

# The Footwashing at Marlborough

**T**HE STORY HAPPENED IN CHESTER COUNTY, Pennsylvania. It took place around the time of the Revolutionary War. Two Quakers lived on neighboring farms. One was Richard Barnard, an elder, who was a war tax refuser. Not able to support military endeavors because of religious conviction, he refused to pay all taxes directly related to war. His neighbor was Isaac Baily, a strong supporter of the Revolutionary War. Baily was known in the area as a contentious man, often involved in disputes with his acquaintances and even with his meeting. It would have been hard to find two more unlikely neighbors than these two Friends.

A waterway ran between the Baily and Barnard home. As part of a dispute about property rights and water use, Isaac Baily dammed up the waterway.

God's call to peacemaking and reconciliation was very important to this Richard Barnard. He tried every conceivable method to work out a satisfactory solution with his neighbor. Following the advice of Matthew 18, he went to talk to Isaac, but to no avail. He took other Friends with him to speak with Isaac. The matter of the dammed waterway was put to arbitration. Friends decided Richard Barnard was in the right. But nothing would induce Isaac Baily to remove the dam or be reconciled to this neighbor.

The situation was a great burden to Richard Barnard. Not only was he without the use of the water, but he suffered much inward discomfort as the result of the broken meeting; he was supposed to be a counselor and guide to others. Yet he could not solve his own dilemma.

One day a travelling minister came to visit. Richard Barnard opened his heart to the minister and described his problem. When he finished, the minister said simply, "there is more required of some than of others." Richard was struck by this response. He considered what more could be required of him. He had done all that seemed humanly possible to find a solution to the problem.

Richard held up the problem to God for direction and guidance. The answer that came was beyond all "techniques" for conflict resolution. It required giving up claims of being right and going to his neighbor in humility and forgiveness. Richard felt that God was calling him to wash Isaac's feet. The idea was so unusual, he kept trying to push it away. But in the end, he realized he would not have an inward sense of being faithful to God's leading unless he was willing to surrender his notions and be obedient.

Therefore one morning he filled a bowl with water from the waterway that divided the two men and went to Isaac Baily's house. It was so early that Isaac was still in bed. But Richard went up to his bedroom and explained that he had come to wash Isaac's feet. He described how painful the strained relationship had been for him. He was here now, following God's leading, hoping they could be reconciled. Isaac sputtered and fussed, refusing to participate. But Richard persevered and began to wash his feet. Gradually Isaac became quiet and let Richard complete the washing. Then Isaac dressed and accompanied Richard to the door.

Later that day Isaac took a shovel to the waterway and dug away the dam. The water flowed again between the two farms. In the afternoon Isaac and his wife came to pay the Barnards a friendly visit, the first in a number of years. Richard was very grateful for the restored relationship.

The friendship between the two men remained deep and vibrant for the remainder of their lives. Some while after the problem with the waterway, Richard Barnard broke his leg in a lumbering accident. Isaac took care of him during his recovery. When Friends decided to build a new schoolhouse in the vicinity (a building which may also have functioned as a meetinghouse), the two friends contributed one hundred dollars and adjoining land at the juncture of their two properties for its construction. It was a fitting memorial of God's healing work in their lives.

—Taken from "Gospel Order" by Sandra Cronk,  
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