

Breaking the Silence: Robert O. Fife's Work to End Racism

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Dr. Robert Oldham Fife, who lived from 1918 to 2003,¹ was an influential member of the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ during some of its most formative years. He began as a pastor and became a professor of church history at multiple Stone-Campbell institutions. Fife always emphasized the importance of the unity and role of the Church even as the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ completed its split from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). As part of these emphases, Fife, who was white, talked repeatedly and publicly during the 1960's about the role that he thought the Church should play in ending the cycle of racism in the United States. He especially focused on this issue as it related to the Stone-Campbell Movement. He finished his dissertation, "Alexander Campbell and the Christian Church in the Slavery Controversy," in 1960.² In 1967 and 1968, he presented and published short works on the contemporary issues of racism. In 1971, he published *Teeth on Edge*, a popular-level work.³ In it, he drew on the parallels to the current moment that he discovered during his dissertation to offer solutions to contemporary racial conflicts in the United States.

While his interpretations and solutions often stood at least somewhat in contrast to both the nonviolent and violent movements for civil rights taking place at the time, Robert Fife's voice was in and of itself an anomaly when compared to the general reaction of the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ. The majority of this constituency was white and generally remained silent throughout the course of the Civil Rights Movement.⁴ Fife was able to break this silence through his efforts to tie the theological importance of ending racism through

¹ Paul Blowers, "Fife, Robert Oldham (1918-2003)," *The Stone-Campbell Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 336.

² Robert O. Fife, "Alexander Campbell and the Christian Church in the Slavery Controversy." Ph.D. diss. (Indiana University, 1960). The Holloway Archives at Milligan University, Johnson City, Tennessee.

³ Robert O. Fife, *Teeth on Edge*, (Grand Rapids: Baker House Books, 1971).

⁴ Emily Messner, "Silence in the Face of Racism: Exploring the Inaction of White Christian Churches/Churches of Christ During the Civil Rights Movement," (Essay, Milligan University, 2021), 1, 4. Milligan Digital Repository, <http://hdl.handle.net/11558/6295>.

reconciliation to the work of the Church, an institution especially critical for both him and the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ movement as a whole. In his works, Fife advocated for the Church to end racism by emphasizing the necessity of white Christians' empathy for Black Americans through an understanding of their circumstances, the necessity of the removal of racism to create true unity in the Church, and the importance of ending racism as a key part of the work of the Church.

Background

The history of Robert Fife's life, the Stone-Campbell Movement (particularly the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ), and of the civil rights campaigns of the 1960's all provide crucial context for understanding Fife's work. The Stone-Campbell Movement began in 1832, when churches of the movements led by Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell formally united.⁵ These two movements shared the goal to unite all Christians through a restoration of New Testament Christianity, which they believed had no formal or denominational organization; hence, adherents referred to themselves simply as "Christians" and, later, as "Disciples of Christ." Their focus on restoring and unifying the Church meant that the universal body of Christ was one of the movement's central emphases. During the second half of the nineteenth century, more conservative Disciples, located mainly in the southern United States, slowly split from the movement. They took the identifier "Churches of Christ" and formally separated in 1906.⁶

In 1919, the remaining Disciples, led by those who were more progressive, began to create the movement's first centralized agency, the United Christian Missionary Society. This helped to

⁵ Henry Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity: A History of the Restoration Movement*, rev. ed. (Abilene: ACU Press, 2003), 159.

⁶ Webb, *Christian Unity*, 209.

begin decades of arguments between the liberal and conservative wings of the Disciples.⁷ As tensions between the two groups became greater, the conservative members started their own separate convention, the North American Christian Convention, in 1927. Actions such as these led to the gradual separation of the two groups. They formally divided in 1968, when liberal Disciples formed an official denomination under the name Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Meanwhile, more conservative Disciples, who were now the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ movement, aligned over time with the emerging evangelical movement throughout the 1950's and 1960's. However, even as late as 1966, some members on both sides of the divide made concerted efforts to reunify, in order to preserve the unity so central to their understanding of the Stone-Campbell Movement.⁸

The Civil Rights Movement began to grow in the mid-1950's, due to events including the Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and Emmett Till's murder. Throughout the end of the decade and into the 1960's, the movement gradually grew in both number of people involved and in its national influence. Through the work of nonviolent protests which exposed the injustices of racism,⁹ the movement culminated in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, that same year, the number of more violent protests began to increase in urban areas. The leadership of various civil rights organizations, which had worked together, began to have increasingly contentious disagreements. Simultaneously, new movements and ideas, such as Black Power, began to appear as a critical part of racial justice protests and advocacy. James Earl Ray's

⁷ Summary from Webb, *Christian Unity*, 281.

⁸ Webb, *Christian Unity*, 359.

⁹ Martin Luther King, "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963, African Studies Center- University of Pennsylvania. https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968 exacerbated this state of affairs, leading to riots across the country. Through it all, the overwhelmingly white Christian Churches/Churches of Christ took no action.¹⁰ The only exceptions took place primarily when magazines such as the *Christian Standard* or conferences such as the North American Christian Convention (NACC) featured speakers and authors with a variety of views about racism to discuss their perspective.¹¹ Despite their differences, almost all of these people agreed that racism could best be solved through the individual conversion of hearts, instead of through large-scale action of any sort, including the passage of federal civil rights legislation.¹² This response was very similar to that of other white evangelical groups that the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ were growing closer to. Michael Emerson and Christian Smith note that white evangelicals generally respond to racism through a theological focus on personal action, individual friendships (as opposed to societal systems) and a general rejection of socially systematic explanations for racism.¹³

In this tense context, Robert Fife called for unity and Christian community, along with its role in facilitating human rights. Born on December 15, 1918, in rural Illinois, he attended Johnson Bible College (now Johnson University) and served as a pastor before enlisting to serve

¹⁰ While the Disciples and the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ kept directories of their churches with membership statistics at this time in the Directory of the Ministry, these did not include racial demographics. However, the history of Black Stone-Campbell members participating in either the Churches of Christ or the Disciples of Christ in addition to the numerical and historical strength of the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ in the rural Midwest strongly suggests that the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ were primarily white at this time.

¹¹ These efforts ranged from William Ellis's support of the Civil Rights Movement during a NACC presentation as a Black missionary to Ray Ellis's (no relation) reluctance to end segregation as voiced in *The Christian Standard*.

¹² Messner, *Silence*, 1.

¹³ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 76, in Joel A. Brown, "White Christianity and Resistance to Civil Rights for Racial Minorities in Twenty-First-Century America," in *Slavery's Long Shadow: Race and Reconciliation in American Christianity*, ed. by James Gorman, Jeff Childers, and Mark Hamilton (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 122.

as a chaplain in 1942, as World War II intensified.¹⁴ The most influential experience Fife had during his time in the military was when he participated in the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp in 1945. The horrors that he encountered that day would firmly convince him of humankind's immense potential for evil and the importance of not turning away from it.¹⁵

After the war, Robert Fife returned to pastoral work while also earning degrees from Butler University School of Religion (now Christian Theological Seminary) and Indiana University, where he earned a Ph.D. in History in 1960.¹⁶ Fife wrote his dissertation, "Alexander Campbell and the Christian Church in the Slavery Controversy," due to the lack of histories on this subject.¹⁷ He then began teaching at Milligan College and Emmanuel School of Religion (now together Milligan University), where he taught until moving to California in 1975.¹⁸ There, he helped to establish the Westwood Christian Foundation, which worked with multiple institutions to teach theology at the graduate level.¹⁹

Robert Fife continuously promoted the unity of the Church, especially working to foster harmony between the splitting factions of the Disciples, and for the Church's mission to serve others. This was due to his understanding of the Stone-Campbell Movement (especially the

¹⁴ Robert O. Fife, "By the Grace of God: Memoirs of Robert Oldham Fife," vol. 1, "1918-1946," 37 (Unpublished manuscript, 2001), typescript. The Helsabeck Archives of the Stone-Campbell Movement, Johnson City, Tennessee.

¹⁵ Robert O. Fife, presentation (Northeast State Technical College, Elizabethton, TN, 2001) in Robert O. Fife, "By the Grace of God: Memoirs of Robert Oldham Fife," vol. 1, "1918-1946," 63 (Unpublished manuscript, 2001), typescript. The Helsabeck Archives of the Stone-Campbell Movement, Johnson City, Tennessee. As Fife absorbed the injustice around him, he was angry to see a quiet neighborhood just across the street. He angrily cried out to God about these people's lack of action, when God spoke to him, reminding him that he probably would have done the same under the circumstances. This is when Fife first realized the extent of the universality of injustice, especially related to racism and genocide.

¹⁶ Blowers, "Robert Oldham Fife," 336.

¹⁷ Fife, "Alexander Campbell," iv.

¹⁸ Robert O. Fife, "Reformation For Mission: The Story of the Westwood Christian Foundation" (presentation, Lectures in Christian Reformation, Emmanuel School of Religion, Johnson City, TN, March 1997), in Robert O. Fife, *Horizons of Reformation* (Johnson City: Emmanuel School of Religion, 1999), 13.

¹⁹ Blowers, "Robert Oldham Fife," 336. As noted by Blowers, the educational section of the foundation dissolved in 1990 after helping to create a position for professor studying early Christianity at UCLA.

Christian Churches/Churches of Christ) as “Free Church Catholic.”²⁰ For Fife, “Free Church” described the movement’s emphasis on the independence of local congregations and “catholic” demonstrated the movement’s central promotion of unity.²¹ Therefore, he attended the conferences put on by both wings of the movement until they formally separated and wrote extensively to promote unity between the two groups. In addition, Fife participated in several of the “Consultations of Internal Unity,” which worked to find common ground between the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ and the Disciples from 1959 to 1966.²² However, he did not let this work stop him from speaking out against racism, giving and writing multiple presentations on the subject during the civil rights campaigns of the second half of the 1960’s. Fife saw racism as the sin that occurs when people isolate each other based on the color of their skin, which was a barrier to Christian unity, and he wanted to help stop it. In the spring of 1970, as he prepared to go on sabbatical for a year, he submitted *Teeth on Edge* for publication, and Baker Book House accepted it.²³ He went through the publication process during his sabbatical, and Baker released the book in paperback form in June 1971, in time for the North American Christian Convention.²⁴

Sources and Methodology

Almost all published research on Robert Fife and his work focuses on his efforts towards unity in the Church. Hence, this project focuses almost exclusively on primary sources that Fife

²⁰ A.T. DeGroot, *Disciple Thought, a History* in Robert O. Fife, “The Fries-Rahner Proposal: A Free Church Catholic Response” (presentation, Lectures in Christian Reformation, Emmanuel School of Religion, Johnson City, TN, March 1997), in Robert O. Fife, *Horizons of Reformation* (Johnson City: Emmanuel School of Religion, 1999), 24.

²¹ Fife, “The Fries-Rahner Proposal,” 24.

²² Webb, *Christian Unity*, 357-359.

²³ Robert Fife to Jay Smith, June 9, 1970. The Helsabeck Archives of the Stone-Campbell Movement, Johnson City, Tennessee.

²⁴ Robert Fife to Edwin Hayden, May 27, 1971. The Helsabeck Archives of the Stone-Campbell Movement, Johnson City, Tennessee.

wrote. Fife spoke out against contemporary racism in the United States during the civil rights era most clearly in two essays, in addition to *Teeth on Edge*. During the 1967 North American Christian Convention, Fife gave a presentation simply entitled “Racism,” that the *Christian Standard* featured in its September 2 and September 9 editions.²⁵ In addition, Fife wrote the article “Racism: A Continuing Challenge to the Lordship of Jesus” for the magazine *FOCI* (published by the Fellowship of Concerned Individuals) in 1968.²⁶ “Racism” focuses more on the general effects of racism on American Christianity, while “Racism: A Continuing Challenge to the Lordship of Jesus” explores the source of racism and how the Church should respond to its challenge.²⁷

In order to understand and interpret Fife’s words and methods, this project utilizes additional context from other essays Fife wrote about the Church as a whole or its specific relationship with racism (all of which focused especially on the Stone-Campbell Movement or the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ in particular). In these essays, which Fife wrote between the 1960’s and the 1990’s, he maintained a remarkably consistent emphasis on the unity of the Church and how it should care for humanity. His general continuity of perspective allows these essays to further highlight Fife’s main emphases in the aforementioned central texts.

²⁵ Robert O. Fife, “Racism,” (lecture, North American Christian Convention, Tampa, Florida, June 30, 1967), in the *Christian Standard*, September 2, 1967, 9-10. The Helsabeck Archives of the Stone-Campbell Movement, Johnson City, Tennessee; Robert O. Fife, “Racism [part 2]” (lecture, presented at the North American Christian Convention, Tampa, Florida, June 30, 1967), in the *Christian Standard*, September 9, 1967, 9-10. The Helsabeck Archives of the Stone-Campbell Movement, Johnson City, Tennessee.

²⁶ Robert O. Fife, “Racism: A Continuing Challenge to the Lordship of Jesus, in Robert O. Fife, *Conveying the Incarnation* (Los Angeles: Westwood Christian Foundation, 1993), 181.

²⁷ Fife’s dissertation “Alexander Campbell and the Christian Church in the Slavery Controversy” does contain a great deal of information on racism, it exclusively discusses the Stone-Campbell Movement’s response to racism in the early-to-mid nineteenth century and is therefore not discussed in this project.

Empathy Through Understanding

First, Robert Fife's works that spoke out against racism during the 1960's and early 1970's all demonstrate how Fife utilized on the importance of empathy in battling racism. Fife primarily addressed these writings to members of the emerging Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, the large majority of whom were white, and took no concrete action on the subject.²⁸ In his writings, Fife worked to help them understand the additional challenges that Black Americans faced in their lives on account of racism and why they reacted in ways that white Christian Churches/Churches of Christ usually found incomprehensible. Therefore, Fife opened his arguments both with statements reflecting the necessity of knowing the historical, religious, and socioeconomic contexts of racism and often summarizing these contexts. Fife worked to help his audience understand the importance of empathy for Black Americans and gain it through an understanding of their struggles.

In his shorter works, "Racism" and "Racism: A Continuing Challenge to the Lordship of Jesus," Fife makes explicit statements of this nature. Fife states outright, "It therefore behooves Christians to seek a better understanding of this age [with its emphasis on race] and of the gospel of Christ, and so to order their corporate life in the church as to affect a ministry worthy of the Lord in this day."²⁹ This declaration demonstrates his opinion of the inseparability of comprehending the issues brought about by race and combatting them as Christians. The title of *Teeth on Edge*, as Fife explains in the book's first chapter ("A Scientific Age Confronts a Prophetic Judgement"), is a reference to Jeremiah 31:29 and Ezekiel 18:2, which state, "The

²⁸ Because his audience was primarily white, Fife often speaks of the Church from a perspective in which being white is considered the norm. This does, however, exclude American Christians of color and can lead to the inaccurate inference that most Black Americans during the 1960's were not Christian.

²⁹ Robert O. Fife, "Racism," 9.

fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." Fife argues that contemporary Christians cannot understand how and why their teeth are on edge if they do not understand the sour grapes of racism consumed by their predecessors.³⁰

Fife further elaborates on these ideas in his essay, "Conveying the Incarnation: The Calling of the Modern Church", which he wrote as an introductory essay for a collection of his works (*Conveying the Incarnation*) published in 1993. In his discussion of the importance of the church's pastoral ministry, Fife argues that Christians should not turn inward to focus on themselves. Rather, the Church, imitating Jesus, should look outward, understanding what those around them need and then minister to such people in empathy.³¹ Without such an understanding, the Church cannot care for the world around it.

Having thus established the importance of empathy through understanding, Fife then gave his white readers and listeners the tools they needed to acquire it. "Racism: A Continuing Challenge to the Lordship of Jesus," mostly focuses on the tragic spiritual consequences of racism, which Fife saw as the intense division of humans along racial lines, in isolation from both God and each other.³² However, "Racism" is much more explicit; Fife devotes about two-thirds of the presentation to explaining the historical consequences of racism. Fife argues that the only cause of categories of race is slight genetic differences between humans from different areas of the world. However, history is full of examples of humans twisting this attribute into a cause for separation from each other, creating cultural differences that were then exploited by the people groups who had the upper hand over those who did not look like them.³³ Besides mentioning the

³⁰ Summary from Fife, *Teeth on Edge*, 22-23.

³¹ Summary from Robert O. Fife in "Conveying the Incarnation: The Calling of the Modern Church" in Fife: *Conveying the Incarnation*, 16-17.

³² Fife, "Racism: A Continuing Challenge," 184-185.

³³ Summary from Fife, "Racism," 10.

isolation of humanity, Fife lists several other consequences that Americans of color must face, including less readily available education and greater difficulty utilizing the United States' legal system.³⁴

Given its length and depth of content (as opposed to his shorter presentations), *Teeth on Edge* has the greatest number of Fife's explanations that promote empathy and understanding. This comes primarily through the historical examples Fife utilizes to examine contemporary race-centered difficulties. Each chapter discusses a different time period leading up to the Civil War and illustrates how the evils of slavery and racism has influenced the country and Church's contemporary tensions. Chapter Two ("Mutual Bondage: The Social Setting of Slavery") is a general description of American slavery as it existed at the dawn of the Stone-Campbell Movement. While the chapter emphasizes the negative consequences for both Black and white participants in the American system of slavery, Fife emphasizes the wide-ranging consequences for slaves and the harmful nature of the racism they endured. Fife includes the scarring consequences of being treated as less than human, emphasizing such cruelties as family separation and lack of political, social, or legal power.³⁵

However, "A Scientific Age Confronts a Prophetic Judgement" features Fife's most powerful arguments for promoting empathy. He dwells on the tensions in American society caused by racism and the backlash of Black Americans (most notably the Black Power movement). However, he then takes several pages to explain how racism and slavery caused this reaction. For example, he spends several pages discussing how the identity for an increasing portion of the Black community rejects Christianity, as they saw it as a white religion. He then

³⁴ Fife, "Racism [part 2]," 9.

³⁵ Fife, *Teeth on Edge*, 34-41.

puts this statement in context by noting the psychological and culture difficulties that arise among Black Americans on account of having their cultural heritage severed by slavery, causing the formation of a new culturally Black identity that incorporates what it can from African cultures.³⁶

Robert Fife emphasized the necessity of white Christians having empathy towards Black Americans by providing a multitude of explanations of the consequences of racism (and their significance) in his works on the subject. By exposing this barrier of ignorance, which could lead to the process of reconciliation between Black and white Americans, Fife was then able to more easily continue to break the silence of white Christian Churches/Churches of Christ on the subject in his work.

Facilitating Christian Unity

Fife also broke the silence of the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ on racism through his understanding that racism was a key barrier to unity within the Church as a whole. For Fife, who spent the 1960's as a Free Church Catholic passionately advocating for unity among Christians despite the split of the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ and the Disciples of Christ, all types of disunity among Christians were dangerous and damaging. To end it, Fife argued that racial reconciliation and genuine Christian community must occur within the Church, deploring its current state of discord in the process.

In all three of Fife's principal works on racism from the late 1960's, Fife begins with the same set of illustrations and examples about unity. He describes humanity as sorting itself into different social identities at different points in history; for example, medieval Catholic Europeans

³⁶ Summary from Fife, *Teeth on Edge*, 17-21.

classified themselves as Christians, first and foremost. However, after the Thirty Years' War ended in 1648, Europeans began to see themselves as members of nation states, and the world at large has since sorted (or attempted to sort) itself into categories of identity based on nationalism, class, or, increasingly, race. This, to Fife, is a tragedy, as Christians now identify themselves by race instead of their faith, leading to disunity in the Church.³⁷ This disunity can cause more fractures in the Church, further damaging a crucial part of its identity; as Fife stated, "In the rise of racism the Church faces a challenge to its very identity as the 'Community of the Reconciled.'"³⁸

Accordingly, reconciliation once again played a critical role in Fife's understanding, both of the Church and of the danger that racism held in disrupting the role of reconciliation in the Church's identity. To Fife, racism was a sin that represented the opposite of reconciliation, as it stemmed from the separation that humans have from God when they sin. People commit the sin of racism when they extend this isolation to the humans around them, based on the color of their skin.³⁹ This then qualified racism as a "spiritual" issue with social consequences that could only then be solved at a spiritual level.⁴⁰

In the last chapter of *Teeth on Edge* (which doubles as its conclusion), Fife most thoroughly discusses both a tragic case of disunity and how to facilitate reconciliation among Christians of all races. "The Day of Visitation" discusses both the violent destruction of the Civil War and its consequences for churches (especially Disciples congregations) that had previously been mixed-race, with both masters and slaves worshipping together. After the conclusion of the war, when

³⁷ Summary from Fife, "Racism: A Continuing Challenge," 182-183.

³⁸ Summary from Fife, "Racism: A Continuing Challenge," 183.

³⁹ Fife, "Racism [part 2]," 10.

⁴⁰ Fife, "Racism [part 2]," 10.

the Thirteenth Amendment made slavery illegal, the racism of the white members caused Black members to found their own, separate churches.⁴¹ Fife recognized that this racism and the pursuit of culturally Black forms of Christian worship and expression were the primary factors in the Black exodus from white churches. Despite this understanding, he still argued that the “imperfect” congregations of the time of slavery were a better expression of Christianity than the “broken” congregations.⁴² Fife argued that this course of action led to isolation and (as noted earlier) a lack of understanding which resulted in prejudice.⁴³ While plenty of prejudice has certainly existed in the United States whether or not slavery has been legal, the point reinforced Fife’s understanding of the aforementioned necessity of learning about and understanding other races to help Christians combat racism. Indeed, as Fife pointed out, by 1971, Black and white churches had two very separate identities.⁴⁴

Fife then submitted his own understanding of the solution to this racial disunity in the Church that so concerned him. He simply argued that the members of the Church could reconcile by participating in Christian community together, breaking down their separated barriers while not forgetting to celebrate the diversity of members as a spiritual blessing for the congregation.⁴⁵ After all, if the members of an integrated church did not genuinely share and participate in community together (emphasized in the New Testament through the use of the word *koinonia*), reconciliation would not truly exist.⁴⁶ If the Church participated in such fellowship, especially among white and Black Americans, it could then share its reconciliation, as God reconciled with humanity, with the world. This would fulfill the Church’s mission, as Fife remarks: “the church

⁴¹ Fife, *Teeth on Edge*, 122-125.

⁴² Summary from Fife, *Teeth on Edge*, 126-127.

⁴³ Fife, *Teeth on Edge*, 127.

⁴⁴ Fife, *Teeth on Edge*, 127.

⁴⁵ Fife, *Teeth on Edge*, 126.

⁴⁶ Fife, *Teeth on Edge*, 132.

is obliged to demonstrate in its common life of faith, hope, and charity that which God seeks for all men.”⁴⁷

In his 1998 article “Racial Reconciliation: A Neglected Mandate for Christian Unity,” published in the Pepperdine University journal *Leaven*, Robert Fife further elaborates on this unity and reconciliation from the perspective of Communion, since it involves a community coming together to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. The *koinonia* that God calls the Church to can be most clearly seen by the world around the Communion table, where the fellowship runs deeper than that forced by laws of integration.⁴⁸ Therefore, the exclusion of any Christian from the Communion table, which Fife was well aware had happened in the past, shatters this sacred fellowship and unity. In “Liberty and Justice For All?” an essay that Fife wrote for the United States’ two hundredth anniversary in 1976 and then revised in 1993, Fife emphasized that facilitating reconciliation (especially for white Christians) should involve full effort to foster community and celebrate the Christian heritage of all participants. On a practical level, this would involve white Christians not leaving neighborhoods whose racial makeup is changing, nearby churches merging together, or the facilitation of multicultural community events for churches who are too far apart to join.⁴⁹

By decrying the lack of Christian unity on account of the sin of racism, Robert Fife spoke out even as the majority of his movement remained silent on the subject.⁵⁰ Through his calls for the demonstration of Christian unity through reconciliation and community, he offered solutions to heal this divide for his fellow white Christians, especially Christian Churches/Churches of Christ

⁴⁷ Fife, *Teeth on Edge*, 132.

⁴⁸ Robert O. Fife, “Racial Reconciliation: A Neglected Mandate for Christian Unity,” *Leaven* 6 no. 2 (1998): 62. <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol6/iss2/4>.

⁴⁹ Summary from Robert O. Fife, “Liberty And Justice for All?” in Fife, *Conveying the Incarnation*, 189, 194-195.

⁵⁰ Messner, *Silence*, 1.

members. It would then be possible, Fife argued, for the Church to share this reconciliation with American society as a whole.

The Church's Role in Ending Racism

Finally, Robert Fife spoke out about racism, despite the silence around him, by arguing that the Church had a key role to play in ending racism outside its walls. Fife did this in his works by first stating how the Church had failed in its response by doing too much, too little, or entirely the wrong thing. He then supported the idea of a multi-pronged solution, at the center of which was love.

In his writings and presentations, Fife notes repeatedly that the Church had either responded to racism during the Civil Rights Movement by doing too much or too little. Fife often criticized the Church for historically stepping away from the problems of racism, especially through its silence or by physically withdrawing from the potential of integration, such as through white flight. He calls those who physically leave the inner city for the suburbs, who supported missionaries abroad while ignoring the needs of their neighborhood, adherents of a “new monasticism.”⁵¹

On the opposite side of the coin for Fife was the “new secularism,” which he described as going so far as to argue that the Church is a racist institution and rejecting it.⁵² Fife also rejected any course of action for the Church that he found was more politically or socially focused than spiritually, seeing such work as too closer to this second extreme. In all three works, he

⁵¹ Fife, *Teeth on Edge*, 21. Given Fife's Free Church, action-oriented, conservative Protestant background, the use of such a phrase is intended almost as an insult.

⁵² Fife, *Teeth on Edge*, 22.

emphasized this by writing, “The church is sent into the world not to become a political pressure group, but as a servant community given to the ministry of redemption and reconciliation.”⁵³

In addition, Fife frowned upon two methods of protest utilized by Black advocates for racial justice during the 1960’s: violence and civil disobedience. For Fife, violence, which he epitomized in *Teeth on Edge* by his emphasis on the human cost of the Civil War, was often unnecessary, tragic, and ineffective. Fife argued in the final chapter of *Teeth on Edge* that the Civil War actually led to further segregation in American churches, since now-free Black church members often left multi-racial churches to found their own. He specifically criticized the violence utilized by contemporary Black protestors by noting that violence is cyclical, citing Lerone Bennett’s argument that the violence of the oppressed simply leads to a violent backlash by their oppressor.⁵⁴ However, Fife also disapproved of any protest involving lawbreaking, including nonviolent civil disobedience. In his fifth chapter of *Teeth On Edge*, “Crisis of Conscience,” Fife studied the various responses of Christians who opposed slavery (both antislavery and abolitionist) to the Fugitive Slave Law. His conclusion about the responses that involved the breaking of the act, which he applied to those practicing various types of civil disobedience during the 1960’s and 1970’s, was that their practice of following their conscience meant that everyone adhered to a slightly different standard. This made antislavery work more difficult while introducing the risk of disobedience to all laws if everyone used their personal standards as excuses.⁵⁵

⁵³ Fife, “Racism, A Continuing Challenge,” 183.

⁵⁴ Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Pioneers in Protest* (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), 90-91, in Fife, *Teeth on Edge*, 130-131.

⁵⁵ Summary from Fife, *Teeth on Edge*, 104-105, 109. This latter argument does, however, utilize a slippery slope fallacy.

Fife argued that the church should instead carry out its ministry of healing and reconciliation with love for others at its center. In “Conveying the Incarnation: The Calling of the Modern Church,” Fife summarizes what he sees as the three most important jobs of the Church in ministering to the world. First, the Church should give “pastoral” love to those outside of it, followed by a “prophetic” declaration in love of warning about sin, and then finally evangelizing.⁵⁶ While Fife does not utilize this language in his earlier works, he does incorporate these three categories of ecclesiastical response to racism in his advocacy. Such arguments about the collective role of the Church in combatting racism also stand in stark contrast to the more individualistic approaches of the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ and similar evangelical groups.

Fife utilizes the idea of pastoral love at the very end of *Teeth on Edge*, where he finally proposes his overall solution to racial justice and reconciliation. Fife calls on the Church to combat works of racist hate with works of love, with Black and White members embodying love through their community, kindness, and patience with one another and for those outside the Church.⁵⁷ Next, the Church must use this love to prophesy without harsh accusation while still proclaiming the evils of racism.⁵⁸ In his many aforementioned calls for the eradication of racism in all three works, Fife himself gave an example of his definition of prophesying in love, though he was of course speaking to those who were already Christians.

Finally, the Church can then proclaim the message of Christ, who in love delivered the ultimate act of reconciliation, and in whom there is no higher identity than belonging to Him. Fife emphasizes this primarily through his previously-mentioned calls for white churches to stop

⁵⁶ Fife, “Conveying the Incarnation,” 34-35.

⁵⁷ Fife, *Teeth on Edge*, 133-134.

⁵⁸ Fife, “Racism: A Continuing Challenge,” 186.

fleeing to the suburbs. In “A Scientific Age Confronts a Prophetic Judgement,” he notes that such action leaves new Black residents in cities with no way of understanding who Jesus truly is, meaning that these churches must bear some of the accountability for the increasing numbers of Black Americans turning away from Christianity.⁵⁹

In addition to his arguments for the Church’s use of empathy and unity to combat racism, Fife then argues that the Church must minister to the world and help it to end its racism. While Fife rejected several of the more popular (and controversial) methods of his day to call for racial justice, he instead advocated for the Church to pastor, prophesy, and evangelize in love to help heal the world of this division.

Lack of Results

The significance of Fife’s works cannot be understated, given their almost-unique status in condemning racism in an otherwise silent corner of white Christianity. However, Fife’s approach in combatting racism left a few significant issues untreated, leaving both his voice and proposed course of action very restrained. Despite Fife’s focus on the importance of prophesy, for example his definitions of the word in its role in fighting racism have most of their focus in the spoken word. In contrast, the Judeo-Christian tradition of prophecy, as seen in both the Old and New Testaments, involved both speech and accompanying actions that embodied and drew attention to the message.

Fife was also not entirely without racist attitudes. His lack of attention given to the work of the Black church and his assumption that Black Americans would be spiritually lost without (presumably) white Christian ministries demonstrate a paternalistic stance. Though Fife may not

⁵⁹ Fife, *Teeth on Edge*, 21.

have realized it,⁶⁰ this paternalism influenced his definition of interracial unity within the church. He showed little concern about the racism and lack of agency Black Disciples dealt with when it caused them to leave the interracial churches that they had been a part of before the Civil War.

Finally, Fife's generally individualistic outlook in his spirituality as a conservative Protestant and member of the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ stopped him from understanding nonviolent civil disobedience as a potential Christian response to systemic racism. As noted above, Fife disagreed with any approach to promoting justice that involved breaking the law, leading him to logically disagree with key civil rights leaders such as Rosa Parks or John Lewis. This disagreement showed itself in response to Martin Luther King, Jr. During his involvement in planning the World Convention of Churches of Christ in 1965, Fife opposed the Convention's invitation to King to speak at the convention. His vocal opposition was due to King's campaigns of civil disobedience and position of general controversy in American public opinion at the time.⁶¹ The result of these gaps in Fife's understanding of racism was that Fife did very little to rid the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ of racism besides his previously mentioned works.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of Robert Fife's life, he consistently promoted unity and reconciliation in the Church and fought against the barriers not only of denominationalism and separation within a movement but of racism as well. Through his shorter works "Racism" and "Racism: A Continuing Challenge to the Lordship of Jesus," as well as his full-length book *Teeth on Edge*, Fife called for a response to racism during an era filled with protests for racial justice

⁶⁰ Tim Dillon in discussion with the author, April 2022.

⁶¹ Robert Fife to James DeForest Murch, Chevy Chase, MD, September 28, 1965. The Helsabeck Archives of the Stone-Campbell Movement, Johnson City, Tennessee. Fife also does not note that King's controversy was due in large part to the mostly-white backlashes his work caused.

but within a movement that, while it emphasized unity and the importance of the Church, stayed almost completely silent on the matter. In his works, Fife advocated for the Church to end racism by emphasizing the necessity of white Christians' empathy for Black Americans through an understanding of their circumstances, the necessity of the removal of racism to create true unity in the Church, and the importance of ending racism as a key part of the work of the Church.

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