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JACK WILLCUTS AND WHY FRIENDS ARE FRIENDS

ARTHUR O. ROBERTS

It's been more than two decades since Jack Willcuts passed away at the age of sixty-seven, from anaphylactic shock. He was my closest college friend, a friendship that continued throughout our lives. I am pleased to share with readers of *Quaker Religious Thought* some reasons why I cherish fond memories about him, and honor him as others do. While Hugh Barbour, John Punshon, and Carole Spencer have established more scholarly understandings of Quakerism in recent decades, it is Jack Willcuts, who more than any other leader in the last half century, has contributed to the Quaker identity of Evangelical Friends in North America. This is especially evident in his editing of the *Evangelical Friend* for eighteen years and his brief introduction to Quakerism, *Why Friends are Friends*. Let me say more about Jack's contribution to Friends, from my perspective.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON JACK WILLCUTS

Beginning with deputation work while a student at George Fox College, and preaching weekends at a community church in the Oregon coastal town of Rockaway Beach, this God-ordained messenger began a half-century ministry that reached around the world and touched thousands of persons. Through rigorous discipline he discovered—and bore—the joyous burden of Christian service. He learned early to channel energy efficiently, a trait that served him well, and those who benefited from his balanced stewardship of mind, body, and soul. George Fox once urged followers to “prize your time.” Jack demonstrated this. Northwest Yearly Meeting recorded God's ordination of Jack Willcuts as a minister of the Gospel and opened channels for ministry.

His pastoral service in Northwest Yearly Meeting included Northeast Tacoma in Washington, and Lents, West Chehalem, Medford, and Reedwood in Oregon. He and his wife Geraldine served as missionaries in Bolivia and Peru for eight years. Jack served the Yearly Meeting as superintendent for two terms—1966-71 and 1979-86. He edited the *Northwest/Evangelical Friend* magazine from

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1967-85. He was Friend-in-Residence at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Center, Birmingham, England in 1986-87. He ministered as speaker at numerous Quaker conferences and youth camps.

I note first some personal characteristics of Jack Willcuts instructive for Friends ministry, drawing heavily upon my book, *The Wit and Wisdom of Jack Willcuts* (Barclay, 2000). In the second section I present his insights about Friends' mission, message, and ministry, from editorial writings gathered by his daughter, Susan Kendall, in *The Sense of the Meeting* (Barclay, 1992) and from Ron Stansell's book, *Missions by the Spirit* (Barclay, 2009). I conclude with a summary of certain Quaker core convictions, from his book, *Why Friends are Friends* (Barclay, 1984)

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

1. *Discipline.* For Willcuts, discipline brought freedom, not bondage. He didn't try to substitute inspiration for effort. He worked at everything he did, including sermons. When work had brought a sermon to readiness, he could hardly wait to preach! Unction came from having joined his labor with the Spirit's fire. No wonder folks were blessed by his preaching! That same pattern of discipline prepared him for positions of church leadership: pastor, missionary, executive, lecturer, writer, elder. Discipline gave him the wisdom to resist taking moral short-cuts for quick church gains. He distinguished between appropriate and inappropriate methods of Gospel witness. He kept learning, read widely, and never coasted on past achievements.

2. *Generosity.* Jack set a pattern for generous giving: of time and money. His family exercised this responsibility quietly, both for individuals in need and the Church and its agencies. Almsgiving reflected compassion, not display. Son Stuart carries on the tradition, currently in Amman, Jordan, serving as Middle-East director of Mercy Corp, International.

3. *Integrity.* Jack didn't talk behind people's backs, shaming some of us into better moral conduct. He took seriously Quaker advices about protecting the reputation of others.

4. *Skill in listening.* He counseled well by being a good listener, opening others to the Light. Jack saw his task as doorkeeper for Christ the true counselor of curious, questing, and troubled souls. I don't know whether he read George Fox's paper, "You Must Come In at the

Door!” but he resonated with it. Jack could listen to common people, said one grateful person, because he himself was a common man with common roots, who in an uncommon way helped others. His gift for listening across cultural barriers enabled him to help Aymara Quakers become an indigenous Yearly Meeting, trusting them to let Christ teach appropriate cultural patterns for their Christian faith communities. This gift brought him into leadership within the world community of Friends. At Woodbrooke, in association with John Punshon, serving as a Friend in Residence helped him disabuse some Friends of negative stereotypes about evangelical Friends, and to interpret Scripture to seekers there, leading some to Christian commitment.

5. *Affirmation.* Family constituted the first circle of that affirmation. “He trusted us!” say his children in unison. They were especially grateful that God gave their father a few additional years following a serious illness of the sort that would prove fatal. Persons in the churches Jack and Geraldine served felt much the same way, regardless of age or station in life. Like the person who said to the family, “During my bankruptcy your father met with me every day.” He was an affirming preacher, not a scolding one.

6. *Discernment.* Jack learned how to guide without dominating. During a difficult time in life daughter Susan recalled finding a note on her pillow, referencing Psalm 40. She then knew the Lord had heard her cry and could put her feet on the rock. Quietly her father had offered a bridge of hope for a difficult crossing. Jack’s practical, discerning spirit. Many folks felt his touch or heard his discerning words *at the right time*.

7. *Commitment.* A convinced as well as a birthright Friend, Jack thought Quaker beliefs should be followed because they were true, not because they were Quaker. He never apologized or compromised Quaker principles, but rather gave them biblical focus. He held folks to them firmly but not legalistically. His passionate convictions, affirmed with tenderness and good-humored recognition of human foibles, drew together at the Cross persons concerned for social issues and those concerned for evangelical proclamation. Jack was an evangelical with liberal social concerns, seeking to follow Jesus. This broad biblical commitment made keynote addresses to his Yearly Meeting, during years he served as General Superintendent, memorable.

With clarity of words and unction from the Holy Spirit, he kept people focused on the covenantal vision. He was a pastor’s pastor.

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He piqued imagination with new ways to practice Kingdom living—developing programs such as Youth Ambassadors, Friends Action Board, and ethnic ministries. He kept the Yearly Meeting on the cutting edge of Quakerism. Jack helped folks understand themselves to be Christians belonging to the family of Friends. This commitment to Christian principles as understood by Friends earned him wide respect. Jack lectured or preached in many yearly meetings across the world, and was engaged with the Friends World Committee for Consultation in planning three regional conferences in 1991. Jack gave imaginative guidance to boards on which he participated, including George Fox University.

8. *Joy.* Jack liked to make ice-cream, and had actually made a freezer of it to celebrate Stu's birthday the day he died. The family ate the remainder while discussing arrangements for a memorial. "A love feast" it was. To the last, Jack served. I recall good times with him, as others do. One summer between college terms we worked in the woods cutting brush. Nasty work! Encouraged by him, I joined him in singing at the tops of our voices verses from Isaiah he had learned from an oratorio, "The valleys stand so thick with corn that they laugh and sing." Once, joshing this egg-head friend, he counseled "Sedulously avoid all polysyllabic profundity.... Shun double entendres, prurient jocosity, and pestiferous profanity. That is naughty." This reminded me of how Elton Trueblood counseled young scholars to use ordinary words to convey profound truth. Still later Jack's epistles from England explaining language differences, showed his propensity for humor about speech, e.g. "a child born of a British mother and an American father is 'hahlf' and 'half'."

This counsel from Jack, read at his memorial service, captures his joyous commitment and his hopes for Quaker renewal: "The spirit is present in both silence and speaking. I fear we dishonor the Lord in limiting Him to just one way or the other. God is bigger than all our Quaker boundaries in faith and practice.... At this point, let us figuratively reach out to shake hands across the distances of sea and space, programmed and un-programmed meetings, and live in peace."

Jack's editorials in *The Evangelical Friend* were framed with the joy of living, but also with important, well-stated concerns and Biblical exhortation. His books, published by Barclay Press, articulate principles noted above. He wrote a membership course, *A Family of Friends* (1977, 1995), a study booklet, *Why Friends are Friends* (1984), with Myron Goldsmith, *Friends in the Soaring Sixties, a Church Growth Era* (1969), and, with David Kingrey, *Team Ministry*:

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a Model for Today's Church. His daughter, Susan Kendall, compiled her father's editorial writings, *The Sense of the Meeting* (Newberg: Barclay Press 1992).

INSIGHTS ABOUT MISSION, MESSAGE, AND MINISTRY

1. *Mission*. In the restless 1960's Jack Willcuts reflected upon some critical remarks by frustrated American Quakers about statistical losses. Here is what he wrote:

No one is more critical of the church than those who love it most... . If this concern for a more effective witness and worship, for a new spiritual thrust that will carry us again beyond the mere momentum of the past, for the manifestation of holy fire of tingling significance that will stir up complacent elders and pastors as well as complacent church attenders—if this widespread discontent is the movement of the Spirit within the hearts of many, then I am rejoicing. For the Lord can best guide those who feel the most need of guidance. If it takes revival, renewal, or revolution to prepare a people to honor and glorify God in all of life as well as in the church, then let us be ready.... Restless ones, let's face it—we dare not just create more committees to take up the time with things that do not awaken the church or change the world. What is needed is a great spiritual power let loose in us and among us.... Our convictions must be clear, or change may do nothing for us. But with convictions clear, hearts clean, and Christ in control, let us turn the world (and the church, if need be) upside down! (SOM, pp. 150-51)

In respect to missionary service, although Willcuts spent only eight years in Bolivia, his wisdom contributed to a good transition for Aymara Friends, from dependency upon foreign mission leadership and support to full autonomy as a yearly meeting—self-governing, self-supporting—within the world body of Friends. Missiologist Ron Stansell notes the importance to the mission of Jack's articulation of difficulties and ways to overcome them. His list includes the following: over-dependence of local pastors upon mission financial support, an indulgent constituency back home that wanted to keep sending money, a tendency for local pastors to look to mission leaders instead of their own for church discipline and placement, over-dependency upon missionaries for facilitating evangelistic outreach, and the symbolic power of missionary presence symbolized by mission-owned

properties. In the decade following 1963 these difficulties were overcome for Bolivia Friends Church, through cooperative actions of missionaries and Aymara church leaders. Jack's discerning spirit aided this transition. (*Missions by the Spirit*, esp. chap, 16)

2. *Message*. In a March, 1961 editorial entitled "Something Inward, Something Outward, Something Eternal," Jack offers in refreshing prose some cogent doctrinal teachings. He writes:

Doctrine should not be dry. To our church it is more important than buildings or programs. Doctrine is described by Paul as "wisdom of God," an expression he uses upon penning a letter to the Corinth Quarterly Meeting. Paul had learned of the situation in Corinth: spiritual shallowness, loose living, divisions. Instead of attacking the evil in the world, they were being infiltrated by it; instead of bringing to bear the transforming power of the Gospel, the church was succumbing to sin.... Paul might have been indignant with these wavering Christians. He might have lashed out at them impatiently, but he doesn't. He adopts the tactics of the Master and with tenderness reminds them of the glory of salvation and the privileges of the Gospel of Christ. Then he reviews their spiritual equipment and resources for the journey of life. "But we speak the wisdom of God,... of Christ Jesus, who is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption." Shallowness, low-level Christian living, stumbling defeat, infiltration of the world into the church—these are conditions crowding the church today. The wisdom of God is needed. What is this wisdom? Where are the resources? Righteousness is one. God is able to take hold of a life that is twisted and broken, sinful and defeated, immoral and hopeless, and make it conform to His standards. To do this (let us use a theological term) He imputes the righteousness of Christ to us... [then] He *imparts* the cleansing and presence of the Holy Spirit, which readies us to begin our growth in the Christian life—into the likeness of Christ,... There are no shortcuts to holiness; it also is an imparted grace.... There is yet another word: redemption.... The wisdom of God when known and followed will land a person in heaven.... Is it poor taste to remind ourselves that we are soon to die? Every town has its funeral parlors, so this is common knowledge. But the way some people live one would think the word about death had never been reported at all.

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The wisdom of God? It is the righteousness of God that puts a person in the center of God's favor; the sanctification of God that removes sin and imparts the Holy Spirit to bring a person day by day into the likeness of the Lord; the redemption of God that lifts one faultless, by God's grace, into the presence of the Lord. This *is* good news. (SOM, p. 101)

From a sick-bed in 1985, remembering the holiness camp meetings of his youth, Willcuts ponders a Catholic phrase used by Thomas Merton: "sanctifying grace." Jack writes:

Surely God wants all of us to rediscover our identity as full participants in the life and mission of the church. The Holy Spirit is at hand today to draw all those who are willing into a deeper fellowship with Himself, and with one another around his living vital Word and the church. We are to be like Jesus, moved with compassion, not self-pity, not preoccupied with our search for pleasure. How easy it is to allow subtle personal goals, even religious interests, to replace the cleansing, comforting, guiding, and empowering grace of God that is given again and again. (SOM, pp. 8-9)

3. *Ministry*. For Willcuts, proclamation and service belong together. To make this point, in 1981, he narrates a story about Benjamin, an Aymara Quaker.

Beyond sharing the message of Christ, what else happens in foreign missions? A lot. One example is a chocolate-processing industry recently developed among Bolivian Friends (no connection with Cadbury, another Quaker chocolate entrepreneur)... that produces 50,000 unsweetened chocolate bars a month, plus other products, all originated, owned, and operated by 35 Aymara Christians who contract to tithe... earnings to the support of Bolivian Yearly Meeting of Friends churches....

Benjamin was one of many Indian peons on a hacienda in 1951.... In a village market one day he heard a Bolivian Friend preaching and handing out tracts. Benjamin became a believer... his family and several neighbors soon became believers and started worshiping in Benjamin's adobe house on Sundays. The only problem, the hacienda *patrón* suspected group meetings of any sort and one day rode horseback into the meeting, flourishing a blacksnake whip, and threatened Benjamin unless

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the meetings ceased. Fortunately it was harvest time and Benjamin was in charge. Instead of stealing potatoes... which the peons did with expertise, Benjamin's awakened conscience would not allow this.... The *patrón* was amazed to find an ordinary yield suddenly a bumper crop. So Chunavi Friends Church was established... [Willcuts then narrates how a young Christian from that church received an education in La Paz]. Because of his obvious abilities he received a scholarship to study a few months in Israel, where he lived in a kibbutz and studied Israeli settlement cooperatives. This became his model for the Friends chocolate industry built on yearly meeting property in La Paz [When Jack asked the group of thirty-some workers why it worked so well they replied] "We can work together because we trust each other as brothers in Christ."

The concluding paragraph of *Sense of the Meeting* reflects Jack Willcuts' hope for the future of Friends: "There is among us a new generation of believing Friends who are ready to be filled again and again with the fire of the Spirit, a fire that will not be put out." (p. 179) Stimulated by the Association of Evangelical Friends, Faith and Life Conferences, and other inter-yearly meeting gatherings, Jack envisioned renewal was commencing. He helped shape the formation of the Evangelical Friends Alliance. He remained editor as the *Northwest Friend* segued into *The Evangelical Friend* and served Friends more widely. He encouraged cooperative publication of books and other literature through Barclay Press.

SOME QUAKER CORE CONVICTIONS

In *Why Friends Are Friends*, Jack Willcuts lays out several core Quaker convictions bolstered by biblical teaching.

1. *About Worship*. "Without real worship" wrote Willcuts "churches grow stale and boring." Worship is basic to Christianity, to its ministry and service. He affirmed the classic Quaker disciplinary statement that "worship is the adoring response of the heart and mind to the influence of the Spirit of God." (WFAF, p. 4)
2. *Sacred Spiritual Sacraments*. He also stressed the spiritual realities of non-ritual communion and baptism with the Holy Spirit. For him the book of Hebrews affirms the new Pentecostal order, displacing old covenant rituals. The church is that new order. (p. 22)

3. *Called to Ministry.* Another core conviction of Friends regards the universal and special ministry of men and women. In contrast to other Christian traditions, where ministers are separated by titles and status, Friends believe that gifts of ministry are exercised in loving service to the fellowship. God alone ordains public ministry, but Friends record that such gifts are carried out effectively. (p. 51)

4. *Letting Peace Prevail.* Jack upheld the conviction that peace and holiness belong together (Heb. 12:14), fostering activities that fulfill the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20). Few things are a worse Christian witness than those who proclaim the love of God while being willing to resort to violence in the furthering of even noble causes. Jesus said “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matt. 5:9), and Paul taught, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts” (Col. 3:15).

5. *Getting the Sense of the Meeting.* Effective Christian leadership is not a function of adhering to Robert’s Rules of Order, but a factor of being led corporately by Christ. Voting makes winners and losers, but coming together in seeking God’s will transforms decisions into discernment (Acts 15).

6. *On Being Powerful.* At the center of Quaker faith and practice is the empowerment of the Spirit. Jesus instructed his followers to wait until they had been filled with the Holy Spirit—that is what makes them his effective witnesses in the world (Acts 1:8). Rather than force or manipulation, true power is the Holy Spirit working within people, and its clearest manifestation is love (1 Cor. 13).

Jack Willcuts believed and taught that every person of faith needs a family, and that the family of Friends is that group that knows what Jesus is doing and that seeks to carry out his will lovingly in the world (Jn. 15:14-15). In explaining *why* Friends are Friends, Jack not only sought to bear biblical and experiential witness among Friends; it was his hope and prayer to restore spiritual vitality to the movement and beyond. By his life and his service, he exemplified what he taught, and his witness lives on.