If Jesus Had a Will, What Would it Have Said?

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The language of inheritance runs like a thread through Scripture. God promises Abraham an inheritance; Israel receives the Promised Land as an inheritance; the Psalms speak of the nations as an inheritance; Christ speaks repeatedly of inheriting the Kingdom; St. Paul describes Christians as heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ; and the Letter to the Hebrews speaks explicitly of an "eternal inheritance." Christianity, in other words, is not merely a religion of commandments or beliefs. It is also, remarkably, a religion of inheritance.

That language invites an intriguing question. What if we approached the final acts and words of Jesus Christ through the structure of a last will and testament?

The analogy is more than a lawyer's conceit. The word *testament* itself stands at the centre of Christianity. The Bible is divided into the Old and New Testaments, and at the Last Supper Christ declares the cup to be the new covenant—or, in the traditional rendering, the "new testament"—in his blood. Hebrews develops the connection still further, associating testament, death and inheritance in explaining Christ's saving work (Heb. 9:15–17).

Read against the basic architecture of a modern will, the final chapters of Christ's earthly life reveal a striking pattern.

I. The Testator and His Estate

A will begins with a testator: someone who possesses something capable of being transmitted.

What, then, constituted Christ's estate?

The answer is paradoxical. By ordinary standards, Jesus died almost completely without property. He had no house to devise, no bank account to distribute and no portfolio to liquidate. Yet Christian theology makes an extraordinary claim about his ownership. Christ possesses not merely material things but a Kingdom.

After the Resurrection, Jesus declares: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Mt. 28:18). His estate, therefore, cannot be understood principally in material terms. It consists of his Kingdom, his teaching, his mission, his Church and the sacraments, through which his followers are invited to participate in the divine life.

The inheritance Christ leaves is greater precisely because it cannot be reduced to property.

II. Appointment of Executors

A modern will normally appoints executors, or estate trustees, to carry the testator's intentions into effect after death. Christ likewise entrusted others with the continuation of his work.

During his ministry he chose the twelve Apostles and gave them authority to preach, heal and act in his name (Mt. 10:1–4; Mk. 3:13–19; Lk. 6:13–16). Among them Peter received a distinctive commission. Christ tells him that he is Peter, that upon this rock he will build his Church, and gives him the "keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 16:18–19). After the Resurrection, Christ again commissions Peter: "Feed my lambs"; "Tend my sheep"; "Feed my sheep" (Jn. 21:15–17).

The analogy should not be pressed into a claim that the Apostles were literally executors under Roman succession law. The point is structural. Christ establishes an office of stewardship. He entrusts persons with authority over something belonging ultimately to him and charges them to administer it according to his purposes.

That is recognizably fiduciary language.

III. Successor Trustees

A carefully drafted will also anticipates succession in office. The death or incapacity of one trustee cannot be permitted to frustrate the administration of the estate.

Christ's commission similarly extends beyond the natural lives of the original Apostles. In the Great Commission he orders them to make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching them, followed by the remarkable promise: "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:19–20).

The mission plainly exceeds the lifespan of the men standing before him.

Acts supplies an immediate illustration. Following the death of Judas, the Apostles determine that another must take his place. Matthias is chosen and "enrolled with the eleven apostles" (Acts 1:23–26). An office vacated by death is filled so that the mission continues.

The Church thus appears not simply as a collection of people remembering a deceased teacher, but as an enduring institution entrusted with the administration of something received.

IV. Vesting the Estate

A will commonly contains a vesting clause by which the testator places property in the hands of trustees and gives them authority to administer it.

Here the language of Matthew 16 becomes especially suggestive. Christ gives Peter the keys of the Kingdom and speaks of authority to bind and loose. Later, that authority is extended to the apostolic community (Mt. 18:18).

Christ does not alienate his ultimate kingship. Rather, he entrusts authority to human stewards.

This distinction is important. A trustee does not become beneficial owner merely because property is vested in the trustee. The trustee holds authority for a purpose. Likewise, the Church's authority, understood through this analogy, is not ownership in the ordinary sense. It is stewardship. What has been entrusted must be administered according to the intention of the one from whom the authority comes.

The legal analogy therefore illuminates something important about ecclesial authority: authority is inseparable from accountability.

V. Powers of Administration

Estate trustees require powers. They must preserve property, make decisions, resolve difficulties and determine how best to carry the testator's instructions into effect.

Christ likewise gives his Apostles real authority. Matthew 18:18 again uses the language of binding and loosing. The Great Commission commands them not simply to preserve his words but to teach the nations to observe what he commanded.

The analogy again has limits, but it clarifies the relationship between discretion and fidelity. A trustee may possess broad administrative discretion, but that discretion exists within the purposes of the trust. The trustee cannot transform stewardship into ownership.

So too with Christian authority. The administrator is not the author. The deposit received from Christ may require application across changing circumstances, but its custodian cannot treat it as his own creation.

VI. Christ's Personal Effects

A will frequently deals separately with personal effects: clothing, jewellery, household contents and objects possessing personal rather than merely financial significance.

What became of Christ's personal effects?

John gives an unforgettable answer. At the Crucifixion, the soldiers divide Christ's garments among themselves. His tunic, because it is seamless, is not torn; instead they cast lots for it (Jn.

19:23–24). Interestingly, drawing lots to distribute items of personalty is commonly done in estate administration in Ontario.

Nevertheless, the contrast is almost shocking. The material estate of Jesus is effectively exhausted at the foot of the Cross. His few possessions pass not to his disciples but to the soldiers carrying out his execution.

Christ dies materially dispossessed.

And yet it is precisely at that moment that the greater inheritance is being transmitted.

VII. The Residue

The residuary clause is among the most important provisions of a will. After particular gifts, debts and expenses have been dealt with, the residue disposes of everything remaining.

What, then, is the residue of Christ's estate?

At the Last Supper, Christ takes the cup and says that it is his blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Mt. 26:26–28). The startling implication of the Christian claim is that Christ's ultimate gift is not merely something that he owns.

It is himself.

His body is given. His blood is poured out. His life is offered. The inheritance therefore reaches beyond property, teaching or institutional authority. The Testator places himself into the testament.

Hebrews brings inheritance and death together explicitly: Christ is mediator of a new covenant so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance (Heb. 9:15). The death that would ordinarily deprive a person of everything becomes, in Christianity, the means by which everything is given.

VIII. Provision for His Mother

A responsible estate plan also considers dependants.

From the Cross, Jesus sees his mother and the disciple whom he loved. He tells Mary, "Woman, here is your son," and tells the disciple, "Here is your mother." John then records that the disciple took her into his own home (Jn. 19:25–27).

Whatever additional theological meaning Christians discern in this scene, its immediate human character should not be missed. In the midst of his own death, Christ makes provision for his mother. He establishes a new relationship of responsibility so that she will be cared for after he is gone.

It may be the most recognizably testamentary act in the Passion narrative.

IX. Funeral Arrangements

Finally comes the disposition of the body.

Unlike a modern testator, Jesus leaves no written funeral instructions recorded in the Gospels. Providence instead supplies others to perform the work. Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for the body of Jesus. Nicodemus brings myrrh and aloes. Together they prepare the body according to Jewish burial customs and place it in a nearby tomb (Jn. 19:38–42).

The earthly administration appears complete.

The possessions have been divided. His mother has been provided for. His followers have received their commission. His body has been buried.

But Christianity begins precisely where the analogy with an ordinary estate must end.

X. An Estate Whose Testator Lives

Every ordinary will rests upon an irreversible fact: the testator is dead. The executor administers the estate because its former owner can no longer do so.

Christ's testament breaks the analogy.

The Testator dies - and then rises.

Consequently, the Apostles are not simply administering the wishes of an absent dead man. The risen Christ remains Lord of the inheritance he has entrusted to them. His final promise in Matthew is therefore decisive: "I am with you always."

This transforms the entire testamentary image. Christ gives without ceasing to possess. He delegates without abdicating. He establishes successors without becoming merely a predecessor. His Kingdom is inherited without being diminished by distribution.

And the beneficiaries themselves are transformed. St. Paul tells Christians that they are "heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17). The inheritance is not divided into smaller portions as the number of beneficiaries increases. Each is invited into the fullness of divine life.

Perhaps this explains why inheritance is such a persistent biblical image. A will is an act performed in contemplation of death, but it is fundamentally directed toward life. It asks what shall endure when the testator is gone: what will be preserved, whom will he provide for, whom will he trust, and what will he give to those who follow him?

At the Last Supper and on Calvary, Christ answers all of these questions.

He appoints stewards. He gives them authority. He provides for his mother. His garments are disposed of. His body is buried. His mission is entrusted to successors. His Kingdom becomes an inheritance.

But at the centre of the testament lies a gift no human will could contain.

The Testator leaves the beneficiaries himself.

And because the Testator rises from the dead, his last will and testament is not ultimately the disposition of the property of a dead man. It is the continuing administration of an inheritance under the authority of a living King.