

A call for gospel audacity: Crucifying the color line in the church one pulpit at a time

By: David E. Prince, PhD

“I couldn’t face my God much longer knowing that His black creatures are held separate and distinct from His white creatures in the game that has given me all I own.”

Those were the words of Branch Rickey reflecting on his decision to sign Jackie Robinson to play baseball for the Brooklyn Dodgers. All of Rickey's advisers, close associates, family and friends advised him against the move. When Rickey petitioned Major League Baseball to allow him to integrate the league, the owners voted unanimously against his request. He did it anyway. On April 15, 1947, when Jackie Robinson, a 28-year-old African-American rookie, courageously ran onto Ebbets Field he trampled the baseball color line under his spikes. Rickey’s commitment to do something about racial segregation began in 1903 when he was the 21-year-old head baseball coach at Ohio Wesleyan University. His Christian conviction collided head on with his love for the great game.

Charles Thomas was recruited by Rickey to play catcher and was the only black player on the team. OWU traveled to South Bend, Ind., for a game against Notre Dame and was checking into a hotel but the hotel clerk said Thomas could not stay due to a whites-only policy. Rickey protested and eventually persuaded the hotel to allow Thomas to stay in his room. That evening he found Thomas sobbing and rubbing his hands and arms convulsively while muttering, "It's my skin. If only I could wipe off the color they could see I am man like everybody else!" A sentiment that would be expressed six decades later by African-American civil rights marchers wearing sandwich board signs that simply read, "I am a man." Rickey later noted that he never felt so helpless. He vowed at that moment that he would do whatever he could to end such humiliation.

This vow to end the “odious injustice” of racism in America came 60 years before Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, 61 years before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and 62 years before the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In 1945, Rickey told beloved Dodgers broadcaster Red Barber that he had to act because he had heard Charles Thomas crying for the past 41 years. He asserted, "I may not be able to do something about racism in every field, but I can sure do something about it in baseball."

In the 4th century, Athanasius, a Bishop and theologian, fought a battle against the heresy of Arianism. It appeared as if the entire Roman Empire was moving in the direction of the heresy. A concerned colleague exclaimed, “The whole world is against you!” Unfazed, Athanasius is said to have responded, “Then it is Athanasius against the world.”

In early 1900s America, white supremacy and the need for racial segregation were perverse cultural truisms enforced de facto (in effect) in the North and de jure (legally) in the South. In a similar spirit, one young, middle-class, Protestant baseball coach had his Athanasian moment against structural authority of an entire nation. Rickey biographer Jimmy Breslin argues that Rickey committed his life to breaking the color line in baseball simply because "he thought it was God's work."

I fear the Christian conviction and moral courage of a young baseball coach to audaciously act upon biblical truth, despite the odds, because he thought it was God's work, serves as an indictment on many pastors in our generation. Pastor, do you consistently and relentlessly apply the gospel of Jesus Christ to issues of race and ethnicity in the church he has called you to shepherd? You may not be able to do something about racial and ethnic prejudice in every church, but you can sure do something in your own church. Can you face your God knowing that his black image bearers are held separate and distinct from his white image bearers in the church, the body of Christ, the Christ who has given you all you have for time and eternity? Is your church as ethnically and racially diverse as your community? If not, are you taking gospel-magnifying risks to bring change?

I teach my pastoral ministry seminary students to ask themselves the question, "What is it, in the church I shepherd, that is most out of line with the truth of the gospel (Gal. 2:14)?" The answer to that question will provide them the information needed to strategically prioritize a Christ-centered, gospel-exulting ministry focus. For many pastors, if not most, the answer to that question will be how the congregation views issues of race and ethnic diversity. The pastor who finds himself in an increasingly rare American location with little or no racial and ethnic diversity has no less responsibility to call his congregation to walk in line with the gospel on matters of race and ethnicity. He should consistently note that the biblical storyline asserts that the glory of Christ is demonstrated in the multi-racial and multi-ethnic composition of the body of Christ. He should also go out of his way to celebrate and learn from the contributions to Christianity of those racially and ethnically distinct from the congregation he shepherds.

All leadership is an essentially moral act that demands courage. Managers take a group of people and attempt to instruct and organize them in a way that maximizes productivity based on an agreed upon goal. Management is an essentially protective act. Leaders step away from the crowd, assert a vision and call people to follow a path that they would not ordinarily take. Leadership is risky and the immediate outcome is never sure. Pastoral ministry is a call to lead, not manage, a flock of God. The pastor of a local church is to be a persistent gospel agitator calling the congregation to take every thought captive to obey Christ (1 Cor. 2:2, 2 Cor. 10:5).

Paul indicates that the triumph of the gospel on display in the church necessarily involves not only the reconciliation of people to God but also to one another (Eph. 2:11-22). The diversity of the church is manifested in the church universally, but that must not be a pastoral excuse for failure to work toward racial and ethnic diversity in the local church. Paul is arguing, not simply for a vertical display of gospel reconciliation (God to man) but also a display of horizontal gospel reconciliation in local churches (man to man). Those normally divided by racial and ethnic differences are now counted as "one new man," a new race of blood bought brothers of the household of God (Eph. 2:15-17). The church is a subversive cruciform community delivered from the self-destructive satanic idolatry that animates racial and ethnic hostility.

Racial bigotry in the church is the fruit of a spirit—the spirit of antichrist. It is an inadequate justification for inaction to assert that intentionally pursuing a multi-ethnic congregation might disturb the peace of a body that is presently accomplishing many good things. Jesus is at war with that kind of serpentine pseudo-peace and calls pastors to lead congregations to accomplish not simply good things but gospel things. Church managers build consensus and mitigate risk. Faithful pastors lead by constantly beckoning the congregation toward cruciform risk. Is there a color line in your church? If so, what are you doing about it? You already have a pulpit. All you need is to add some gospel audacity.

Recommended reading about Branch Rickey:

David E. Prince, Baptist Press, The 'ferocious Christian gentleman' behind Jackie Robinson's famous moment, Posted on Apr 8, 2013

Jimmy Breslin, Branch Rickey Books, Penguin Books (2012)

Lee Lowenfish, Branch Rickey: Baseball's Ferocious Gentleman, University of Nebraska Press (2007).

Murray Polner, Branch Rickey: A Biography, McFarland (2007).