

Jackie Robinson
A Spiritual Biography

The Faith of a Boundary-Breaking Hero

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WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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Introduction

“God Is with Us in This, Jackie”: The Meeting of the Methodists

Jackie Robinson met Brooklyn Dodgers president Branch Rickey for the first time shortly after 10:00 a.m. on August 28, 1945, in Rickey’s fourth-floor office at 215 Montague Street in Brooklyn, New York. Rickey sat in a leather swivel chair behind a large mahogany desk. Rickey, bulky and rumpled, was wearing a sport coat and bow tie and holding a cigar. Light gleamed off his glasses. An extensive file on Robinson lay on his desk.

Robinson entered the office with Clyde Sukeforth, a Brooklyn scout, who had joined him outside the Montague Street building. A few days earlier, Sukeforth had introduced himself to Robinson, a shortstop on the Kansas City Monarchs in the Negro leagues, after a game in Chicago. Sukeforth said he was there on behalf of Rickey, who wanted to talk to the ballplayer about joining a black team Rickey was creating, the Brooklyn Brown Dodgers.¹

Robinson was unaware that Rickey had been scouting him for several months. Rickey had learned everything he could about Robinson, including his time at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), in the US Army, and with the Monarchs. Rickey’s announcement that he was creating a team for a new Negro league worked as a smoke screen to hide his real intentions.²

Robinson’s eyes quickly scanned the inside of Rickey’s office. On one wall was a blackboard with the names of the baseball personnel at all levels in the Brooklyn organization. On another was a portrait of Abraham

Lincoln, the Great Emancipator. There were photos of Brooklyn's tempestuous manager, Leo Durocher, Rickey's granddaughters, and the late Charley Barrett, who had been one of Rickey's closest friends.

Goldfish swam nervously in a fish tank off to the side of the office, demonstrating an uneasiness that Robinson later said captured his own.

"Hello, Jackie," said Rickey as he stood up, reached across his desk, and warmly shook Robinson's hand.³

Rickey did not immediately say anything else.

"He just stared and stared," Sukeforth recalled. "That's what he did with Robinson—stared at him as if he were trying to get inside the man. And Jack stared right back at him. Oh, they were a pair, those two. I tell you, the air in the office was electric."⁴

Rickey then began asking Robinson about his personal life.

"Do you have a girl?" he said.

Robinson told Rickey he was engaged to Rachel Isum, whom he met while attending UCLA.

"Well, marry her," Rickey said. "When we get through today you may want to call her up, because there are times when a man needs a woman by his side."⁵

The personal questions continued.

Rickey asked Robinson about his religious affiliation. Robinson said he was a Methodist. This pleased Rickey, a lifelong Methodist whose name, Wesley Branch Rickey, came from John Wesley, the founder of Methodism.

Shortly before his meeting with Robinson, Rickey had visited the office of the Rev. L. Wendell Fifield, his pastor at Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims in Brooklyn.

"Don't let me interrupt you. I can't talk with you," Rickey said. "I just want to be here. Do you mind?"

The minister agreed, and for the next forty-five minutes Rickey frantically paced about Fifield's office.

"I've got it," Rickey finally yelled as he pounded the minister's desk.

"Got what, Branch?" Fifield replied.

Rickey plopped down on the minister's couch and offered a brief explanation. "This was so complex, fraught with so many pitfalls but filled with so much good, if it was right, that I just had to work it out in this room with you. I had to talk to God about it and be sure what He wanted me to do. I hope you don't mind.

"Wendell," Rickey said, "I've decided to sign Jackie Robinson!"

Rickey then straightened his trademark bow tie and thanked his pastor.

“Bless you, Wendell,” he said, and left the room.⁶

In later years, Rickey said, “Surely, God was with me when I picked Jackie Robinson as the first Negro player in the major leagues.”⁷

The late August 1945 meeting between the two Methodists, Rickey and Robinson, ultimately transformed baseball and America.

Rickey knew Robinson was a good athlete who had lettered in four sports at UCLA. He earned honorable mention on the all-American football team. He led the conference in scoring in basketball and finished first in the long jump at the NCAA national track and field championship. His worst sport was baseball.

But Rickey wanted to know more about Robinson as a man. He asked him if he drank alcohol. Robinson said he did not. Jackie, in fact, had openly scorned his whiskey-drinking teammates on the Kansas City Monarchs, once tossing a glass of scotch into a lighted fireplace to demonstrate the lethality of liquor.

Robinson did not tell Rickey this story. But if he had, it would have brought a smile to Rickey’s face. Rickey, too, often used dramatics to make a point.

As Rickey looked at Robinson, he saw the intensity in Robinson’s face. The ballplayer was twenty-six, old for someone without any experience in what was called “organized professional baseball.”

Robinson’s birthday was January 31, 1919. The date resonated with Rickey. His own son, Branch Rickey Jr., was born on January 31, 1914. Both men, Robinson and Rickey Jr., as it turned out, would die relatively young from complications from diabetes.

Rickey’s line of questioning thus far must have confounded Robinson, who still did not know what he was doing in the office on Montague Street.

Rickey asked Robinson if he was under contract with the Monarchs. Robinson said he was not. Rickey then asked if Robinson had any agreement with the Monarchs.

“No, none at all. Just pay day to pay day,” Robinson said.⁸

Finally, Rickey asked Robinson if he knew why he had been brought to the office.

“To play on a black team,” Robinson responded.

Rickey shook his head.

He told Robinson he wanted to sign him for the Brooklyn Dodgers organization. Rickey told Robinson he would start with the Montreal Royals, the organization’s top minor-league team, and then, if he was good enough, be promoted to the Dodgers.

Robinson was being asked if he was interested in breaking baseball's color line, which had existed since the nineteenth century.

Robinson tried to grasp the totality of the moment.

Rickey's booming voice interrupted Robinson's thoughts.

"I want to win the pennant and we need ball players!" Rickey thundered as he whacked his desk. "Do you think you can do it?"

Robinson waited before answering.

"Jack waited, and waited, and waited before answering," Sukeforth remembered.

"Yes," Robinson said.⁹

Rickey's scouts told him that Robinson was a good baseball player, maybe not the best player in black baseball, but better than most. Rickey liked the fact that Robinson had played against white athletes in college and that he had been an officer in the army. He liked what he heard about Robinson's athleticism, his intelligence, his speed, and his competitiveness. Rickey liked just about everything he heard about Robinson.

Except his temper.

Rickey knew that Robinson's temper was particularly explosive when he was confronted with racial bigotry—whether as a teenager on the streets of Pasadena, during athletic competitions, or while serving as a soldier. Lieutenant Robinson had been court-martialed for insubordination after refusing to move to the back of a military bus in Fort Hood, Texas.

Robinson was cleared of the charges and discharged from the army in late November 1944. He began playing the next spring with the Monarchs. He did not like the Negro leagues and the ways black baseball perpetuated Jim Crowism. He hated the long bus rides, the Jim Crow hotels and restaurants, the poor umpiring, and the carousing of his teammates. His feelings on drinking and sexual abstinence put him at odds with his teammates.

Robert Abernathy played with Robinson for the Monarchs during the summer of 1945.

"Jackie Robinson, he was a good player, but he had some temper—temper like a rattlesnake," Abernathy said. "The umpire would call a strike or a bad call on him and he wanted to argue. And then he'd get in there and he'd knock the cover off the ball.

"Jackie said, 'Ab, you're a good ballplayer' and I'd say, 'So are you—just control your temper.' And he said, 'Well, I ain't gonna take no mess.'"¹⁰

Reports about Robinson's temper got back to Rickey, who was clearly worried about Robinson's ability to control his anger.

For Robinson to succeed, Rickey knew, he could not respond to the indignities that would be piled onto him, or he would give credence to the segregationists who said blacks were too temperamental to play in the major leagues. Segregationists had long said that mixing blacks and whites on baseball diamonds inevitably would lead to fistfights on the field and race riots in the bleachers.¹¹

Rickey needed to know what was inside Robinson.

"I know you're a good ballplayer," Rickey told him. "What I don't know is whether you have the guts."

Rickey's words stung Robinson, whose fists clenched while anger stirred in his stomach. Nobody had ever questioned Robinson's guts. He started to respond. But Rickey cut him off.

"I'm looking for a ballplayer with guts enough not to fight back," Rickey said.

Rickey did not immediately say anything more.

He took off his coat and transformed himself from baseball executive to method actor. First, he was a white hotel clerk refusing the black Robinson a room, then a white waiter denying Robinson service, and then a white train conductor sticking a finger in Robinson's face and calling him "boy."

Rickey then became a foulmouthed opposing player who, as Robinson later recalled, derided "my race, my parents, in language that was almost unendurable."

And finally, Rickey became a vindictive base stealer who slid into Robinson with his spikes high in the air, hoping to bloody the infielder trying to tag him out.

"How do you like that, nigger boy?" the base stealer said.

Rickey, the base stealer, swung his fist at Robinson's head.

Robinson did not flinch. He did not respond.¹²

Rickey opened a book published in 1921, Giovanni Papini's *Life of Christ*, and read Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of 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. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain" (Matt. 5:38-41 KJV).

Robinson recognized the text and the point Rickey was making, and what was required of him.

“I have two cheeks, Mr. Rickey,” Robinson replied. “Is that it?”¹³

Rickey nodded and then smiled. Robinson’s words were just what Rickey hoped to hear.

“Well, I thought the old man was going to kiss him,” remembered Clyde Sukeforth, who witnessed the exchange.¹⁴

But Rickey had to make sure that Robinson understood what he was getting himself into.

“We can’t fight our way through this,” Rickey said. “We’ve got no army. There’s virtually nobody on our side. No owners, no umpires, very few newspapermen. And I’m afraid that many fans will be hostile.”¹⁵

Rickey asked Robinson for his assurance that he would restrain himself from responding to any verbal or physical confrontation, on or off the field. He told Robinson that if he lost his temper, it would vindicate those who believed blacks did not belong in white baseball. Rickey told Robinson he would have to be “a man big enough to bear the cross of martyrdom.”¹⁶

Robinson agreed.

Rickey signed Robinson to a contract with the Montreal Royals. It included a bonus of \$3,500 and a salary of \$600 a month.

He insisted that Robinson keep the news to himself. Robinson told neither Rachel nor his mother, Mallie. As Robinson got to know Rickey, he found that the white baseball executive reminded him of his mother because both possessed a deep and uncompromising faith in God.

“I am not the most religious person in the world. I believe in God, in the Bible and in trying to do the right thing as I understand it,” Robinson once said. “I am sure there are many, many better Christians than I. Yet, it has always impressed me that two of the people who had the greatest influence on my life—my mother and Branch Rickey—had such deep faith in the existence of a Supreme Being. It is one thing to express faith. It is another thing to do as these two people did—to practice faith every day of one’s life.”¹⁷

The next two months were anxious ones for Robinson. He did not know Rickey well enough yet to fully believe him. He tried to go on with his life as it was, but he could not stop thinking about the opportunity ahead for him. Nor could he help but wonder whether this would become another deferred dream for another black person.

Two months later, on October 23, Brooklyn announced it had signed Robinson for its Montreal team. By doing so, Rickey fulfilled a promise he had made to himself decades earlier, when he was the baseball coach at Ohio Wesleyan University, a private Methodist-affiliated school in Delaware, Ohio.

In 1903, the Ohio Wesleyan team traveled to South Bend, Indiana, for a game against the University of Notre Dame. The hotel clerk denied a room to Charles “Tommy” Thomas, the team’s only black player. Rickey asked if Thomas could sleep on a cot in his room. The clerk agreed.

Later that evening, Rickey said, he saw Thomas sobbing and rubbing his hands, saying, “Black skin. Black skin. If only I could make them white.”

Rickey said the scene haunted him.

“I vowed,” Rickey told the Associated Press after he signed Robinson, “that I would always do whatever I could to see that other Americans did not have to face the bitter humiliation that was heaped upon Charles Thomas.”¹⁸

Rickey could not make good on the promise he made to Thomas by himself. He needed the right man—and in Robinson he found him.

Rickey, it appears, did not tell Robinson the story of Charles Thomas. But, as Robinson later explained in an article he wrote for *Guideposts* magazine, Rickey told another story as the men discussed what might happen if Robinson integrated baseball.

“There will be trouble ahead—for you, for me, for my people, for baseball,” Robinson told Rickey.

“Trouble ahead,” Rickey said, repeating Robinson’s words. “You know, Jackie, I was a small boy when I took my first train ride. On the same train was an old couple, also riding for the first time. We were going through the Rocky Mountains. The old man sitting by the window looked forward and said to his wife, ‘Trouble ahead, Ma! We’re high up over a precipice and we’re going to run right off!’

“To my boyish ears the noise of the wheels repeated, ‘Trouble a-head, trouble-ahead. . . .’ I never hear train wheels to this day but that I think of this. But our train course bent into a tunnel right after the old man spoke, and we came out on the other side of the mountain. That’s the way it is with most trouble ahead in this world, Jackie—if we use the common sense and courage God gave us. But you’ve got to study the hazards and build wisely.”¹⁹

Robinson said he never forgot that story. He also did not forget that Rickey told him he would not be alone.

“God is with us in this, Jackie,” Rickey told Robinson. “You know your Bible. It’s good, simple Christianity for us to face realities and to recognize what we’re up against. We can’t go out and preach and crusade and bust our heads against the wall. We’ve got to fight out our problems together with tact and common sense.”²⁰

Robinson had never met anyone like Rickey. Robinson learned to be suspicious of whites. And yet he implicitly trusted Rickey. When he later remembered their first meeting, Robinson recalled how Rickey’s “piercing eyes looked at me with such meticulous care. I felt almost naked.” But once he got to know Rickey, Robinson learned he had no greater protector. “He was like a piece of mobile armor, and he would throw himself and his advice in the way of anything likely to hurt me.”²¹

Nobody in sports had more at stake, and no one ever suffered more than Robinson. Opposing pitchers threw at him. Opposing base runners spiked him. Fans screamed the vilest of racial epithets. He routinely received death threats.

If he failed, he affirmed the belief of many whites that blacks were inferior. If he lost his temper, he affirmed the belief of those who thought blacks did not have the temperament to play white baseball. It was not enough for him to be good enough for the major leagues; he had to be better than most of the other players, he had to beat them at their own game, and do so with grace and dignity and equanimity.

If Robinson succeeded, he succeeded for all blacks and the millions of whites who believed in racial equality. His success would inspire millions of blacks that they, too, deserved to be treated with equality and fairness. It would cure many white Americans of their belief that blacks were inferior, and convince many others that blacks should have the same opportunities as whites—not just in baseball but also in jobs, housing, and education.

Through it all, Robinson remained steadfast, firmly convinced that God was guiding him, that God was on his side, and that God would sustain him. Trusting God as his constant companion, Robinson exemplified redemptive suffering on the baseball diamond: he turned the other cheek in the face of viciousness.

Robinson succeeded, he felt, because God sides with right, not might. Robinson had no doubt that God favored the cause of racial justice over the forces of bigotry and discrimination. God was on his

side, fighting for equality, and not with the bigots who tormented him or with those who indifferently turned their backs on injustice.

While Robinson occasionally made public statements about his faith, he expressed his faith in these early baseball years mostly in the quiet of the night. His prayer time was intensely private, according to Rachel Robinson, who left her husband alone as he prayed for strength and courage to face the next day's trials and tribulations. Rachel knew that turning the cheek did not come naturally to her husband. He was not nonviolent by nature, and felt he needed all the help he could get through his nightly ritual of prayer.

Robinson's strength in the face of those threats and unspeakable obscenities demonstrated his Christian faith. He succeeded in no small part because of his strong faith in God, which was instilled in him through his mother, Branch Rickey, and his own prayers. "I can testify to the fact that it was a lot harder to turn the other cheek and refuse to fight back than it would have been to exercise a normal reaction," Robinson once wrote. "But it works, because sooner or later it brings a sense of shame to those who attack you. And that sense of shame is often the beginning of progress."²²

From their first meeting, Rickey put his faith in Robinson, and Robinson remained steadfast in that faith. Robinson repeatedly observed how Rickey anticipated difficulties before they happened and then informed the ballplayer and instructed him how he should act. This would repeat itself during Robinson's season with the Montreal Royals in 1946 and during his career with the Dodgers.

Robinson was convinced that Rickey was being directed by a higher power.

"It was impossible for me to believe otherwise," Robinson said. "The first few times he did it, I waved it away as coincidences. But the evidence kept piling up until I realized that I was dealing with a man who had found a way to project himself into the future. I began to accept the fact that Branch Rickey was receiving the kind of help which is above and beyond the understanding of man. It was most valuable to me to know that he had that kind of help. For, when I came to believe that God was working with and guiding Mr. Rickey, I began to also believe that he was guiding me."²³

The famous meeting of the Methodists is depicted in *42*, the 2013 biographical movie starring Chadwick Boseman as Jackie Robinson and Harrison Ford as Branch Rickey. Then the movie turns to the familiar,

inspiring saga of Robinson's courageous fight against racism in baseball and society.

What is overlooked in *42* is that Robinson was a deeply religious man and that the story of his life was spiritual at its core.

Robinson's faith in God, as he attested, carried him not only through the torment of integrating the major leagues but also through the difficult years of advancing civil rights after he left the baseball diamond.

The purpose of this book is to take Robinson at his word and help readers recognize and understand the indispensable role that Christian faith played throughout his life.

The importance of faith for Robinson may come as a surprise to readers. Brian Helgeland, the screenwriter of *42*, is far from alone in largely ignoring Robinson's Christianity.²⁴ It's all too easy to read one of the numerous books about Robinson without coming across one word about his religious convictions.

Arnold Rampersad, who has written the best biography of Robinson, nicely captured Robinson's reliance on faith in his fight for freedom in Major League Baseball and in the wider society.

This book will use and build upon Rampersad's important work by looking at Robinson's life through the lens of faith.

Doing so, the book will show that to ignore Robinson's faith is to take away the very foundation on which he stood as he shattered the color barrier in baseball and became a leading figure in the civil rights movement after baseball.

It is simply impossible to understand Robinson in depth without tending to his Christian belief in God. Only when we see faith in every part of Robinson's life—from his birth to his death—will we understand that Robinson was a man for whom Christian faith acted as a source of inspiration and motivation, comfort and strength, wisdom and direction.

Jackie Robinson was a Hall of Famer and a civil rights leader, to be sure. But first and foremost, he was a Christian believer.

