

## OUTSOURCING GOVERNMENT

### A Devotional Meditation on D'varim (Words)

Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22; Isaiah 1:1-27; 1 Samuel 12:1-25; Ezekiel 20:27-38;  
Acts 18:12-17; 1 Corinthians 6:1-7

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Just ten minutes from my house is a foreign country.

Well, maybe not a foreign country, but the Catawba Indian Reservation is the seat of a different nation. The Catawba have lived in what is now South Carolina for many centuries. Today the nation retains only 700 acres of what was once a vast domain, yet the Catawba survive as a distinct people among the nations of North America.<sup>1</sup> About 3,300 enrolled members of the tribe share a heritage that extends beyond the written records of history. They have persevered through trials that nearly extinguished them as a people, but they are still here, and they are still able to govern themselves.



Entrance to [Catawba Indian Reservation](#), Rock Hill, South Carolina. Photo: *The Barking Fox*, July 9, 2023.

That may be a strange thought to people who don't live near a reservation. First Nations reservations are self-governing entities. Sometimes their laws and customs are quite different from what the majority American cultures have received from our European ancestors. Outsiders who enter the Catawba Reservation enter tribal jurisdiction and are subject to tribal laws. The opposite is also true: Catawbas who leave the reservation are subject to the laws of South Carolina and the United States. That doesn't automatically mean trouble, but if someone commits a crime, then there's a question of which law enforcement agency has jurisdiction, and what court should hear the case should it go to trial. Until recently, all such matters were handled by state and county law enforcement and courts, but the Catawba Nation is establishing its own police force and tribal courts. Eventually, they will be self-governing in these matters. Until then, the awkward arrangement with South Carolina only partly meets the nation's needs.

We shouldn't be surprised that native societies seek to govern themselves. They did quite well at self-government before Europeans arrived in North America, even though their forms of government and societal organization differed greatly from European norms. Having survived all these centuries, is there any reason why these distinct peoples should not judge matters within their societies according to their own ways? Not only does that reduce the burden on the larger society to do for them what they can do for themselves, but it also enables the tribes to employ more effective and culturally appropriate measures familiar to tribal members.

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<sup>1</sup> The Catawba Indian Nation share their story at the nation's official website: <https://www.catawba.com>.

Self-government is an American tradition, especially for nations and communities within the nation. There are many examples of self-government among immigrant communities and religious sects, as well as native tribes. Self-government was the goal of early settlers, such as the Puritans and Quakers. Those Christian communities purposefully sought to live according to biblical standards as they understood them, and when circumstances in England prevented them from doing so, they emigrated to the New World to establish governments for themselves.

Self-government has biblical precedent, of course. Henry David Thoreau may have had biblical precedent in mind when he wrote, “That government is best which governs least.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, the actions of government should be decentralized to the lowest effective level to enable people to govern themselves, and to avoid the tyranny of a government grown too large and powerful to limit itself. That’s one interpretation we can coax out of Moses’ instructions to Israel:

“May *ADONAI*, God of your fathers, increase you a thousand times as many as you are, and may He bless you just as He has promised you! How can I bear your load and burden and bickering by myself? Choose for yourselves wise and discerning men, well known to your tribes, and I will appoint them as your heads.”

You answered me and said: “The thing you have said to do is good.” So I took the heads of your tribes, men who were wise and well known, and appointed them as heads over you—leaders of thousands, leaders of hundreds, leaders of fifties, leaders of tens, and officials for your tribes.

I commanded your judges at that time saying: “Hear cases between your brothers, and judge fairly between a man and his brother or the outsider with him. You must not show partiality in judgment—you must hear the small and the great alike. Fear no man, for the judgment is God’s. The case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me and I will hear it.”

Deuteronomy 1:11-17 TLV

That’s how Israel established a government. For the next four hundred years, government in Israel resided in clans and tribes, not in the national government created when the people demanded a king. When that happened, God was clear that the people had rejected Him as King in the interest of outsourcing government to a human entity who would do for them what they chose not to do for themselves. Instead of learning God’s ways of righteousness, justice, and mercy, and then applying those ways to their own lives, and then to their families and communities, they decided to allow someone else do that hard work for them. Of course, in time, that meant the monarchy they demanded became a new version of the idolatrous Egyptian tyranny that had oppressed their ancestors. That’s when God decided enough was enough, and sent the nation into exile to serve the gods of wood and stone of their foreign oppressors.

Apparently, this cycle continued into New Testament times. Even as the Almighty wanted His ancient Hebrew children to govern themselves by His laws, He seems to have

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<sup>2</sup> “That government is best which governs least,” attributed to Henry David Thoreau. Suzy Platt, ed., *Respectfully Quoted: A Dictionary of Quotations Requested from the Congressional Research Service* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1989), Bartleby.com, 2003, <https://www.bartleby.com/lit-hub/respectfully-quoted/henry-david-thoreau-181762-6/>.

expected that of Israel's Jewish remnant in Yeshua's day, and of those from the nations who were adopted into Israel by pledging allegiance to Israel's Messiah. It seems to be the expectation of the Roman imperial government as well, at least for the Jews. When Jewish leaders in Corinth brought charges against Paul, the Roman governor refused them, saying,

If it were a matter of wrongdoing or a vicious crime, there would be a reason to put up with you, O Jews. But since it is issues about words, names, and your own law, see to it yourselves. I do not wish to be a judge of these.

Acts 18:14-15 TLV

Years later, in a letter to Yeshua's followers in Corinth, Paul echoed the Roman governor's chastening remarks:

Does any one of you, when he has a matter against his neighbor, dare to go to court before the unrighteous and not before the *kedoshim* [saints]? Don't you know that the *kedoshim* will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to judge trivial matters? Don't you know that we will judge angels? How much more the matters of this life! So if you have courts for matters of this life, why do you appoint as judges those who have no standing in the community?

1 Corinthians 6:1-4 TLV

It seems that Paul had the same expectations as Moses: that God's people should learn to govern themselves so that they would be able to function properly in the age to come. We're going to be spending an eternity in Messiah's Kingdom, so maybe we should start learning now how to be good citizens who abide by His laws. The alternative is to continue outsourcing our government to hirelings and tyrants. Whatever we decide, we'll still be foreigners and exiles in this fallen world, but the more we take care of our own, the less trouble we'll be, and the less trouble we'll receive.