



## The Chapel Window: What's Wrong?

A year ago I was invited to a panel discussion about the prayer chapel window. One of the things I said there was, “I don’t care whether the window stays or goes. I care that it stays or goes for the right reasons.” Recently a student followed up with me, asking what I thought the right reasons were that warranted a proper response. Since the school has now decided on a plan—one I like—I’d like to offer my list. I speak only for myself here, not for the school or anyone else. What was wrong here, and what was right?

It’s not right that visitors on admissions tours and newly arriving students were being perplexed or put off. Naturally, they were interpreting the window through perspectives they brought with them, which could be both diverse and different from the chapel’s original context. An interpretive plaque next to the image can help a lot, but only for those who get close enough to read it. Visitors especially can’t be expected to know Westmont history, art history, evangelical history, or the chapel’s or image’s history.

Since the window is the one public visual representation of a holy figure on campus, in a central location, it becomes a focal point. It’s right that Jesus be such a focal point, since *Christus primatum tenens*. That reflects the heart and ground of our community, especially the donors who built a place for communal and individual devotion to Jesus Christ in memory of Nancy Voskuyl. It’s right that we heirs remember that and pass it along.

However, the window is dated, and it hasn’t aged well. (Nor did the red and white pews, which were removed a few years ago to enhance the flexibility of the space.) The image hasn’t lived up to the aspirations behind it, and that’s not right either. This was already somewhat true when I arrived twenty years ago, long before the present controversy erupted. The window has puzzled some viewers for a long time. Earlier the reactions tended to be more charitable. They reminded me of looking at old yearbook photos and cringing at our fashions and hairstyles. They seemed so normal at the time! When faculty retire, cringey photos like these are obligatory elements of the celebratory slide show. We laugh at them—but respectfully, especially the highlights: our graduations, weddings, and first moments as parents. Those embarrassing photos are my story. They are who I was along the way. Even where they haven’t aged well, to hide or discard them would display shame, insecurity, and disrespect. On the other hand, for the college’s webmaster to choose one for the main photo on my webpage wouldn’t be right either. It’s not who I am anymore.

The window is one of those highlights. But it’s more what Westmont was than who we are or want to be. We face a genuine dilemma. Westmont wants to reflect evangelical faith’s present features, appreciate its old centers, venture toward its frontiers, and hold on to the One who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Doing all these well is what makes our faith apostolic: built upon the apostles’ foundations and

sent along on their mission to bring the good news to all. We absolutely need to get that right.

So it's also wrong to recruit the image—by either side—for turf in a zero-sum turf war and interpret it, its champions, or its critics uncharitably. This is the cultural moment we're in, so it's not surprising that it happened. But it's still unfair to the artist, to the Bousloughs who commissioned and donated it, to the community that received the prayer chapel in gratitude, to the Lord to whom they were sacrificing and giving glory, and to people on all sides.

What about the racial context in which the window was produced? Isn't that also a wrong that needed righting, and still does? Yes. The question for me is how. It's true that Westmont comes out of a tradition of evangelicalism that was dominantly European-American, and Westmont was a very white school when the window was made, and its composition testifies to that. Indeed, the chapel's very architecture was intended to recall American Protestantism's historical roots in New England. This is one of the common arguments about what's wrong with the window: that it subsumes Jesus into a white evangelicalism that is complicit in European colonialism and American racism. That's one way to interpret the window: as indelibly stained by its originators' flaws. I can see how it pains viewers who associate the window with past and present wrongs in America and beyond.

However, I don't accept that it makes the window irredeemably invalid. That line of interpretation would make a lot of icons all around the world irredeemable too: ethnically Japanese Christs in post-imperial Japan, Han Chinese ones in today's colonialist PRC, Russian ones in every old Soviet republic, Tigrayan ones in present-day Ethiopia, and on and on. Christian images as well as architectures are always going to be embedded in problematic histories and inadequate to the realities they try to convey. This led earlier Calvinists to do away with images entirely, and I appreciate their reasons. Yet I think both arguments give away too much.

After all, our New Testament is written in the language of Alexander the Great, whose hellenizing empire is one of the beasts in the book of Daniel. Its manuscripts circulated by means of the fine communications network of the empire that colonized the Mediterranean world, occupied Israel, crucified its Messiah, and persecuted his followers. It was canonized by a church hierarchically structured along culturally Roman lines. If the Holy Spirit can use all that and more to reach us with the very Word that promises the Beast's (and every beast's) fall before the One who ransomed us from every tribe and tongue and ethnos, then God can use the idiom of twentieth century white evangelicals to declare his lordship of all peoples here—from the New England of the chapel's colonial style to the Central Coast of California that opens up outside its windows. The message can transcend, interrogate, and even redeem its own medium. So to assess what's wrong about it as well as what's right, let's think in terms of justification—how God sets wrong things right. Our whole faith testifies to a God who enters into the impossible situations we keep generating and uses unlikely events and messengers as vehicles of his salvation. The Bible is full of irony; and in the end it's a glorious irony, a treasure in earthen vessels.

You and I are awkward, compromised, complicit earthen vessels too, so this isn't just about a window, or even a society.

So the situation is complicated. Some are attached to the window, some repelled; there are solid reasons for both reactions. I appreciate the way we've resisted zero-sum culture-war logic and cancel culture and focused on improving the chapel as a space better suited to learning, spiritual formation, and glorifying God. Opening the space to student-crafted rotations of images is a lovely way for us to practice all three. And I think moving the image to a vestibule strikes a wise balance that honors what's right about the window and addresses what's wrong. Adding a descriptive plaque helps us acknowledge its creators' and sponsors' world, imaginations, and hearts even as we ponder what else the image suggests. The whole effort evokes the spirit of Romans 14-15 to reconcile diversity, foster hermeneutics of charity rather than suspicion and resentment, encourage us to look after one another even as we disagree, and honor the Lord who welcomes us all.