image of the Good Samaritan at his upper right side. The opening words of the Nunc Dimittis (or the Song of Simeon), 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace', are inscribed across the lower part of the window. According to the biblical narrative, Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem, where Simeon, who has been promised by the holy spirit that he will not die until he had seen the Messiah, takes Jesus in his arms and utters these words. He is ready to die because he has seen the promised Messiah. Here, the window's narrative clearly suggests that Lee and God are intimately connected, emphasising the popular conception of Lee's devout Christian character, which gained momentum after he famously claimed to accept the Confederacy's defeat and pledged to spend the remaining years of his life to heal the wounds of the war. His character as a Christian soldier is further suggested in the inscription below, which also manifests the prominence of UDC as an institution belonging in the sacred space of the Cathedral, which was described by UDC's then-President General Bashinsky as 'America's Westminster Abbey':

MARK HIM FOR ALL AGES AS
A CHRISTIAN SOLDIER
WITHOUT FEAR AND WITHOUT REPROACH
THIS MEMORIAL BAY
IS GRATEFULLY BUILT BY
THE UNITED DAUGHTERS OF THE CONFEDERACY

In the next bay window, Lee's most famous lieutenant, Thomas J. 'Stonewall' Jackson, kneels beneath the Confederate flag as he reads the Bible on the battlefield, next to a soldier blowing a bugle. Jackson was known, among his men and colleagues, for his devout disposition: he was a Presbyterian deacon and Sunday School

superintendent, who often prayed before or during battle. While Jackson's piety is celebrated in the prominent upper windows, the lower scenes celebrate his skills as a military tactician. The next medallion narrates how he became legendary among his men for his unconventional campaigns and unexpected military manoeuvres during the Mexican-American War (1846-1848). Like Lee, Jackson is also symbolically rendered as a biblical figure in the upper right medallion, in which he stands with his back towards us in front of an altar and reaches for the heavens, ready to cross the River of Death – an attitude which evokes his supposed last words: 'Let us cross over the river and rest under the shade of the trees'. On his hospital bed at Chancellorsville, fighting to recover from the bullet-wound mistakenly inflicted by his own men, Jackson received a short note from Lee, in which Lee congratulated Jackson on his ultimate victory and conveyed his wish that he had been injured instead of Jackson, for the good of the country. As the story goes, the two soldiers held on to their Christian faith as they were faced with death and were prepared to sacrifice their lives for the Confederate cause. The inscription accompanying Jackson's memorial further describes his meeting with God, confirming his position as a servant of God who was admired by northerners and southerners alike:

HE WALKED HUMBLY
BEFORE HIS CREATOR
WHOSE WORD WAS HIS GUIDE THIS BAY IS ERECTED BY
THE UNITED DAUGHTERS
OF THE CONFEDERACY
AND HIS ADMIRERS
FROM SOUTH AND NORTH

As we have seen, conversations about the memorial continued for years but remained uncritical in their consideration of its celebration of the Confederacy – the long

debates about this memorial were about how best to portray the generals' heroism, rather than question it. Instead, the Cathedral loyally followed the UDC's idea that the memorial should serve as a commemoration and as a constant reminder of the Confederacy as a Christian institution, implicitly blessing the Confederate pursuit to uphold slavery under the Confederate battle flag.

Throughout the 1950s, the National Cathedral, led by Sayre, became an important example of a religious institution which broke the silence surrounding racial inequality and actively participated in the civil rights movement: the clergy sermonized for equal rights, the leadership participated in freedom marches and invited civil rights activists (including King) to speak in the Cathedral. We see Sayre Jr. both officiating at the dedication day service to the Lee and Jackson windows, *and* leading the Cathedral's efforts for the civil rights movement. His position illustrates the ambiguity of the Church's position and makes us wonder how it could support two opposing movements in the same breath. Since then, the Cathedral has been increasingly faced with the challenge of making their position clear in the fight for racial justice.

Following the mass shooting at the Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church of Charleston, South Carolina in 2015, the sitting Dean of the Cathedral, Gary Hall, called for the Lee-Jackson stained glass windows to be removed during a sermon on the 28 June. 'We do not seek to eliminate reminders of a painful past,' he argued: 'Rather, we seek to represent that past honestly in a manner that matches our shared aspirations for a diverse, just and compassionate nation'. Further, he suggested that 'we may discern what kind of contemporary stained-glass windows could adequately represent the history of race, slavery, and division in America.' After his sermon, the Cathedral Chapter appoints a Task Force, which six months later, recommended that the windows should stay in place for the next two years and serve as a catalyst to engage the faith

community in discussions about racial justice. The community was asked whether the windows seem to be ‘an appropriate part of the sacred fabric of a spiritual home for the nation?’ The dialogue took place at several public events, such as open panel discussions. Yet the Cathedral community struggled to reach a final conclusion about the presence of the windows. Things changed with the racially-motivated violence sparked by the removal of a statue of Lee in Charlottesville in 2017 – an event which constituted one of the largest white supremacist rallies in decades. Thereafter, the Cathedral Chapter quickly voted that the windows should be immediately removed because they presented as a ‘obstacle to worship’. The Chapter argued that the windows offered a misleading story of the nation and should instead be used as a tool for teaching the histories of the Civil War outside of the Cathedral’s walls. At the time of writing, the windows remain in storage.

All the stained-glass windows in the National Cathedral construct a story of the nation through the lens of religion -- whether the subject is Lee and Jackson, Abraham Lincoln or the moon landing. The central question of the recent debates surrounding the Lee-Jackson windows centres on whether the participation of these men in the fight for the Confederacy, and the white supremacist beliefs that underpinned its justification of the enslavement of millions African Americans, deserves to be told here, in the ‘nation’s’ cathedral. These debates have, in turn, created opportunities for other stories to be told in the space they once occupied, and demonstrated the changing nature of any ‘national’ narrative in the process. The history of the Lee-Jackson windows is a fascinating example of how institutions – bearers of social, cultural and moral values in society – are consistently faced with calls to respond to a current moment. Where calls to recognise and celebrate the Confederacy constituted one such moment, our moment acknowledges the need to re-think former views and decisions, and the necessity of removing memorials honouring the institution of slavery in order to imagine a different

future. We have yet to see what histories will be commemorated in the stained-glass windows where Lee and Jackson once stood.

Resources and Further Reading

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Evie Terrono, "Great Generals and Christian Soldiers": Commemorations of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson in the Civil Rights Era" in *Civil War in Art and Memory*, Kirk Savage, ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 147-170. Please read Terrono's chapter for an in-depth analysis of Lee-Jackson monuments. It has been a great resource and inspiration for this article.

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Please read for a short bibliography on Frank Billings Kellogg.

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Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, "Responding to the Cathedral's Confederate Windows", July 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecKOhp-OSMg>

[Statement by Alabama Clergymen](#), 12 April, 1963,

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Please read Appendix 1 for the 'History of the Lee-Jackson Bay and Windows at Washington Cathedral', Chronology Excerpted from the Archives, written by Cathedral Head Archivist Diane Ney, pp. 8-14. The primary material is taken from this document, unless otherwise indicated.

Washington National Cathedral, 26th October, 2016: "Monuments Speak: The Lee-Jackson Windows at Washington National Cathedral", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ynm279U9b-A&feature=emb_title. Please see [for the first public conversation on the Lee-Jackson windows.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ynm279U9b-A&feature=emb_title)

Washington National Cathedral, 29th March, 2017: "Saints and Sinners" Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZ6NZvTLw0U&t=4s>. Please see for a public panel on the histories of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson.

Washington National Cathedral, 17th July, 2016: "Racial Reconciliation: What The White Church Must Do", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xB2ukkdVg4>. Please see for the public panel, which uses Dr. King's words from Birmingham Jail to consider "What the White Church Must Do" on issues of race.