

Wills and Inheritance in the Bible

Christian lawyers can be asked to do some strange things. Several years ago I received a telephone call from the manager of a local Christian bookshop, who knew that I was both a solicitor and a regular preacher in my church. He had been approached by the pastor of a church in London which ran seminars on practical topics. The pastor wanted to encourage members of his congregation to make a Will – perhaps he hoped they might consider a legacy to the church! He wanted a speaker who could teach on the Biblical basis for making a Will and then give some practical guidance. No payment was offered but the speaker would be free to promote the services of his own firm! Quite a challenge – but I decided to take it up.

When I started to prepare the first part of the seminar, I realised that the Bible has far more to say on this subject than I had ever seen before, and it occurs to me that this may be of interest to Christian lawyers generally.¹ At a time when Christian values are being challenged and abandoned by the culture around us, it is good to be reminded of the Biblical basis for much of what we do as lawyers. Also, what has now come to be known as “private client” work may not be the first area of practice that springs to mind when thinking of how God can use Christian lawyers to advance His kingdom and do some good in His Name, but I hope we will see that He is just as interested in it as He is in, say, family law, housing or welfare benefits.

The Bible often uses human affairs to illustrate spiritual principles. Perhaps the best example is marriage, which demonstrates the relationship between Christ and the Church.² Indeed it could be said that God instituted marriage for that purpose – but it is also good in itself: Paul puts forbidding marriage in the category of “deceiving spirits and things taught by demons”.³ Likewise, we will see that taking steps to deal with the future of our assets after death is good and proper in itself, as well as illustrating something of eternal significance. Our money and possessions are entrusted to us by God to look after for Him and we should therefore seek His will as to what should happen to them after we are “promoted to Glory”.

Inheritance in the Old Testament

God did not criticise Abraham for being concerned about who would inherit his estate; rather He reassured him on the subject.⁴ He had already promised to give the land of Canaan to Abraham’s descendants.⁵ An interesting problem arose when that promise was much closer to fulfilment and the time had come to allocate the land to the tribes of Israel. Until then (under traditional rules but not any actual law given by God to Moses) only sons could inherit. But Moses, with God’s authority, clarified the law of inheritance to ensure that family assets could be passed on even if there were no sons.⁶ This was implemented by Joshua.⁷

However, the family heads of the clan of Gilead drew Moses’ attention to a potential problem arising from this change: if Zelophehad’s daughters were to marry men from other tribes, their inheritance could be transferred to those other tribes, contrary to God’s allocation of the land. At the Lord’s command, Moses ordered that any daughter inheriting land must marry only within her own tribe.⁸ So inheritance law was

¹ This article also includes some material from a sermon I later preached in my own church on Chapter 5 of Revelation as part of a series in that book.

² Ephesians 5:22-32

³ 1 Timothy 4:1-3

⁴ Genesis 15:1-4

⁵ Genesis 12:7

⁶ Numbers 27:1-11

⁷ Joshua 17:3-6

⁸ Numbers 36:1-12

developed to cure an anomaly. The *details* are specific to Israel and not directly relevant to us for today's purposes. Yet the *principle* suggests that it is responsible for us to ensure that our assets, which we have received from God and hold as stewards, end up in the right place, by means of a carefully drafted Will. This may involve consideration of different scenarios that could arise in the future, although it is never possible to cover all eventualities.

Inheritance in the New Testament

God has made a Will leaving everything to His Son, Jesus, "whom he appointed heir of all things".⁹ He is our model: if He has made a Will, we should certainly encourage people to do so. In fact, back in the Old Testament, we are allowed to eavesdrop as the Father makes His Will, discussing it with His Son.¹⁰ What was the outcome?

If we are looking for the outcome of something mentioned earlier in the Bible we may find it in the one book many Christians find daunting – Revelation. There we read that, after a vision setting the scene, the Father's throne in heaven, the Apostle John saw a closed book – a scroll.¹¹ Tantalisingly, he could see some writing on the outside, but it was rolled up and sealed with seven seals, so he could not read it. What this scroll reveals emerges from the following chapters. For our present purposes it is enough to know just the general nature of its contents:

*The scroll contains the judgments of God that will fall on the earth, but they conclude with the full establishment of God's government and rule. What has been written is complete. The scroll is written on both sides and sealed with seven seals. Another way of stating the significance of this scroll is to say that it contains God's plan, which is to be executed on the earth.*¹²

The seals need to be opened, not only to reveal what is written, but also to enable it to be carried out. Roman Wills were sealed by seven witnesses¹³ and their contents were often summarised on the back. A Will is to be opened only when the testator has died, not just to find out to whom he left his estate, but also to enable his wishes to be carried out. Until the testator dies, the Will remains private; after his death, only the Executor is entitled to have it and to carry out what it says. So, as William Barclay suggests, "The roll may be what we might describe as God's will, his final settlement of the affairs of the universe."¹⁴ Some idea of its contents had already been revealed, hence the writing on the outside, but the detailed provisions were still concealed and they remained to be carried out.

Who is the Executor?

One of the first questions a lawyer will ask when taking instructions to prepare a Will is, "Who is to be the Executor?" In John's vision the problem with the scroll is that there is apparently no one qualified to unseal it.¹⁵ Who can release the purposes of God to bring history to its climax? In other words, who is the Executor of the Father's Will? John is so distressed that he weeps. Christians are enduring serious opposition; if the scroll is opened the universe will be governed in the interests of the Church but otherwise

⁹ Hebrews 1:2

¹⁰ Psalm 2:6-9

¹¹ Revelation 5:1

¹² John Hosier, *The Lamb, the Beast and the Devil* (Monarch Books, 2002), p 57

¹³ Bruce W. Frier, Thomas A. J. McGinn, *A Casebook on Roman Family Law* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p 345

¹⁴ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John: Chapters 1 to 5* (St Andrew Press, 2004), p 182. See also G K Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (W B Eerdmans, 1999), pp 340-342, for slightly different terminology.

¹⁵ Revelation 5:2-4

*there will be no protection for God's children in the hours of bitter trial, no judgments upon a persecuting world, no ultimate triumph for believers, no new heaven and earth, no future inheritance.*¹⁶

It is quite a relief, then, when we see Jesus revealed as the One with the credentials to be the Executor of the Will – the One entitled to take the scroll, open the seals and implement its contents.¹⁷ He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David. These credentials were revealed by being gradually narrowed down through the Old Testament,¹⁸ from “the offspring of Eve”; descendant of Abraham, but of Isaac not Ishmael; of Jacob not Esau; of Judah not Reuben or even Jacob’s favourite son Joseph.¹⁹ But even that was not enough to qualify Him – He had to be descended from David.²⁰ So there is no difficulty in identifying the Jesus of the New Testament as the One always intended to release God’s plan for the history of the world.²¹

So, is He the Executor? Normally if you make a Will leaving everything to one person, you will also appoint that person as the Executor. As we have already noted, Jesus is the sole beneficiary of the Father’s Will. If we “jump” a few chapters in Revelation, we know that the request the Father invited in Psalm 2 must have been made, and that He fulfilled it.²² But even if Jesus is the sole beneficiary, and therefore logically the Executor, He has no authority to possess the Will, or to execute it, until the testator has died. The first question a solicitor should ask when taking instructions to apply for Probate is, “Please may I see the Death Certificate?” Normally, of course, he will also convey his condolences to the bereaved; the death of a loved one is a very sad event. But in this case it is good news – indeed what we call the Gospel - that a death has occurred.²³ Hence in John’s vision we see Jesus’ other essential qualification to be the Executor. Having been announced as a lion, He appears as a Lamb. It bore the evidence of having been slain: “those wounds yet visible above, in beauty glorified”, as the hymn puts it.²⁴ Jesus’ wounds were still apparent after His resurrection; remember He invited Thomas to feel them.²⁵ These are His identifying marks, and He still had them when He ascended to heaven.

Who has died and who are the beneficiaries?

Yet, there are two problems here. Firstly, *isn’t it the person who made the Will that has to die?* Yes, but we know that Jesus is by very nature God and said, “I and the Father are one” and “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”²⁶ The fact that He is God is confirmed by the seven horns and seven eyes.²⁷ The number 7 represents perfection or completeness, so the seven horns represent complete power or strength (only God is omnipotent) and we are told that the seven eyes represent “the seven spirits of God”, the Holy Spirit who is also God, who rested upon Him²⁸ and whom Jesus said He would send after His ascension²⁹ (“sent out into all the earth”).

¹⁶ William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors* (Tyndale Press, 1940), p 89 (emphasis mine)

¹⁷ Revelation 5:5-7

¹⁸ See Phil Moore, *Straight to the Heart of Revelation* (Monarch Books, 2010), pp 71-74

¹⁹ Genesis 3:15, 49:8-10

²⁰ Isaiah 11:1-4, 10 (David was Jesse’s youngest son, whom God told Samuel to anoint as King.)

²¹ Arguably Adam was the original appointee, but he forfeited that right leaving Jesus, the last Adam, to inherit it: Beale, *op cit*, p 341.

²² Revelation 11:15

²³ Hebrews 9:15-17

²⁴ *Crown Him with Many Crowns*, Matthew Bridges, 1852 and Godfrey Thring, 1874

²⁵ John 20:27

²⁶ Philippians 2:6; John 10:30, 14:9

²⁷ Revelation 5:6

²⁸ Isaiah 11:2, Matthew 3:16, John 1:32-34

²⁹ John 7:39, 16:7

Secondly, the writer to the Hebrews says, “*Christ is the mediator of a new covenant that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance*”³⁰ whereas we have said that the Father made *only Jesus* His heir. But Jesus is pleased to share His inheritance with us!³¹ This is God’s grace! He didn’t have to do it.³² We are given the same status as Jesus. He is happy to accept us, God’s adopted children, as entitled to share the inheritance with Him, God’s only begotten Son. So the heavenly company in John’s vision sang, not only that *Jesus* will reign, but that *we* shall reign on the earth.³³ Thus we see Jesus, having completed His saving work on the earth, conquering sin and death by His Cross and resurrection, and ascended to the Father’s right hand, taking the Father’s Will from that same right hand, as the Father gives Him power and authority to bring into effect His kingdom rule, which He will share with those He has redeemed.

Following His ascension to heaven, therefore, Jesus was confirmed as the Executor of the Father’s Will and, until His return, He is implementing God’s remaining plan for the history of the world. But His death and resurrection mean that the inheritance is released, not just to Jesus as the original beneficiary, but also to us, His brothers, who have put our trust in Him. It is an inheritance we can begin to enjoy now; we do not have to await His return. Paul uses the idea of a trust for minor children, frequently used in Wills today, to illustrate the temporary purpose of the Law until the promise of righteousness by faith in Christ was fulfilled by His death.³⁴ As believers, we are not to live like minor beneficiaries of a trust, making do with what the trustees will advance to us, as they keep us in check to stop us squandering our inheritance. That is what we are doing if, like the Galatians, we go back to trying to please God by keeping rules and regulations by our own efforts. Instead we should live as those who have unrestricted access to God’s riches, trusted by Him like adults to “live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature”.³⁵

So, what does all this mean for Christian lawyers?

Firstly, it is a good and responsible act to make a Will, as part of our Christian stewardship. Lawyers are often the most neglectful in this, following the old proverb, “The cobbler’s shoes are never mended.” God is interested in what happens after you die to the money and property He has entrusted to you. So, have you made a Will? Your first responsibility will be to provide for your family.³⁶ But you may have the opportunity to consider whether to benefit your church, individual members of God’s family, other Christian charities and, of course, the LCF. These suggestions are not intended to be exhaustive, but perhaps we should bear in mind the principle in Galatians 6:10.

Secondly, if you are a “private client” lawyer, or even a general practitioner (if there are any left!) who deals with Wills and Probate as well as other work, not only are you doing something very useful and important in God’s purposes, but as you do it I hope you will remember the Will our Father has made, the wonderful inheritance His Son has agreed to share with us and the confidence we can have that He has been put in charge of the remaining history of our world, which He will bring to a glorious conclusion at His return. Maranatha!

³⁰ Hebrews 9:15

³¹ Romans 8:16-17, Hebrews 2:11

³² Such an arrangement can now be achieved under English law by a Deed of Variation. To be treated for certain tax purposes as original beneficiaries of the Will, the new beneficiaries must not give anything in return for what they receive.

³³ Revelation 5:10

³⁴ Galatians 4:1-7

³⁵ Galatians 5:16

³⁶ 1 Timothy 5:8