



Rickey and Robinson

Born in 1881, Wesley Branch Rickey was named after the Methodist evangelist John Wesley and a prophecy of Christ found in Isaiah: "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots" (11:1). Raised on the Bible by his parents, faith would play a vital role in every aspect of Branch Rickey's life.

He pursued a career in sports in spite of a promise he made to his mother to honor the Lord's Day and not play on Sunday. He kept that promise even in the major leagues.

When his playing days ended, his love for baseball led him to coaching. During his first year coaching at Ohio Wesleyan, his team traveled to South Bend to play Notre Dame. The manager of the hotel where his team was to stay refused to register the team's only black player, Charles Thomas. At the time, racial bigotry was a tragic part of the nation's culture. Rickey sent Thomas to his own room and told him to wait there while he resolved the problem at the front desk. His vehement protests finally gained permission for Thomas to share his coach's room. When Rickey entered his room he found Thomas sobbing. He was clawing at the back of his hands. "Black skin ... if only I could rub it off!" Rickey wrote, "That scene haunted me for many years, and I vowed that I would always do whatever I could to see to it that other Americans did not have to face the bitter humiliation that was heaped on Charles Thomas." A friend of Rickey's, years after his death, said that incident pricked Rickey's Christian faith. This wrong had to be made right.

Four decades would pass before Rickey would act on his vow. But when he did, the effect was dramatic.

In 1946 Branch Rickey was the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers. After months of research he invited a young star in the Negro leagues to come to his office. Jackie Robinson had heard a rumor that a new black team was being formed in Brooklyn.

The rumor was false. The truth was that Branch Rickey was planning to end the long standing racial segregation in major league baseball.

Rickey surprised Robinson, "You were brought here to play for the Brooklyn organization. Perhaps our minor league affiliate Montreal to start, and then, if you can make it, you'll have a chance with the Brooklyn Dodgers."

Then Rickey added, "I know you're a good ball player. What I don't know is whether you have the guts."

Before Jackie could defend his manhood, Rickey cut him off. "I'm looking for a ball player with guts enough to not fight back."

Pacing the floor, Rickey acted out the role of a brutish bigot threatening, insulting. He told Robinson this is what you will face. Then he insisted, "You cannot strike back. If you do, this bold experiment will fail. If it succeeds, hundreds will follow after."

Rickey concluded with a striking appeal to Robinson's faith. He knew Robinson was raised by a godly mother, read the Bible, and attended church. He reminded Robinson that turning the other cheek is not cowardice. He quoted from Matthew: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (5:38).

Jackie Robinson took the challenge. All that Rickey warned him about happened and more. He was subjected to poor officiating, unsportsmanlike conduct, insults, and even death threats. But he kept his word and he prevailed.

Because of his exploits on the field, Jackie Robinson is enshrined in Cooperstown. What's more, each April 15 every major league baseball player wears Jackie Robinson's retired number 42 in his honor because he had the courage and faith to endure the unendurable and not hit back. Branch Rickey's audacious plan to keep his decades-old vow regarding Charles Thomas combined with Jackie Robinson's far greater heroic sacrifice to right a terrible wrong. The faith of these two men not only integrated baseball, it elevated the dignity of all men made in the image of God.