



The Covenant

Ruhi Book

8.1.1

The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh

Unit 1

The Center of the Covenant and His Will and Testament

**PRE-PUBLICATION EDITION
MATERIAL IN DEVELOPMENT**

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The Ruhi Institute is an educational institution functioning under the aegis of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Colombia. Its purpose is to develop human resources dedicated to the spiritual, social and cultural progress of the Colombian people. Over the decades its materials have increasingly been used by national Bahá'í communities in all parts of the world.

The approach to curriculum development followed by the Ruhi Institute is not the traditional one of design, field-testing and evaluation, carried out in a linear fashion. The first step in writing any set of materials is taken, rather, when an experience is created at the grassroots in performing some act of service in response to the exigencies of the development of a community. Materials emerge out of this experience and become an expression of it. They are, on the one hand, a record of the learning that occurs in applying the teachings of the Faith in a particular area of service and, on the other, an instrument for the systematization of that learning. The approach has been described in the following terms in the small volume *Learning About Growth*:

Once an educational need is identified, a small group of people, working at the grassroots, consult among themselves, develop a set of ideas for educational activities, and put them into practice. The results of this practice are reviewed, evaluated and consulted upon; in light of this consultation, a modified set of educational activities is put into practice, and subjected to reflection that leads to further modification and revision. At no time in this process of curriculum development does action await the final preparation and evaluation of educational materials. At every stage, educational activities proceed with the best materials at hand, in the conviction that it is only through practice and reflection, both pursued in light of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, that more appropriate curricula can gradually evolve. Yet, this is not a setting in which a few individuals are developing materials for their own use, and it does become necessary at some point to finalize the structure and content of each unit so that it may be used with confidence by others. The decision to release a final version of the materials for a given course is made simply when it is noticed that modifications are becoming negligible. It is important to note that the various aspects of this process of consultation, action and reflection are carried out parallel with one another, and not performed in a linear sequence which would be inherently artificial.

In practice the above approach takes somewhat different forms, depending on the nature of the material in development. Generally, however, some three stages can be identified in the development process before the final version of the material is published:

1. *Initial Outline*

At this stage a course is little more than a few basic concepts and a set of passages from the Bahá'í writings that, taken together, are believed to be useful in helping individuals acquire the capabilities they need to participate effectively in a specific act of service. For some time, this initial outline of ideas is used by small groups of individuals in the field.

2. *Rough Draft*

As action progresses, the material is refined and begins to reflect new experience gained, incorporating ideas that arise out of it. Not infrequently, certain concepts are amended, new passages from the Bahá'í writings added, or a series of simple exercises introduced to facilitate comprehension of a topic or to help develop an important skill or attitude. Through this ongoing process of action and reflection, the disparate elements are gradually further consolidated into a recognizable course organized around a sequence of ideas that has emerged naturally in the field of service. This is generally regarded as a rough draft.

3. *Pre-Publication Edition*

In time, an initial version of the course is prepared and made more widely available as a pre-publication edition. Through continued use, it becomes apparent when a section needs to be moved or an exercise or two revised. Several successive versions may appear. Gradually, however, fewer and fewer modifications are required to achieve the intended purpose of the course, and the material, at this stage, goes for publication.

We are happy to make available to selected organizations and institutions one of the units that has reached the pre-publication stage. It is the first of three units of a book currently in development entitled *The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*. You are encouraged to send us any comments you have on the basis of your experience in using the course content.

Ruhi Institute

SECTION 1

In this book we will study the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, to which 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Center of that Covenant, refers as the “Conclusive Testimony,” the “Universal Balance,” the “Magnet of God’s Grace,” the “Upraised Standard,” the “Irrefutable Testament,” “the almighty Covenant, the like of which the sacred Dispensations of the past have never witnessed” and “one of the distinctive features of this most mighty cycle.” Our study will be divided into three parts. In this unit we will focus on the period following the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh and try to gain insight into the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, His chosen Successor and the Interpreter of His teachings. In doing so, we will review the achievements of His ministry and explore extensive passages from His Will and Testament. The second unit of the book will guide us through the ministry of Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Faith, providing us with an opportunity to study several themes vital to the progress of the Cause, most notably the rise of the Administrative Order. The third unit will explore some of the major developments that have occurred in the Faith under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice and briefly examine the nature of the Bahá'í community as it is today.

We should acknowledge at the outset that our treatment of this vast subject will inevitably be inadequate. All we hope to do here is to deepen our appreciation of the influence that the power of the Covenant exerts on our individual and collective lives. We will approach this task by exploring, as much as possible over these three units, the meaning and implications of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that “the pivot of the oneness of mankind is nothing else but the power of the Covenant.” What we should all recognize, however, is that a truly profound appreciation for this power only grows gradually through a lifetime of study and service.

SECTION 2

Let us begin by considering the concept of the oneness of humankind as expressed in the Bahá'í writings. Acceptance of the Bahá'í teachings implies a firm belief in humanity's oneness. “The Tabernacle of Unity,” Bahá'u'lláh proclaims, “has been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers.... Of one tree are all ye the fruit and of one bough the leaves.... The world is but one country and mankind its citizens.... Let not a man glory in that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind.”¹ We know that Bahá'u'lláh appeared to unify humanity in one universal Cause, in one common Faith, and our very identity as individuals and as a community is shaped at the most fundamental level by this conviction.

In the following quotation, the Guardian explains some of the implications of belief in the oneness of humankind. He makes clear that the principle of oneness, as enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh, involves much more than brotherly love and tolerance. It calls for a change in the very structures of society. It represents the final stage of a long evolutionary process in the collective life of humanity, a stage that will be marked by the emergence of a world civilization. You are encouraged to read the quotation several times with the members of your study group.

“Let there be no mistake. The principle of the Oneness of Mankind—the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve—is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope. Its appeal is not to be merely identified with a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and good will

among men, nor does it aim solely at the fostering of harmonious cooperation among individual peoples and nations. Its implications are deeper, its claims greater than any which the Prophets of old were allowed to advance. Its message is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family. It does not constitute merely the enunciation of an ideal, but stands inseparably associated with an institution adequate to embody its truth, demonstrate its validity, and perpetuate its influence. It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced. It constitutes a challenge, at once bold and universal, to outworn shibboleths of national creeds—creeds that have had their day and which must, in the ordinary course of events as shaped and controlled by Providence, give way to a new gospel, fundamentally different from, and infinitely superior to, what the world has already conceived. It calls for no less than the reconstruction and the demilitarization of the whole civilized world—a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its political machinery, its spiritual aspiration, its trade and finance, its script and language, and yet infinite in the diversity of the national characteristics of its federated units.

“It represents the consummation of human evolution—an evolution that has had its earliest beginnings in the birth of family life, its subsequent development in the achievement of tribal solidarity, leading in turn to the constitution of the city-state, and expanding later into the institution of independent and sovereign nations.

“The principle of the Oneness of Mankind, as proclaimed by Bahá’u’lláh, carries with it no more and no less than a solemn assertion that attainment to this final stage in this stupendous evolution is not only necessary but inevitable, that its realization is fast approaching, and that nothing short of a power that is born of God can succeed in establishing it.

“So marvelous a conception finds its earliest manifestations in the efforts consciously exerted and the modest beginnings already achieved by the declared adherents of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh who, conscious of the sublimity of their calling and initiated into the ennobling principles of His Administration, are forging ahead to establish His Kingdom on this earth. It has its indirect manifestations in the gradual diffusion of the spirit of world solidarity which is spontaneously arising out of the welter of a disorganized society.”²

The explanation offered by the Guardian of the principle of the oneness of humankind is profound. Clearly the operation of this principle in human affairs will have far-reaching effects. To reflect on some of its implications, complete each of the sentences below on the basis of the above quotation.

1. The principle of the oneness of humankind is no mere outburst _____

2. Its appeal is not to be merely identified with _____

3. It does not aim solely at _____

4. Its claims are greater than _____
5. Its message is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns _____

6. It does not constitute merely the enunciation of an ideal, but stands _____

7. It implies an organic change in _____

8. It constitutes a challenge, at once bold and universal, to _____

9. It calls for no less than _____

10. It carries with it no more or less than a solemn assertion that _____

In the last paragraph of the passage, the Guardian speaks of the early manifestations of Bahá'u'lláh's vision for humanity, first in the efforts of the Bahá'í community as it forges ahead to establish His Kingdom on earth and second, indirectly, in the gradual diffusion of the spirit of world solidarity. Today the effect of this spirit in the world is apparent in a number of developments, such as the rejection of deeply ingrained racial prejudices and heightened environmental awareness. Can you mention a few others?

Now think of the work of the Bahá'í community. What are some of the specific endeavors it is pursuing in fulfillment of its God-given mission?

SECTION 3

While the mysterious forces that emanate from the mightiest Revelation ever vouchsafed unto humankind steadily transform its life, it is the efforts of the community of the Greatest Name that create a pattern according to which future society will be shaped. It is the sacred duty of those who have embraced the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh and have set their gaze upon Him to strive daily to establish this pattern of a new World Order. A community entrusted with such a task must possess qualities and powers that distinguish it from every other community and every organized movement on the planet. Specifically, the unity that binds the members of this community and the institutions they build must necessarily be stronger than anything the human race has ever witnessed. The discipline that is to maintain such unity must be unshakable.

Let us explore this point further. We live in a world where conflict is considered an inevitable characteristic of life. Even when not overt, the spirit of conflict is present in subtle forms as individuals and groups try to advance themselves over others. It is widely accepted that, more often than not, interests will clash. Thus, individuals and groups—indeed, entire societies—work against one another in pursuit of their own aims. Contest, competition, and confrontation have become norms embedded in social, political, and economic systems. Accordingly, power is voraciously sought as a means to protect, in whatever way possible, one's own interests. This is not to say that there are not many who take advantage of numerous opportunities for earnest collaboration and cooperation to achieve noble goals. Still, an ever-present threat of conflict influences habits of thought and patterns of behavior and defines to some extent the structures and functioning of social institutions.

In the Bahá'í community, of course, we do not consider the ways of conflict the natural expression of human existence. We follow the ways of unity, in which diversity is viewed as a source of strength not as a cause of contention. The power of unity is directed towards the common purpose of building the world civilization envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh. There are certain attitudes and forms of behavior, then, which, though prevalent in society and even regarded as praiseworthy, are to be avoided.

Below are several adjectives, set off in pairs, that refer to different kinds of behavior. The first of each pair belongs, we could say, to a culture rooted in conflict, while the second characterizes the pattern which the small nucleus made up of the members of the Bahá'í community is asked to promote. Discuss each pair in your group and explain the difference between the two, giving examples, if possible. You should note that the exercise does not ask for examples of specific individuals, which would lead us down a path of backbiting, but for examples of behavior.

Before you begin, a further word of caution is warranted. In trying to understand the forces that affect our lives, we are often obliged to examine negative aspects of society. We should take care in doing so, however, to avoid going to extremes and becoming overly critical of the world around us. With this in mind, we have refrained from employing extreme words in the exercise, for instance, *blunt* and not *insolent*, *overly assertive* and not *aggressive*, *calculating* and not *deceitful*. In any case, we need to remember that human beings are noble by nature; many simply allow themselves to fall into negative patterns of behavior unconsciously. This is another reason that kinds of behavior, and not people, are the subject of this exercise.

- a. frank and adversarial b. frank and loving

- a. critical and blunt b. analytical and respectful

- a. confident and brash b. confident and modest

- a. knowledgeable and manipulative b. knowledgeable and generous

- a. friendly and calculating b. friendly and genuine

- a. defensive and suspicious b. vigilant and open

- a. powerful and self-interested b. empowered and self-sacrificing

- a. well-trained and cunning b. well-trained and nurturing

- a. competent and overly assertive b. competent and humble

SECTION 4

Having considered briefly the responsibility entrusted to the Bahá'í community to establish the pattern of a new World Order and its challenge to act as a force of unity in a world accustomed to contention, let us now read and reflect on the following passage written by the Guardian regarding the nature of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant:

“A dynamic process, divinely propelled, possessed of undreamt-of potentialities, world-embracing in scope, world-transforming in its ultimate consequences, had been set in motion on that memorable night when the Báb communicated the purpose of His mission to Mullá Ḥusayn in an obscure corner of Shíráz. It acquired a tremendous momentum with the first intimations of Bahá'u'lláh's dawning Revelation amidst the darkness of the Síyáh-Chál of Ṭíhrán. It was further accelerated by the Declaration of His mission on the eve of His banishment from Baghdád. It moved to a climax with the proclamation of that same mission during the tempestuous years of His exile in Adrianople. Its full significance was disclosed when the Author of that Mission issued His historic summonses, appeals and warnings to the kings of the earth and the world's ecclesiastical leaders. It was finally consummated by the laws and ordinances which He formulated, by the principles which He enunciated and by the institutions which He ordained during the concluding years of His ministry in the prison-city of 'Akká.

“To direct and canalize these forces let loose by this Heaven-sent process, and to insure their harmonious and continuous operation after His ascension, an instrument divinely ordained, invested with indisputable authority, organically linked with the Author of the Revelation Himself, was clearly indispensable. That instrument Bahá’u’lláh had expressly provided through the institution of the Covenant, an institution which He had firmly established prior to His ascension. This same Covenant He had anticipated in His Kitáb-i-Aqdas, had alluded to it as He bade His last farewell to the members of His family, who had been summoned to His bed-side, in the days immediately preceding His ascension, and had incorporated it in a special document which He designated as ‘the Book of My Covenant,’ and which He entrusted, during His last illness, to His eldest son ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.”³

In the first paragraph, in one sweeping statement, the Guardian provides an historical account of the unfoldment of the Faith from its birth in Shíráz to the ascension of its Founder in Bahjí. You, of course, are well familiar with the actual events to which the Guardian alludes in each sentence. The following questions are intended to bring their significance into sharper focus. You can turn to Book 4 of this series, if necessary, for assistance in answering most of the questions; the subjects addressed in the final three are discussed in Chapter 12 of *God Passes By*:

1. What according to the passage above was set in motion when the Báb declared His mission to Mullá Ḥusayn? _____

2. What were the circumstances surrounding the Báb’s declaration of His mission to Mullá Ḥusayn on the eve of 23 May 1844? _____

3. What did the dynamic process set in motion by the Báb’s declaration acquire with the first intimations of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation in the Sýyáh-Chál? _____

4. How does Bahá’u’lláh Himself describe the momentous event that took place while imprisoned in the Sýyáh-Chál? _____

5. What were the circumstances surrounding the declaration of Bahá’u’lláh’s Mission in the Riḍván Garden? _____

6. What effect did His declaration have on the dynamic, divinely propelled process under way? _____

7. When did this process move to a climax? _____

8. What internal crisis occurred in the Faith during Bahá'u'lláh's banishment in Adrianople that made the period particularly tempestuous? _____

9. When was the full significance of the dynamic process under way disclosed? _____

10. Who were a few of the recipients of the historic summonses, appeals, and warnings of Bahá'u'lláh? _____

11. How was the process set in motion on the eve of 23 May 1844 finally consummated? _____

12. What are some of the mighty laws and ordinances that were formulated by Bahá'u'lláh during the period of His banishment to 'Akká? _____

13. What were some of the principles He enunciated? _____

14. What were some of the institutions He ordained? _____

In the second paragraph of the passage quoted above, the Guardian introduces the concept of the Covenant and explains its purpose and significance. The questions below will assist you in thinking through the sequence of ideas he presents:

1. What was needed to direct and canalize the forces let loose by Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and to insure the harmonious and continuous operation of these forces after His ascension? _____

2. With what would this divinely ordained instrument need to be invested? _____

3. With what would this divinely ordained instrument need to be organically linked? _____

4. Through what institution did Bahá'u'lláh expressly provide this divinely ordained instrument? _____

5. In what book was the institution of the Covenant already anticipated by Bahá'u'lláh? _____

6. When did Bahá'u'lláh make an allusion to the institution of the Covenant to the members of His family? _____

7. In what special document did Bahá'u'lláh incorporate the institution of the Covenant? _____

8. To Whom did Bahá'u'lláh entrust the document He designated “the Book of My Covenant”? _____

SECTION 5

We have seen that an instrument was needed to ensure the steady operation of the forces let loose by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh after His ascension, and we know from the passage we have just read that He provided that instrument through the institution of the Covenant—an institution which He incorporated in a document He designated the Kitáb-i-‘Ahdí. The word “‘ahdí” in Persian means “my covenant”, and we refer to the document simply as the Kitáb-i-‘Ahd, the “Book of the Covenant”. This is how the Guardian describes the document in *God Passes By*:

“Written entirely in His own hand; unsealed, on the ninth day after His ascension in the presence of nine witnesses chosen from amongst His companions and members of His Family; read subsequently, on the afternoon of that same day, before a large company assembled in His Most Holy Tomb, including His sons, some of the Báb's kinsmen, pilgrims and resident believers, this unique and epoch-making Document, designated by Bahá'u'lláh as His ‘Most Great Tablet,’ and alluded to by Him as the ‘Crimson Book’ in His ‘Epistle to the Son of the Wolf,’ can find no parallel in the

Scriptures of any previous Dispensation, not excluding that of the Báb Himself. For nowhere in the books pertaining to any of the world’s religious systems, not even among the writings of the Author of the Bábí Revelation, do we find any single document establishing a Covenant endowed with an authority comparable to the Covenant which Bahá’u’lláh had Himself instituted.”⁴

Complete the sentences below on the basis of the above paragraph.

1. The Kitáb-i-‘Ahd was written _____
2. The Kitáb-i-‘Ahd was unsealed on _____
3. The Kitáb-i-‘Ahd was unsealed in the presence of _____
4. On the ninth day after Bahá’u’lláh’s ascension, the Kitáb-i-‘Ahd was read before _____

5. The Kitáb-i-‘Ahd was designated by Bahá’u’lláh as _____
6. In His “Epistle to the Son of the Wolf”, the Kitáb-i-‘Ahd was alluded to by Bahá’u’lláh as _____
7. The Kitáb-i-‘Ahd can find no parallel in _____
8. Nowhere in the books of the world religious systems do we find any single document ____

SECTION 6

Below is the full text of the Kitáb-i-‘Ahd. Even if you are well familiar with the book, you are asked to undertake a careful study of it again, reading it more than once and identifying the precious counsels it contains. In the next and subsequent sections of the unit, we will explore some of the implications of this “unique and epoch-making” document.

If you are relatively new to the Faith and have not yet had an opportunity to study a great deal of Bahá’í literature, you may encounter concepts and terms in the text that are unfamiliar to you. As we proceed in our study, many of these ideas will be made clear. You may, however, find a brief discussion of some of the terms helpful here. “Aghsán”, which is the plural form of the word “ghuṣn”, means branches in Arabic. There are other words in Arabic and Persian that also mean branches. However, this specific term is used by Bahá’u’lláh to refer to His male descendants. The title the “Most Mighty Branch”, in Arabic “Ghuṣn-i-A‘zam”, refers to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and given the way the title was used at the time, the meaning intended was clearly

understood by the entire community of Bahá'u'lláh's followers. It was equally clear to all that the title the "Greater Branch", or "Ghuṣn-i-Akbar", was used to designate Mírzá Muḥammad-'Alí, the half-brother of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. As for the term "afnán", it is employed throughout the Writings to refer to the relatives of the Báb, Who, as you know, did not leave any direct descendants.

“Although the Realm of Glory hath none of the vanities of the world, yet within the treasury of trust and resignation We have bequeathed to Our heirs an excellent and priceless heritage. Earthly treasures We have not bequeathed, nor have We added such cares as they entail. By God! In earthly riches fear is hidden and peril is concealed. Consider ye and call to mind that which the All-Merciful hath revealed in the Qur’án: ‘Woe betide every slanderer and defamer, him that layeth up riches and counteth them.’ Fleeting are the riches of the world; all that perisheth and changeth is not, and hath never been, worthy of attention, except to a recognized measure.

“The aim of this Wronged One in sustaining woes and tribulations, in revealing the Holy Verses and in demonstrating proofs hath been naught but to quench the flame of hate and enmity, that the horizon of the hearts of men may be illumined with the light of concord and attain real peace and tranquility. From the dawning-place of the divine Tablet the day-star of this utterance shineth resplendent, and it behoveth everyone to fix his gaze upon it: We exhort you, O peoples of the world, to observe that which will elevate your station. Hold fast to the fear of God and firmly adhere to what is right. Verily I say, the tongue is for mentioning what is good, defile it not with unseemly talk. God hath forgiven what is past. Henceforward everyone should utter that which is meet and seemly, and should refrain from slander, abuse and whatever causeth sadness in men. Lofty is the station of man! Not long ago this exalted Word streamed forth from the treasury of Our Pen of Glory: Great and blessed is this Day—the Day in which all that lay latent in man hath been and will be made manifest. Lofty is the station of man, were he to hold fast to righteousness and truth and to remain firm and steadfast in the Cause. In the eyes of the All-Merciful a true man appeareth even as a firmament; its sun and moon are his sight and hearing, and his shining and resplendent character its stars. His is the loftiest station, and his influence educateth the world of being.

“Every receptive soul who hath in this Day inhaled the fragrance of His garment and hath, with a pure heart, set his face towards the all-glorious Horizon is reckoned among the people of Bahá in the Crimson Book. Grasp ye, in My Name, the chalice of My loving-kindness, drink then your fill in My glorious and wondrous remembrance.

“O ye that dwell on earth! The religion of God is for love and unity; make it not the cause of enmity or dissension. In the eyes of men of insight and the beholders of the Most Sublime Vision, whatsoever are the effective means for safeguarding and promoting the happiness and welfare of the children of men have already been revealed by the Pen of Glory. But the foolish ones of the earth, being nurtured in evil passions and desires, have remained heedless of the consummate wisdom of Him Who is, in truth, the All-Wise, while their words and deeds are prompted by idle fancies and vain imaginings.

“O ye the loved ones and the trustees of God! Kings are the manifestations of the power, and the daysprings of the might and riches, of God. Pray ye on their behalf. He hath invested them with the rulership of the earth and hath singled out the hearts of men as His Own domain.

“Conflict and contention are categorically forbidden in His Book. This is a decree of God in this Most Great Revelation. It is divinely preserved from annulment and is invested by Him with the splendor of His confirmation. Verily He is the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.

“It is incumbent upon everyone to aid those daysprings of authority and sources of command who are adorned with the ornament of equity and justice. Blessed are the rulers and the learned among the people of Bahá. They are My trustees among My servants and the manifestations of My commandments amidst My people. Upon them rest My glory, My blessings and My grace which have pervaded the world of being. In this connection the utterances revealed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas are such that from the horizon of their words the light of divine grace shineth luminous and resplendent.

“O ye My Branches! A mighty force, a consummate power lieth concealed in the world of being. Fix your gaze upon it and upon its unifying influence, and not upon the differences which appear from it.

“The Will of the divine Testator is this: It is incumbent upon the Aghṣán, the Afnán and My Kindred to turn, one and all, their faces towards the Most Mighty Branch. Consider that which We have revealed in Our Most Holy Book: ‘When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation is ended, turn your faces toward Him Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root.’ The object of this sacred verse is none other except the Most Mighty Branch [‘Abdu’l-Bahá]. Thus have We graciously revealed unto you Our potent Will, and I am verily the Gracious, the All-Powerful. Verily God hath ordained the station of the Greater Branch [Muḥammad-‘Alí] to be beneath that of the Most Great Branch [‘Abdu’l-Bahá]. He is in truth the Ordainer, the All-Wise. We have chosen ‘the Greater’ after ‘the Most Great’, as decreed by Him Who is the All-Knowing, the All-Informed.

“It is enjoined upon everyone to manifest love towards the Aghṣán, but God hath not granted them any right to the property of others.

“O ye My Aghṣán, My Afnán and My Kindred! We exhort you to fear God, to perform praiseworthy deeds and to do that which is meet and seemly and serveth to exalt your station. Verily I say, fear of God is the greatest commander that can render the Cause of God victorious, and the hosts which best befit this commander have ever been and are an upright character and pure and goodly deeds.

“Say: O servants! Let not the means of order be made the cause of confusion and the instrument of union an occasion for discord. We fain would hope that the people of Bahá may be guided by the blessed words: ‘Say: all things are of God.’ This exalted utterance is like unto water for quenching the fire of hate and enmity which

smouldereth within the hearts and breasts of men. By this single utterance contending peoples and kindreds will attain the light of true unity. Verily He speaketh the truth and leadeth the way. He is the All-Powerful, the Exalted, the Gracious.

“It is incumbent upon everyone to show courtesy to, and have regard for the Aghṣán, that thereby the Cause of God may be glorified and His Word exalted. This injunction hath time and again been mentioned and recorded in the Holy Writ. Well is it with him who is enabled to achieve that which the Ordainer, the Ancient of Days hath prescribed for him. Ye are bidden moreover to respect the members of the Holy Household, the Afnán and the kindred. We further admonish you to serve all nations and to strive for the betterment of the world.

“That which is conducive to the regeneration of the world and the salvation of the peoples and kindreds of the earth hath been sent down from the heaven of the utterance of Him Who is the Desire of the world. Give ye a hearing ear to the counsels of the Pen of Glory. Better is this for you than all that is on the earth. Unto this beareth witness My glorious and wondrous Book.”⁵

SECTION 7

You will gain invaluable insight into the nature of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant if you read the paragraph below from *God Passes By* about the content of the Kitáb-i-'Ahd and then go back to the full text in Section 5, relating the ideas mentioned by the Guardian to the relevant passages.

“In this weighty and incomparable Document its Author discloses the character of that ‘excellent and priceless heritage’ bequeathed by Him to His ‘heirs’; proclaims afresh the fundamental purpose of His Revelation; enjoins the ‘peoples of the world’ to hold fast to that which will ‘elevate’ their ‘station’; announces to them that ‘God hath forgiven what is past’; stresses the sublimity of man’s station; discloses the primary aim of the Faith of God; directs the faithful to pray for the welfare of the kings of the earth, ‘the manifestations of the power, and the daysprings of the might and riches, of God’; invests them with the rulership of the earth; singles out as His special domain the hearts of men; forbids categorically strife and contention; commands His followers to aid those rulers who are ‘adorned with the ornament of equity and justice’; and directs, in particular, the Aghṣán (His sons) to ponder the ‘mighty force and the consummate power that lieth concealed in the world of being.’ He bids them, moreover, together with the Afnán (the Báb’s kindred) and His own relatives, to ‘turn, one and all, unto the Most Great Branch (‘Abdu’l-Bahá)’; identifies Him with ‘the One Whom God hath purposed,’ ‘Who hath branched from this pre-existent Root,’ referred to in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas; ordains the station of the ‘Greater Branch’ (Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí) to be beneath that of the ‘Most Great Branch’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá); exhorts the believers to treat the Aghṣán with consideration and affection; counsels them to respect His family and relatives, as well as the kindred of the Báb; denies His sons ‘any right to the property of others’; enjoins on them, on His kindred and on that of the Báb to ‘fear God, to do that which is meet and seemly’ and to follow the things that will ‘exalt’ their station;

warns all men not to allow ‘the means of order to be made the cause of confusion, and the instrument of union an occasion for discord’; and concludes with an exhortation calling upon the faithful to ‘serve all nations,’ and to strive for the ‘betterment of the world.’”⁶

Write down the statements contained in the Kitáb-i-‘Ahd related to each of the following:

1. The character of the heritage Bahá’u’lláh bequeathed to His heirs: _____

2. The fundamental purpose of His Revelation: _____

3. The sublimity of man’s station: _____

4. That which we should do to elevate our station: _____

5. The kings and rulers of the world: _____

6. Love and unity, enmity and dissension: _____

7. The Center of His Covenant to which all should turn: _____

8. His family and the kindred of the Báb: _____

9. His exhortation to His followers and the generality of humankind: _____

SECTION 8

In our exploration of the Kitáb-i-‘Ahd and other Texts that provide insight into the workings of the Covenant, two interwoven themes will be ever present—themes that you may have already identified in your study of the last section. One is related to the concept of a center to which all must turn. The other concerns the standard of conduct that Bahá’u’lláh calls on us to follow and which we pledge to uphold when we enter into the Tabernacle of His Covenant. Let us look at the first of these two themes.

We have said that the community of the Greatest Name must achieve an unprecedented degree of unity if it is to serve as a nucleus for future society, a society in which the oneness of humanity is recognized as a fundamental operating principle. Clearly, then, the kind of schisms that have torn apart every religion in the past would be alien to the very purpose of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh. One of the primary causes for the disagreements that spread in other religions, and which eventually split the ranks of their followers, was the lack of clarity over the question of

succession. Bahá'u'lláh, however, safeguarded His community from such division by expressly calling on His followers to turn to 'Abdu'l-Bahá after His ascension. Succession was thus clearly defined at the outset. Further, at every subsequent stage in the unfoldment of the Faith, the same clarity has been present, and no room left for ambiguity in this respect.

In the Book of His Laws, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh makes the following statement:

“When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation is ended, turn your faces towards Him Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root.”⁷

And, again, in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, we read:

“When the Mystic Dove will have winged its flight from its Sanctuary of Praise and sought its far-off goal, its hidden habitation, refer ye whatsoever ye understand not in the Book to Him Who hath branched from this mighty Stock.”⁸

In the Kitáb-i-'Ahd, which we have just briefly studied, Bahá'u'lláh refers to the first passage quoted above and leaves no doubt that the One intended was 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

“The Will of the divine Testator is this: It is incumbent upon the Aghsán, the Afnán and My Kindred to turn, one and all, their faces towards the Most Mighty Branch. Consider that which We have revealed in Our Most Holy Book: ‘When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation is ended, turn your faces toward Him Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root.’ The object of this sacred verse is none other except the Most Mighty Branch [‘Abdu'l-Bahá]. Thus have We graciously revealed unto you Our potent Will, and I am verily the Gracious, the All-Powerful.”⁹

So central are these three passages to Bahá'í belief that you are encouraged to commit them to memory. Before doing so, complete the sentences below.

1. In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh tells us that, when the ocean of His presence has ebbed and the Book of His Revelation has ended, we should turn our faces towards Him Whom _____, Who _____
2. In the Kitáb-i-'Ahd, Bahá'u'lláh tells us that the object of the sacred verse “When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation is ended, turn your faces toward Him Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root” is _____

SECTION 9

In *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, the Guardian quotes from several passages of Bahá'u'lláh's Writings, including the Tablet of the Branch, which offer us a glimpse of 'Abdu'l-

Bahá's exalted rank. They are provided below for your reflection. You may already know that the term "Sadratu'l-Muntahá", used in the first of these, literally means "the furthestmost Tree". It was translated into English by Shoghi Effendi as "the Tree beyond which there is no passing". As a symbol it suggests the point beyond which no one can pass in his approach to God—the bounds of divine knowledge as revealed to humankind. Thus it is often used in the Writings to refer to the Manifestation of God.

"In the Súriy-i-Ghuṣn (Tablet of the Branch) the following verses have been recorded: 'There hath branched from the Sadratu'l-Muntahá this sacred and glorious Being, this Branch of Holiness; well is it with him that hath sought His shelter and abideth beneath His shadow. Verily the Limb of the Law of God hath sprung forth from this Root which God hath firmly implanted in the Ground of His Will, and Whose Branch hath been so uplifted as to encompass the whole of creation. Magnified be He, therefore, for this sublime, this blessed, this mighty, this exalted Handiwork! . . . A Word hath, as a token of Our grace, gone forth from the Most Great Tablet—a Word which God hath adorned with the ornament of His own Self, and made it sovereign over the earth and all that is therein, and a sign of His greatness and power among its people . . . Render thanks unto God, O people, for His appearance; for verily He is the most great Favor unto you, the most perfect bounty upon you; and through Him every mouldering bone is quickened. Whoso turneth towards Him hath turned towards God, and whoso turneth away from Him hath turned away from My beauty, hath repudiated My Proof, and transgressed against Me. He is the Trust of God amongst you, His charge within you, His manifestation unto you and His appearance among His favored servants. . . We have sent Him down in the form of a human temple. Blest and sanctified be God Who createth whatsoever He willeth through His inviolable, His infallible decree. They who deprive themselves of the shadow of the Branch, are lost in the wilderness of error, are consumed by the heat of worldly desires, and are of those who will assuredly perish.'

"O Thou Who art the apple of Mine eye!' Bahá'u'lláh, in His own handwriting, thus addresses 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'My glory, the ocean of My loving-kindness, the sun of My bounty, the heaven of My mercy rest upon Thee. We pray God to illumine the world through Thy knowledge and wisdom, to ordain for Thee that which will gladden Thine heart and impart consolation to Thine eyes.' 'The glory of God rest upon Thee,' He writes in another Tablet, 'and upon whosoever serveth Thee and circleth around Thee. Woe, great woe, betide him that opposeth and injureth Thee. Well is it with him that sweareth fealty to Thee; the fire of hell torment him who is Thine enemy.' 'We have made Thee a shelter for all mankind,' He, in yet another Tablet, affirms, 'a shield unto all who are in heaven and on earth, a stronghold for whosoever hath believed in God, the Incomparable, the All-Knowing. God grant that through Thee He may protect them, may enrich and sustain them, that He may inspire Thee with that which shall be a wellspring of wealth unto all created things, an ocean of bounty unto all men, and the dayspring of mercy unto all peoples.'

"Thou knowest, O my God,' Bahá'u'lláh, in a prayer revealed in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's honor, supplicates, 'that I desire for Him naught except that which Thou didst desire, and have chosen Him for no purpose save that which Thou hadst intended for Him. Render Him victorious, therefore, through Thy hosts of earth and

heaven. . . Ordain, I beseech Thee, by the ardor of My love for Thee and My yearning to manifest Thy Cause, for Him, as well as for them that love Him, that which Thou hast destined for Thy Messengers and the Trustees of Thy Revelation. Verily, Thou art the Almighty, the All-Powerful.’

“In a letter dictated by Bahá’u’lláh and addressed by Mírzá Áqá Ján, His amanuensis, to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá while the latter was on a visit to Beirut, we read the following: ‘Praise be to Him Who hath honored the Land of Bá (Beirut) through the presence of Him round Whom all names revolve. All the atoms of the earth have announced unto all created things that from behind the gate of the Prison-city there hath appeared and above its horizon there hath shone forth the Orb of the beauty of the great, the Most Mighty Branch of God—His ancient and immutable Mystery—proceeding on its way to another land. Sorrow, thereby, hath enveloped this Prison-city, whilst another land rejoiceth. . . Blessed, doubly blessed, is the ground which His footsteps have trodden, the eye that hath been cheered by the beauty of His countenance, the ear that hath been honored by hearkening to His call, the heart that hath tasted the sweetness of His love, the breast that hath dilated through His remembrance, the pen that hath voiced His praise, the scroll that hath borne the testimony of His writings.’”¹⁰

From these passages, we gain a sense of the unique station occupied by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in this Dispensation. To reflect further on the extraordinary Figure of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, complete each of the sentences below on the basis of what you have just read.

1. Bahá’u’lláh tells us that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is that _____ which has branched from the Sadratu’l-Muntahá.
2. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is that Branch which has been so uplifted as to _____ .
3. Bahá’u’lláh refers to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as this _____ , this _____ , this _____ , this _____ Handiwork.
4. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is the most great _____ unto us.
5. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is the most perfect _____ bestowed upon us.
6. Through ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, every mouldering bone is _____ .
7. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is the _____ of God among us, His _____ within us, His _____ unto us, and His _____ among His favored servants.

8. Bahá'u'lláh prays for the world to be illumined through 'Abdu'l-Bahá's _____ and _____ .
9. 'Abdu'l-Bahá is a _____ for all humankind, a _____ unto all who are in heaven and on earth, a _____ for whosoever has believed in God.
10. 'Abdu'l-Bahá is the Most Mighty Branch of God—His _____ .

The passages also give us an indication as to how we, as the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, should relate to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Completing these sentences will help you to think about our relationship with Him:

1. Well it is with those that have _____ 'Abdu'l-Bahá's shelter and _____ beneath His shadow.
2. Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us to render _____ to God for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's appearance.
3. Bahá'u'lláh tells us that those who turn towards 'Abdu'l-Bahá have _____ towards God, and those who have turned away from 'Abdu'l-Bahá have _____ His Beauty, have _____ His Proof, and have _____ against Him.
4. Those who have deprived themselves of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's shadow are lost in the _____ , are consumed by the _____ , are of those who _____ .
5. The glory of God rests upon those who _____ 'Abdu'l-Bahá and who _____ around Him.
6. Bahá'u'lláh asks God that, through 'Abdu'l-Bahá, He _____ us and _____ us and that 'Abdu'l-Bahá may be inspired by that which will be a _____ unto all created things, an _____ unto all men, and the _____ unto all peoples.
7. Blessed are those whose eyes are cheered by _____ .

8. Blessed are those whose ears are honored by _____ .
9. Blessed are those whose hearts have tasted _____ .
10. Blessed are those whose breasts are dilated through _____ .
11. Blessed are those whose pens have voiced _____ .

SECTION 10

Over the past few sections we have seen that, through the institution of the Covenant, Bahá'u'lláh provided an instrument to ensure the steady operation of the forces let loose by His Revelation. By reading the Kitáb-i-'Ahd, we have gained some insight into the nature of this Covenant and have noted how explicitly He called upon His followers, one and all, to turn to 'Abdu'l-Bahá after His ascension. In the last section we studied the Tablet of the Branch in an effort to deepen our appreciation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's exalted rank in this Dispensation. Let us continue to enhance our understanding of the unique station conferred on 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

In summarizing and codifying the laws and ordinances laid down in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Guardian explains that Bahá'u'lláh, in His Most Holy Book, appoints 'Abdu'l-Bahá both His Successor and the Interpreter of His teachings:

- A. The faithful are enjoined to turn their faces towards the One “Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root”.
- B. The faithful are bidden to refer whatsoever they do not understand in the Bahá'í writings to “Him Who hath branched from this mighty Stock”.¹¹

In this and the next few sections we will reflect on the significance of these statements.

'Abdu'l-Bahá is the Center and Pivot of the Covenant that Bahá'u'lláh made with all those who recognize Him. The concept of a “center” is most essential to our understanding of the Covenant. The discussion below may help you gain a greater appreciation of the need for a center in organizing the life of humanity and investing it with harmony.

Consider the people of the world in relation to each other, scattered according to distinct sets of beliefs, emotions, aims, and the means necessary for achieving them. There are forces that bind individuals in this complex world, generated by love, fear, ideology, culture, religious belief, common interest, and scores of other factors. Individuals, then, tend to unite around one or another center in large and small groups, each center itself revolving around others that are endowed with greater capacity to hold things together. For instance, an extended family can serve as the center for its members to organize their individual and collective affairs. A political party, in turn, may become a center, capable of securing the allegiance of a number of individuals and families and of directing their united efforts towards its ends. To think further about the forces that unite people in this way, thus creating centers of attraction, you may want to give a few other examples.

In the absence of a spiritual center to which all can turn, individual and collective life in the world we have briefly described is often plagued by conflict and contention. Centers of authority and power compete to expand their spheres of influence, and some strive to achieve as much dominance as possible. At best, a humanity organized in this way can aspire to put an end to war and tolerate differences. Taken to the worst extreme, a state of perpetual conflict can end in total disintegration.

An example from nature can be used to demonstrate the condition of a society bereft of centers of unity. The individuals in such a society can be likened to the particles of gas in a container. The particles move in every direction, colliding with one another every so often. When more freedom is given to them by making greater space available, say, by enlarging the size of the container, the average distance between the particles increases; they move in spaces that are farther and farther from one another. How reasonable is it to expect that the principle of the oneness of humankind could be realized in a society in which the interactions of its members is similar to the image just described?

Now consider another example from the physical world, the solar system, in which the movement of heavenly bodies along their specific orbits, some with their own satellites, is governed by the force emanating from the sun. The center holds the entire constellation together, establishing relationships, setting rhythms and patterns, and ensuring that order is maintained. Under the center’s influence, every motion is endowed with grace. And at least in the case of our own planet, the rays of the sun sustain a web of life infinitely rich and constantly evolving at higher and higher levels of complexity.

As is the case with all analogies, the utility of this imagery is limited, and it should not be taken too far. Yet it serves to emphasize how essential is a center in organizing the individual and collective affairs of humanity. Bahá’u’lláh established such a center by naming ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the Center of His Covenant, and as we will see in later sections, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá—by appointing the Guardian of the Cause and confirming the authority of the Universal House of Justice—ensured that Bahá’ís would never be bereft of a center to which they could turn.

With these thoughts in mind, discuss in your group the statement presented in the first section in the unit: “The pivot of the oneness of mankind is nothing else but the power of the Covenant.” In the space below, write down some of your thoughts.

SECTION 11

The discussion in the last section has helped us to see some of the implications of the statement in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas “The faithful are enjoined to turn their faces towards One ‘Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root’.” Now let us consider the second statement, “The faithful are bidden to refer whatsoever they do not understand in the Bahá’í writings to ‘Him Who hath branched from this mighty Stock’.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá is the authorized Interpreter of Bahá’u’lláh’s Words. In one of His talks, He explains the significance of this station for the unity of the Bahá’í community. “Bahá’u’lláh desired that there should not be any ground or reason for disagreement among the Bahá’ís,” indicates ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Therefore, with His own pen He wrote the Book of His Covenant, addressing His relations and all people of the world, saying, ‘Verily, I have appointed One Who is the Center of My Covenant. All must obey Him; all must turn to Him; He is the Expounder of My Book, and He is informed of My purpose. All must turn to Him. Whatsoever He says is correct, for, verily, He knoweth the texts of My Book. Other than He, no one doth know My Book. The purpose of this statement is that there should never be discord and divergence among the Bahá’ís but that they should always be unified and agreed.’”¹²

‘Abdu’l-Bahá goes on to tell us that Bahá’u’lláh explained in the clearest language the attributes, qualities, functions, and powers of the One that He named in the Book of His Covenant to succeed Him so that no one could create “dissension and variance”¹³ among His followers by claiming to understand the true meaning of His Writings. We are warned by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to beware of anyone who speaks “from authority of his own thoughts” or creates “a new thing out of himself.”¹⁴

To think about this last point further, consider what would happen to the unity of the Bahá’í community if someone were allowed to call on the friends to turn to him, declaring to be so learned that he could clarify their thinking and enable them to understand the Faith in the “right way”. Write a few of your thoughts here:

That Bahá’u’lláh appointed One Who is the Interpreter of His Words does not imply that we each, as individuals, cannot have our personal understanding of the guidance and counsels found in Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings and share our thoughts with others. It does mean, however, that no individual believer can present his or her personal views as authoritative and attempt to impose them on the members of the Bahá’í community. It also implies that our own personal

understanding of the Writings must be aligned with the interpretations of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Guardian, who, as we will discuss in later sections, is the Interpreter of Bahá’u’lláh’s Words after ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation is so vast that it would be impossible for any ordinary human mind to fathom it. It is indeed like an ocean in which we can immerse ourselves in a lifetime of study and still only discover a small share of the countless pearls hidden in its depths. And so many of these gems of wisdom would remain out of our reach, were it not for the interpretations provided by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Guardian. Let us reflect on selected passages from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, quoted by the Guardian in one of his early letters to the believers, that speak of the greatness of His Revelation.

“The word which the one true God uttereth in this day, though that word be the most familiar and commonplace of terms, is invested with supreme, with unique distinction.’ ‘The generality of mankind is still immature. Had it acquired sufficient capacity We would have bestowed upon it so great a measure of Our knowledge that all who dwell on earth and in heaven would have found themselves, by virtue of the grace streaming from Our pen, completely independent of all knowledge save the knowledge of God, and would have been securely established upon the throne of abiding tranquillity.’ ‘The Pen of Holiness, I solemnly affirm before God, hath writ upon My snow-white brow and in characters of effulgent glory these glowing, these musk-scented and holy words: “Behold ye that dwell on earth, and ye denizens of heaven, bear witness, He in truth is your Well-Beloved. He it is Whose like the world of creation hath not seen, He Whose ravishing beauty hath delighted the eye of God, the Ordainer, the All-Powerful, the Incomparable!””¹⁵

There is a concept here that merits reflection. As we will see in later sections of this unit, we are repeatedly advised to turn to the “Book” as a source of authority in the Faith, an indication that in this Dispensation we each have the privilege and obligation to read and strive to understand the Word of God. Of course, by the term “Book” is meant first and foremost the recorded utterances of Bahá’u’lláh. But the interpretations of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi can, in a certain sense, be regarded as part of the “Book”. In this light, discuss with the members of your group the following statement written by the Universal House of Justice:

“... in reality the Interpreter of the Word is an extension of that center which is the Word itself. The Book is the record of the utterance of Bahá’u’lláh, while the divinely inspired Interpreter is the living Mouth of that Book—it is he and he alone who can authoritatively state what the Book means.”¹⁶

SECTION 12

We should pause here and consider the nature of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s interpretations. There are those that explain the meaning of specific passages from Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings and give us insight into the significance of His Words. Two examples will illustrate how essential are such interpretations to our efforts to understand the teachings and to apply them to our individual and collective lives.

Suppose a Bahá'í who recently enrolled in the Faith reads several passages from Bahá'u'lláh's Writings related to life after death. Because the passages speak about the progress of the soul—and in light of his religious background—he comes to the conclusion that his belief in reincarnation is in harmony with the Bahá'í teachings. However, not finding any explicit reference to reincarnation in the literature available to him, he continues to wonder whether his understanding is correct. Eventually he puts the question to a knowledgeable friend, who refers him to a chapter which addresses this issue in *Some Answered Questions*, a collection of talks given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. There he reads passages such as the following that make the impossibility of reincarnation clear: “. . . this material world has not such value or such excellence that man, after having escaped from this cage, will desire a second time to fall into this snare. No, through the Eternal Bounty the worth and true ability of man becomes apparent and visible by traversing the degrees of existence, and not by returning. . . . The return of the soul after death is contrary to the natural movement, and opposed to the divine system.”¹⁷ And so the believer reaches a new understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's statements regarding the progress of the soul and the means for acquiring perfection.

The law for the burial of the dead offers another example. The Kitáb-i-Aqdas states that it is forbidden to carry the body for more than one hour's journey from the place of death; that the body should be wrapped in a shroud of silk or cotton, and on its finger should be placed a ring bearing the inscription “I came forth from God, and return unto Him, detached from all save Him, holding fast to His Name, the Merciful, the Compassionate”; and that the coffin should be of crystal, stone, or hard fine wood. Further, there is a specific Prayer for the Dead that is to be said just before burial. Despite these clear injunctions, the question sometimes arises in the minds of individual believers as to whether or not cremation is permissible; it has been affirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that this law rules out the possibility of cremation. In answer to the question of whether in the case of contagious diseases, such as the plague or cholera, cremation of bodies with lime or chemicals is permissible, He explained that “In such cases, hygiene and preservation are necessarily more important; for according to the clear divine texts, medical commands are lawful, and ‘necessities make forbidden things lawful’ is one of the certain rules.”¹⁸

The above two examples—the first, a question of doctrine or fundamental belief, and the second a matter related to the application of the laws of the Faith—help us to see how much our understanding of the Bahá'í teachings depends on the interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. But the question of interpretation goes beyond such clarification and explanations.

Consider the Bahá'í Administrative Order. That Bahá'u'lláh conceived the Administrative Order is clear from passages He revealed in which He established Local Houses of Justice and the Universal House of Justice, from His appointment of Hands of the Cause of God, and from other aspects of His Revelation that address administrative matters. It was 'Abdu'l-Bahá, however, Who, as the Architect of the Administrative Order, created its design and delineated its features. Shoghi Effendi developed the framework for this Order and dedicated much of his energy to laying its foundations, foundations on which will continue to be erected for centuries to come the administrative structure of the Faith. These concepts will be clarified further in the next unit when we study the rise of the Administrative Order. Here, however, they can serve as an example, with the help of which we can state a fundamental truth about 'Abdu'l-Bahá's authoritative interpretation: So completely did He understand the intent behind every Divine verse that, in unraveling its implications for us, He was able to bring into the realm of being elements that we would have never been able to uncover. The following passage written by the Guardian underscores this point:

“Bahá’u’lláh’s inscrutable purpose, we must ever bear in mind, has been so thoroughly infused into the conduct of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and their motives have been so closely wedded together, that the mere attempt to dissociate the teachings of the former from any system which the ideal Exemplar of those same teachings has established would amount to a repudiation of one of the most sacred and basic truths of the Faith.”¹⁹

You may find it helpful at this point to think about what you have learned in your own life as a Bahá’í from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s interpretations of the teachings. In your study of the courses of the Ruhi Institute, alone, you have benefited greatly from the many passages and quotations infused with His wisdom. Below are just four examples of the various subjects addressed by the passages from His talks and Tablets found in the earlier books you studied. What insights did you gain from His explanation of each one?

1. The nature of prayer: _____

2. The joy of teaching: _____

3. The mystery of sacrifice: _____

4. The power of love: _____

SECTION 13

Having reflected on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s station as the authorized Interpreter of Bahá’u’lláh’s utterances, you may wish to draw up a plan for studying His many written works and talks available in published volumes. His Will and Testament, which Shoghi Effendi calls the “Charter of Bahá’u’lláh’s New World Order”, will form the basis for much of the study in the later sections of this unit, but you will want to make it the object of your reflection throughout your life. As for His published Tablets, you are no doubt familiar with a few of these. Penned at two separate times, the first eight between 26 March and 22 April 1916 and the final six between 2 February and 8 March 1917, His Tablets of the Divine Plan fashion in broad outline a master plan for the spiritual regeneration of the planet. They, too, are a constant source of guidance to all of us throughout our lives. *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* brings together some of the innumerable Tablets He addressed to early believers of the East and the West and gives us an

indication of the vast range of subjects with which He dealt in His correspondence. Relatively longer Tablets, such as the one written to Auguste Forel and the Tablet to the Hague, are available as separate publications.

The Secret of Divine Civilization consists of a message addressed to the rulers and people of Persia in 1875, which has been described by Shoghi Effendi as “‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s outstanding contribution to the future reorganization of the world”.²⁰ Among the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá are also those that deal with biographical and historical topics, including *Memorials of the Faithful* and *Traveller’s Narrative*. The Guardian referred to the latter as “the ablest and most valuable presentation of the early history of the Faith and of its tenets. . . transmitted to posterity”.²¹

There are, in addition, several compilations of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s recorded utterances that treat many important issues, from the philosophical to the practical, from the social to the personal. *Some Answered Questions*, to which we referred earlier, is one of these. Its text was read in full and corrected by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself. Not all the published transcripts of His talks have been authenticated in this way. For example, original Persian transcripts are available for only some of the talks published in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, a collection of addresses given in America, and *Paris Talks*. Similarly, no original transcript has been found for the talks recorded in *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London*. Yet, it is important to note that the Guardian allowed such compilations to continue to be used by the friends, as has the Universal House of Justice.

How you go about formulating your study plan will depend, of course, on what is accessible to you. Below is some space for you to set out your plan.

SECTION 14

In the last few sections we have explored some of the implications of the station conferred on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the Most Holy Book as the Center of Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant and the Interpreter of His Word. Now let us consider another dimension of His station.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá is the Perfect Exemplar of His Father’s teachings. There is no need for us to illustrate here through episodes from His life the significance of this statement. Previous books in the sequence have provided so many references to Him that have shown us how He manifested, to the utmost perfection, every Bahá’í ideal. Think, for instance, about the qualities that He demonstrated in His interactions with people and the way He approached His conversations about the Faith, as explained in Books 2 and 6, or about the joy that characterized His being, as described in Book 7. Remember the glimpses of His utter devotion to His Father provided in Book 4. Call to mind the stories from His life in the lessons for children that show them the ways of love and compassion, of selflessness and justice. His occupation with the spiritual edification of souls, expressed in so many passages we have studied, inspires us in our own dealings with others. And His words of longing to carry His Father’s message to every corner of the globe sustain us in our own services to the Cause.

As has been mentioned earlier, in reflecting on His life, we should be aware of the dangers of two extremes. On the one hand, we should never imagine that we can ever attain His level of perfection, for He moves in a sphere all His own, a sphere which is beyond the reach of any human being. On the other hand, we cannot assume an attitude of resignation, thinking that it is useless to make an effort to follow the example of such an exalted Being. Throughout our lives we should not only constantly turn to Him but also strive to emulate His ways. And conscious of the absolute sublimity of His station, we will feel the warmth of His presence and will draw strength from the knowledge of His love for us as we hear the echoes of His voice in the numerous Tablets that He addressed to early believers:

“I say unto thee the truth, that I am with you in spirit and in heart, that I rejoice by your joy and am happy by your happiness; and hear with the ear of spirit your calling and scent with the spiritual nostrils the fragrances of your garden.”²²

“Verily, I implore God to gaze upon you with the eyes of His mercy, to raise you through a godlike power, to move you by the breezes of His glory, to make you fluent in irrefutable and divine proofs and arguments, to sever you from the world and all therein, to purify and sanctify you from every material grade, and enable you to diffuse the bounties of the Divine Worlds.”²³

“At all times do I speak of you and call you to mind. I pray unto the Lord, and with tears I implore Him to rain down all these blessings upon you, and gladden your hearts, and make blissful your souls, and grant you exceeding joy and heavenly delights. . . .”²⁴

“Ye live, all of you, within the heart of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and with every breath do I turn my face toward the Threshold of Oneness and call down blessings upon you, each and all.”²⁵

“O ye who have turned your faces toward the Exalted Beauty! By night, by day, at morningtide and sunset, when darkness draweth on, and at early light I remember, and ever have remembered, in the realms of my mind and heart, the loved ones of the Lord.”²⁶

You may wish to memorize one or more of the above quotations.

SECTION 15

The discussion in the preceding sections has focused on the station of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, a station unique not only in this Dispensation but in all of religious history. Though not a Manifestation of God, He clearly stands apart from any other figure in humanity’s long evolution. The two passages below written by Shoghi Effendi provide us with further insight into the nature of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s station. You are encouraged to read them several times and to reflect on the import of their words until you feel satisfied that you have an adequate grasp of their significance.

“An attempt I strongly feel should now be made to clarify our minds regarding the station occupied by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the significance of His position in this holy Dispensation. It would be indeed difficult for us, who stand so close to such a tremendous figure and are drawn by the mysterious power of so magnetic a personality, to obtain a clear and exact understanding of the role and character of One Who, not only in the Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh but in the entire field of religious history, fulfills a unique function. Though moving in a sphere of His own and holding a rank radically different from that of the Author and the Forerunner of the Bahá’í Revelation, He, by virtue of the station ordained for Him through the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh, forms together with them what may be termed the Three Central Figures of a Faith that stands unapproached in the world’s spiritual history. He towers, in conjunction with them, above the destinies of this infant Faith of God from a level to which no individual or body ministering to its needs after Him, and for no less a period than a full thousand years, can ever hope to rise. To degrade His lofty rank by identifying His station with or by regarding it as roughly equivalent to, the position of those on whom the mantle of His authority has fallen would be an act of impiety as grave as the no less heretical belief that inclines to exalt Him to a state of absolute equality with either the central Figure or Forerunner of our Faith. For wide as is the gulf that separates ‘Abdu’l-Bahá from Him Who is the Source of an independent Revelation, it can never be regarded as commensurate with the greater distance that stands between Him Who is the Center of the Covenant and His

ministers who are to carry on His work, whatever be their name, their rank, their functions or their future achievements. Let those who have known ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who through their contact with His magnetic personality have come to cherish for Him so fervent an admiration, reflect, in the light of this statement, on the greatness of One Who is so far above Him in station.”²⁷

“He is, and should for all time be regarded, first and foremost, as the Center and Pivot of Bahá’u’lláh’s peerless and all-enfolding Covenant, His most exalted handiwork, the stainless Mirror of His light, the perfect Exemplar of His teachings, the unerring Interpreter of His Word, the embodiment of every Bahá’í ideal, the incarnation of every Bahá’í virtue, the Most Mighty Branch sprung from the Ancient Root, the Limb of the Law of God, the Being ‘round Whom all names revolve,’ the Mainspring of the Oneness of Humanity, the Ensign of the Most Great Peace, the Moon of the Central Orb of this most holy Dispensation—styles and titles that are implicit and find their truest, their highest and fairest expression in the magic name ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. He is, above and beyond these appellations, the ‘Mystery of God’—an expression by which Bahá’u’lláh Himself has chosen to designate Him, and which, while it does not by any means justify us to assign to Him the station of Prophethood, indicates how in the person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized.”²⁸

SECTION 16

Let us pause here and review what we have studied up to now. We began by considering the principle of the oneness of humankind—the pivot around which all the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh revolve. We considered the implications of the operation of this principle in human affairs and the role played by the community of His followers in working towards its realization. In this context, we saw how essential it is for the community to remain united. To safeguard this unity and to ensure that His Revelation would achieve its purpose, Bahá’u’lláh entered into a Covenant with His followers. In His Most Holy Book, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, He named ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the Center of that Covenant and the Interpreter of His teachings. In reflecting on the station of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, we discussed the imperative need for a center in organizing the affairs of the community, the significance of an authorized interpreter of the teachings for the steady progress of the Cause, and the influence exerted on our individual lives by the Perfect Exemplar of those teachings.

The Covenant established by Bahá’u’lláh to ensure the harmonious and continuous operation of the forces let loose by His Revelation is, of course, unique in all of religious history. What is important to realize, however, is that, though erected on such a firm foundation, the stronghold of the Faith is not immune to periodic attacks by unscrupulous enemies from within and from without. We will try to examine the nature of such attacks over the next few sections.

First, we should acknowledge that, in Bahá’í belief, evil has no existence of its own, as darkness is nothing but the absence of light. Yet human beings do commit deplorable deeds when they allow their lives to be ruled by their lower nature. And it is unfortunate that the whisperings of the ego deep in the breasts of men can, if unchecked, drive ambitious and power-hungry

individuals to the extreme of breaking the Covenant. Thankfully, this is not a common occurrence. Usually, even the most blameworthy behavior of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh can be attributed to the shortcomings of sincere souls who are trying to understand and live by the high standards of a Faith that has only begun to exert its influence on humanity. But, as we will see in our further study of the unit, the actions of those who violate the Covenant, few as they have been in the past and inconsequential as they will continue to be in the future, constitute a class of their own and need to be understood not as ordinary human conduct but as the operation of a spiritual disease intent on invading the entire body of the Cause.

A moment's reflection on the pattern of the Faith's irresistible advance through cycles of crisis and victory, a theme treated in earlier courses, should convince you that, once 'Abdu'l-Bahá had assumed His incomparable station as the Center of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant and the Cause was poised to enter a new stage in its development, the time was ripe for another crisis. At the heart of this crisis was the rebellion of Mírzá Muḥammad-'Alí.

The immediate sense of bewilderment that overcame the followers of Bahá'u'lláh after His ascension was dispelled by the knowledge that they had not been abandoned. In 'Abdu'l-Bahá they recognized their Solace; the Cause of God would continue through Him to be the recipient of unerring guidance. Yet scarcely had He assumed His responsibilities as Head of the Faith than the rebellion of those closest to Him began. The ensuing crisis was to last some four years. Although it could have never succeeded in creating a permanent divide in the community, it aroused agitation in the minds and hearts of many and resulted in a breach in the ranks of Bahá'u'lláh's own family, a breach that could not be repaired and which would eventually cause most of its members to move away from the shelter of the Covenant. Its ultimate outcome, however, would serve as testimony to the infinite love and wisdom of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the invincible power of that same Covenant.

During Bahá'u'lláh's own lifetime, Muḥammad-'Alí had shamelessly advanced the claim of partnership with his Father and had tampered with the text of the Holy Writings in his care. He had earned the displeasure of Bahá'u'lláh for his actions, but out of God's infinite mercy he had been forgiven. In the Kitáb-i-'Ahd he was granted a station next in rank to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and great honor could have been his had he proven himself worthy of God's bounties. Instead, he used his influence to mount an attack on the Covenant. Even while Bahá'u'lláh's body was still awaiting burial, he carried off two packages containing important documents of his Father that had been entrusted to 'Abdu'l-Bahá prior to His ascension. Gradually over time through "lies, half-truths, calumnies and gross exaggerations,"²⁹ the Guardian has told us, Muḥammad-'Alí managed to persuade most of the family of Bahá'u'lláh and several well-known Bahá'ís both in the Holy Land and in Iran to join him. These self-appointed defenders of the Faith, which they pretended to love, did everything in their power to take the reins of the Cause in their own hands. They established a vast system of correspondence with every center and individual they could reach; they dispatched emissaries to Írán, 'Iráq, India, and Egypt; they bribed and seduced corrupt officials whenever they could; and they even joined forces with enemies of the Faith—all this with a single purpose in mind: to disgrace 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The crisis created by Muḥammad-'Alí and his associates can be traced to the most ignoble impulses of human nature. The Guardian has written:

“The true ground of this crisis was the burning, the uncontrollable, the soul-festering jealousy which the admitted preeminence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in rank, power, ability, knowledge and virtue, above all the other members of His Father's family,

had aroused not only in Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí, the archbreaker of the Covenant, but in some of his closest relatives as well. An envy as blind as that which had possessed the soul of Mírzá Yaḥyá, as deadly as that which the superior excellence of Joseph had kindled in the hearts of his brothers, as deep-seated as that which had blazed in the bosom of Cain and prompted him to slay his brother Abel, had, for several years, prior to Bahá’u’lláh’s ascension, been smoldering in the recesses of Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí’s heart and had been secretly inflamed by those unnumbered marks of distinction, of admiration and favor accorded to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá not only by Bahá’u’lláh Himself, His companions and His followers, but by the vast number of unbelievers who had come to recognize that innate greatness which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had manifested from childhood.”³⁰

To the campaign of abuses mounted against Him, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá responded with “incessant exhortations”, “earnest pleadings”, “favors and kindnesses”, and “admonitions and warnings”.³¹ But all of this proved to be of no avail. Referring to Muḥammad-‘Alí’s misdeeds, Shoghi Effendi has stated: “The Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh had, by acts such as these, and others too numerous to recount, been manifestly violated. Another blow, stunning in its first effects, had been administered to the Faith and had caused its structure momentarily to tremble.”³²

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s grief over what occurred was such that “despite the triumphs witnessed in the course of His ministry, it left its traces upon Him till the end of His days. The intensity of the emotions which this somber episode aroused within Him were reminiscent of the effect produced upon Bahá’u’lláh by the dire happenings precipitated by the rebellion of Mírzá Yaḥyá.”³³ “I swear by the Ancient Beauty!” He wrote in one of His Tablets, “So great is My sorrow and regret that My pen is paralyzed between My fingers.”³⁴

Before considering the implications of the actions of Muḥammad-‘Alí, you should review some of the features of this sad episode in the history of the Faith. It is suggested that you read through the above account again and then complete the exercises below.

1. How had Muḥammad-‘Alí earned the displeasure of Bahá’u’lláh during His lifetime?

2. What bounty had been bestowed by Bahá’u’lláh on Muḥammad-‘Alí in the Kitáb-i-‘Ahd?

3. How did Muḥammad-‘Alí use his influence following the ascension of Bahá’u’lláh? ____

4. Muḥammad-‘Alí managed to persuade most of Bahá’u’lláh’s family and several well-known Bahá’ís both in the Holy Land and in Iran to join him through _____

5. In their efforts to take the reins of the Cause in their own hands, Muḥammad-‘Alí and his associates

- established _____

- dispatched _____

- bribed and seduced _____

- joined forces with _____

6. The Guardian tells us that the true ground of the crisis created by Muḥammad-‘Alí and his associates was the _____, the _____, the _____ which the admitted _____ of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in _____, _____, _____, _____ and _____, above all other members of His Father’s family, had aroused not only in Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí, _____, but in some of his _____ as well.

7. The envy that had been smoldering in the recesses of Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí’s heart prior to Bahá’u’lláh’s ascension was as blind as _____

8. The envy that had been smoldering in the recesses of Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí’s heart prior to Bahá’u’lláh’s ascension was as deadly as _____

9. The envy that had been smoldering in the recesses of Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí’s heart prior to Bahá’u’lláh’s ascension was as deep-seated as _____

10. The envy that had been smoldering in the recesses of Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí’s heart prior to Bahá’u’lláh’s ascension was secretly inflamed by _____

11. To the campaign of abuses mounted against Him by Muḥammad-‘Alí and his companions, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá responded with _____

12. By the acts Muḥammad-‘Alí had committed, Shoghi Effendi confirms, the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh had been _____
13. Shoghi Effendi assures us that, though _____ in its first effects, the blow administered to the Faith by this sad episode had only caused its structure to tremble _____ .

SECTION 17

It is painful to contemplate the words and actions of the breakers of a Covenant that is the only hope of humanity as it struggles to free itself from the yokes of oppression. Yet it is important for us to understand their ways if we are each to contribute our share to the protection of His Cause. An examination of the ruthless behavior of Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí and those who associated with him offers us many insights in this respect. Here are a few examples.

Muḥammad-‘Alí and his associates attributed to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the very blameworthy acts that they themselves committed and the ambition for leadership that consumed their hearts. Shoghi Effendi tells us:

“To friend and stranger, believer and unbeliever alike, to officials both high and low, openly and by insinuation, verbally as well as in writing, they represented ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as an ambitious, a self-willed, an unprincipled and pitiless usurper, Who had deliberately disregarded the testamentary instructions of His Father; Who had, in language intentionally veiled and ambiguous, assumed a rank co-equal with the Manifestation Himself; Who in His communications with the West was beginning to claim to be the return of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who had come ‘in the glory of the Father’; Who, in His letters to the Indian believers, was proclaiming Himself as the promised Shah Bahram, and arrogating to Himself the right to interpret the writing of His Father, to inaugurate a new Dispensation, and to share with Him the Most Great Infallibility, the exclusive prerogative of the holders of the prophetic office. . . .”³⁵

It was, of course, Muḥammad-‘Alí who, desiring rank and station for himself, had advanced false claims, and it was he who had deliberately disregarded the instructions of his Father. Suppose, then, that you were living in those days and heard someone whispering to you: “You know, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has become more authoritative since the passing of the Blessed Beauty. He does seem to act as if He has some claim beyond the station conferred on Him by Bahá’u’lláh. Are we not all humble servants of the Cause?” What would this individual have hoped you did not understand about the nature of Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant and the station of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that he would have dared to initiate such a conversation with you?

Through other arguments they advanced, Muḥammad-‘Alí and his associates tried to take advantage of the love of Bahá’ís for unity. While acting with utter disregard for the integrity of the community, doing everything in their power to foment suspicion, and bent on making a breach among the believers, they laid the blame for the disunity thus created on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. This was another of their ways. Here is how Shoghi Effendi continues his description of the claims made by Muḥammad-‘Alí and his associates against ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

“They, furthermore, affirmed that He had, for His private ends, fomented discord, fostered enmity and brandished the weapon of excommunication. . .”³⁶

Imagine once again as if you were living in those perilous days and someone approached you, saying: “Perhaps the intentions of Muḥammad-‘Alí and his companions are not so ignoble after all. What harm could come from talking to them and finding out what they have to say? As Head of the Faith, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá should be maintaining unity among the believers. Why would He try to throw His own brother out of the Faith? Is not unity to be valued above all else?” What misconception of unity would this person have been trying to introduce to you in order to sow the seeds of doubt in your mind?

Besides attributing to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá their own ambitions and accusing Him of creating disunity in the Bahá’í community, Muḥammad-‘Alí and those who collaborated with him sought for the family of Bahá’u’lláh power and a certain degree of ownership over the resources of the Faith. In this they could sometimes be subtle in their ways. Let us see how Shoghi Effendi continues his description of their conduct.

“[They, furthermore, affirmed] that He had perverted the purpose of a Testament which they alleged to be primarily concerned with the private interests of Bahá’u’lláh’s family by acclaiming it as a Covenant of world importance, pre-existent, peerless and unique in the history of all religions. . .”³⁷

It is not unreasonable to imagine that, by trying to cast doubt on the validity of a unique center of authority to succeed Bahá’u’lláh, they were hoping to create a situation where they could share authority with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Suppose someone approached you at the time and said: “Well, it is true that it is difficult for us to understand Bahá’u’lláh’s real intention. Muḥammad-‘Alí, like ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, spent hours and hours in the presence of the Blessed Beauty, listening to His counsels and immersed in His Words. Surely Muḥammad-‘Alí’s knowledge of Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings is comparable to that of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. He must know Bahá’u’lláh’s real intention. And, after all, every one of us can read Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings and have his own understanding of the teachings.” What kind of attitude would this person have been trying to cultivate in you towards the authority clearly given by Bahá’u’lláh to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá?

In the midst of such intrigue and misrepresentation, Muḥammad-‘Alí and his associates went even further to present themselves as helpless victims, inventing story after story of the injustices being done to them by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. In ever louder voices they cried out in an effort to win sympathy for their case. The Guardian continues his description in this way:

“[They, furthermore, affirmed] that He had deprived His brothers and sisters of their lawful allowance, and expended it on officials for His personal advancement; that He had declined all the repeated invitations made to Him to discuss the issues that had arisen and to compose the differences which prevailed. . .”³⁸

How would you have understood the apparent innocent remark of someone saying at the time: “Maybe ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is too hard on the members of His family.”

Similarly, Muḥammad-‘Alí and his associates hoped to create anxiety among the friends by making them believe that the Faith was in a state of decline because of the way ‘Abdu’l-Bahá guided the community. With these words does Shoghi Effendi end this sad passage regarding the unseemly conduct of Muḥammad-‘Alí and those with whom he collaborated:

“[They, furthermore, affirmed] that He had actually corrupted the Holy Text, interpolated passages written by Himself, and perverted the purpose and meaning of some of the weightiest Tablets revealed by the pen of His Father; and finally, that the standard of rebellion had, as a result of such conduct, been raised by the Oriental believers, that the community of the faithful had been rent asunder, was rapidly declining and was doomed to extinction.”³⁹

Imagine that someone approached you at the time and said the following: “A few years ago, when Bahá’u’lláh was still among us, the Faith enjoyed increasing prestige and the community of His followers was swelling in numbers. Now look at us. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is happy that a few Westerners are becoming Bahá’ís. Meanwhile, outstanding believers like Mírzá Áqá Ján, who spent years transcribing the Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh, have abandoned Him and have sided with Muḥammad-‘Alí. We should do what we think is best for the Cause of God, even if it means ignoring ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s wishes for a while. He will modify His ideas over time.” How would you have analyzed this assessment of the status of the Faith, both in terms of the emotions on which it was trying to play and the way in which it presented information?

SECTION 18

In the preceding section, we examined some of the ways in which Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí and his associates strove to undermine the Covenant established by Bahá’u’lláh. Even after it became obvious that they had failed to divide the community, they did everything in their power to discredit ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the eyes of the authorities, joining forces with the enemies of the Faith in order to achieve their purpose. For the period of some seven years, from around 1901 to 1907, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was made the object of close scrutiny by the authorities as a result of the intrigues of the embittered Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí.

One day in August 1901, upon returning to ‘Akká from Bahjí, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was informed that the restrictions which had gradually been relaxed over the years on the exiled community of Bahá’u’lláh’s followers were to be reimposed. Orders had arrived from the Sulṭán in Constantinople that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and His brothers were to be confined within the city walls. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá submitted to several days of interrogations. Though He convinced the authorities to allow His brothers to return to Bahjí and to grant the believers enough freedom to earn their livelihoods, He and His household were vigilantly watched. Later, one of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s brothers who had sided with the Covenant-breakers would reconcile with Him briefly and confess that Muḥammad-‘Alí had sent an emissary with a gift and a letter to a high-ranking official in the region, suggesting that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was acting against the interests of the Ottoman empire. It was a few days later that the Sulṭán’s orders had arrived.

Muḥammad-‘Alí and his associates continued unabated over the years to present ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as a threat to the state, hoping they could bring about His execution or His exile to a place

remote enough to allow them to take control over the affairs of the Faith. Eventually the Sulṭán became so concerned that he appointed a commission to investigate the matter. It was now 1904. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was summoned on several occasions to answer to the charges made against Him, which He carefully and fearlessly refuted. Although the commission failed to prove any wrongdoing by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, He remained in danger. In 1907 a second commission of four officers was dispatched to ‘Akká by the Sulṭán. Guards were posted outside the home of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, while the officers went about their investigation. Muḥammad-‘Alí and his associates were jubilant. The commission’s ship remained in the harbor in the bay, and it seemed certain that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would soon be taken away. At one point the Spanish Consul, who was a great admirer of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, offered Him a freighter so that He could flee to a safe place. But He refused, determined to follow the example of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, who faced every danger unperturbed.

Then one day around sunset, the ship started to make its way across the bay towards ‘Akká. It was generally assumed that the commission was coming to arrest ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and take Him on board. The friends were in anguish, some weeping with grief over the thought of separation from Him. But suddenly the ship changed course, and its lights could be seen moving in the direction of Constantinople. It was later learned that an attempt had been made on the life of the Sulṭán and the Ottoman empire was in turmoil. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was out of imminent danger.

In His Will and Testament ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses the following words to describe the conduct of Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí:

“What deviation can be greater than breaking the Covenant of God! What deviation can be greater than interpolating and falsifying the words and verses of the Sacred Text, even as testified and declared by Mírzá Badí’u’lláh! What deviation can be greater than calumniating the Center of the Covenant himself! What deviation can be more glaring than spreading broadcast false and foolish reports touching the Temple of God’s Testament! What deviation can be more grievous than decreeing the death of the Center of the Covenant, supported by the holy verse:—‘He that layeth a claim ere the passing of a thousand years. . . ,’ whilst he (Muḥammad-‘Alí) without shame in the days of the Blessed Beauty had advanced such a claim as this and been confuted by Him in the aforementioned manner, the text of his claim being still extant in his own handwriting and bearing his own seal. What deviation can be more complete than falsely accusing the loved ones of God! What deviation can be more evil than causing their imprisonment and incarceration! What deviation can be more severe than delivering into the hands of the government the Holy Writings and Epistles, that haply they (the government) might arise intent upon the death of this wronged one! What deviation can be more violent than threatening the ruin of the Cause of God, forging and slanderously falsifying letters and documents so that this might perturb and alarm the government and lead to the shedding of the blood of this wronged one,—such letters and documents being now in the possession of the government! What deviation can be more odious than his iniquity and rebellion! What deviation can be more shameful than dispersing the gathering of the people of salvation! What deviation can be more infamous than the vain and feeble interpretations of the people of doubt! What deviation can be more wicked than joining hands with strangers and with the enemies of God!” ⁴⁰

Now suppose as you did in the last section that you were living in those days. Remembering what you have studied in these two sections, how would you have protected yourself from the spiritual disease that had infected several scores of once faithful souls? Would you have felt there was any reasonable option other than to avoid them entirely and leave them to themselves? On what would you have focused your time and energies? Discuss these questions in your group.

SECTION 19

One of the articles of faith shared by all the Bahá'ís of the world is that no power on earth can alter the course Bahá'u'lláh has set for His Cause. It is true that, during the years immediately following His ascension, Muḥammad-‘Alí and his companions spread confusion in the community of His followers, and it is true that the Covenant-breakers continued to create consternation among the believers for some time and renewed fresh hope among the enemies of the Faith. Yet the effects of this rebellion were by no means long lasting. The Guardian explains:

“Though the rebellion of Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí precipitated many sombre and distressing events, and though its dire consequences continued for several years to obscure the light of the Covenant, to endanger the life of its appointed Center, and to distract the thoughts and retard the progress of the activities of its supporters in both the East and the West, yet the entire episode, viewed in its proper perspective, proved to be neither more nor less than one of those periodic crises which, since the inception of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, and throughout a whole century, have been instrumental in weeding out its harmful elements, in fortifying its foundations, in demonstrating its resilience, and in releasing a further measure of its latent powers.”⁴¹

You are encouraged to reflect for a moment on all that we have studied in this course up to now and discuss with the other participants the assurance given in the Writings that, no matter how formidable the forces arrayed against the Cause of God, the power invested in Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant will ensure its ultimate victory.

With this reflection fresh in mind, we should now read the following passage written by Shoghi Effendi:

“Now that the provisions of a divinely appointed Covenant had been indubitably proclaimed; now that the purpose of the Covenant was clearly apprehended and its

fundamentals had become immovably established in the hearts of the overwhelming majority of the adherents of the Faith; and now that the first assaults launched by its would-be subverters had been successfully repulsed, the Cause for which that Covenant had been designed could forge ahead along the course traced for it by the finger of its Author.”⁴²

The history of the twenty-nine year ministry of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is not the subject of this unit. Yet, in order to gain further appreciation for the power of the Covenant, we should review, however inadequately, some of the accomplishments of the Faith during His ministry. This we will do in the next few sections, which, following the sequence of thought in the relevant chapters of *God Passes By*, will be dedicated, in turn, to the establishment of the Faith in the West, the transfer of the remains of the Báb to their final resting place on Mount Carmel, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s travels to Europe and North America, and the systematic expansion and consolidation of the Faith throughout the world.

SECTION 20

Shoghi Effendi reminds us that as far back as the year that saw the birth of the Faith, the Báb addressed the “peoples of the West”, bidding them to “issue forth” from their “cities” to aid God and “become as brethren” in His “one and indivisible religion”. In the Most Holy Book, Bahá’u’lláh conferred a unique distinction on the rulers of the American continent. He calls on them to “adorn the temple of dominion with the ornament of justice and of the fear of God, and its head with the crown of the remembrance” of their Lord, to “bind with the hands of justice the broken,” and “crush the oppressor” with the “rod of the commandments” of their “Lord, the Ordainer, the All-Wise”. The establishment of the Cause in the West, therefore, is to be considered one of the most significant accomplishments achieved during ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ministry. The sequence of events can be summarized as follows.

The first mention of the Name of Bahá’u’lláh at a public gathering in the Western Hemisphere took place on 23 September 1893. On that day, Rev. George A. Ford delivered a paper at the World Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in connection with the Columbian Exposition. Less than a year later, Ibráhím Khayru’lláh, a Syrian doctor who had become a Bahá’í in Cairo, moved to Chicago. He began to teach the Faith vigorously, traveling to a number of other cities in the United States. Through his efforts, hundreds of receptive souls across the country embraced the Faith. From among these early believers would emerge some of the most prominent followers of Bahá’u’lláh in the West. Two names stand out as particularly noteworthy: Thornton Chase, designated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the first American believer, and Louisa A. Moore, known to us by her married name Lua Getsinger, the mother teacher of the West.

One of the individuals attracted to the Faith by Lua Getsinger was Mrs. Phoebe Hearst, a well-known philanthropist. Towards the end of 1898, she organized a trip to the Holy Land in order to meet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. She was accompanied by Dr. and Mrs. Getsinger, Dr. Khayru’lláh and his wife, and Miss May Ellis Bolles. At the time May Bolles lived in Paris, but three years later, having married Sutherland Maxwell, she would transfer her residence to Canada and lay the foundations of the Cause in that country. Also included among the pilgrims was Mrs. Hearst’s butler Robert Turner, who would become the first African-American Bahá’í. The Guardian describes this pilgrimage in the following terms:

“The arrival of fifteen pilgrims, in three successive parties, the first of which, including Dr. and Mrs. Getsinger, reached the prison-city of ‘Akká on December 10, 1898; the intimate personal contact established between the Center of Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant and the newly arisen heralds of His Revelation in the West; the moving circumstances attending their visit to His Tomb and the great honor bestowed upon them of being conducted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself into its innermost chamber; the spirit which, through precept and example, despite the briefness of their stay, a loving and bountiful Host so powerfully infused into them; and the passionate zeal and unyielding resolve which His inspiring exhortations, His illuminating instructions and the multiple evidences of His divine love kindled in their hearts— all these marked the opening of a new epoch in the development of the Faith in the West, an epoch whose significance the acts subsequently performed by some of these same pilgrims and their fellow-disciples have amply demonstrated.

“‘Of that first meeting,’ one of these pilgrims, recording her impressions, has written, ‘I can remember neither joy nor pain, nor anything that I can name. I had been carried suddenly to too great a height, my soul had come in contact with the Divine Spirit, and this force, so pure, so holy, so mighty, had overwhelmed me. . . We could not remove our eyes from His glorious face; we heard all that He said; we drank tea with Him at His bidding; but existence seemed suspended; and when He arose and suddenly left us, we came back with a start to life; but never again, oh! never again, thank God, the same life on this earth.’ ‘In the might and majesty of His presence,’ that same pilgrim, recalling the last interview accorded the party of which she was a member, has testified, ‘our fear was turned to perfect faith, our weakness into strength, our sorrow into hope, and ourselves forgotten in our love for Him. As we all sat before Him, waiting to hear His words, some of the believers wept bitterly. He bade them dry their tears, but they could not for a moment. So again He asked them for His sake not to weep, nor would He talk to us and teach us until all tears were banished. . .’”⁴³

So enamored with the love of God did these souls become that the Guardian refers to them as “God-intoxicated pilgrims”. Following their return to France and the United States, efforts to spread Bahá’u’lláh’s message intensified, and receptivity proved to be great. The tempo of teaching continued to gather momentum, and eventually ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself resolved that, as soon as He was free to do so, He would undertake a personal mission to the West.

A decade would pass before ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would embark on His historic travels to Europe and North America. During those ten years, He nurtured the newly formed Bahá’í communities through the many Tablets He revealed to early believers, the successive messengers and teachers He sent to them, and the verbal messages transmitted to them by a continual flow of pilgrims. As a result, the communities became increasingly consolidated, especially in North America, despite the crisis that Dr. Khayru’lláh created upon his return from pilgrimage. This foolish and ambitious man had become blinded by his own accomplishments. Hoping that he could become the leader of the community in America, he allowed himself to be seduced by Muḥammad-‘Alí and his associates and violated the Covenant. As is the case with every episode of Covenant-breaking, his efforts to divide the Bahá’í community failed in the end. However, he caused a great deal of consternation among the friends. To dispel their confusion, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá dispatched to America such loyal and knowledgeable servants of the Cause as Mírzá Abul-Faḍl, who deepened the believers’ understanding of the teachings.

The fruit of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ceaseless labors was a strong, energetic American Bahá’í community, ready to take on any challenge. Its zeal was demonstrated by the decision of the small band of believers in Chicago to initiate the monumental task of building the Mother Temple of the West. With the assistance of their fellow-believers in various parts of the country, they managed to raise the funds necessary to make an initial payment towards the purchase of two adjoining plots of land on the shores of Lake Michigan, in the vicinity of Chicago. A year later in March 1909, following instructions received from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, thirty-nine delegates from localities around the country assembled in that city and established a permanent national organization, known as the Bahá’í Temple Unity. This organization, recognized under the law, was given full legal authority to hold title to the property of the Temple. Contributions for this historic enterprise arrived from countries around the world, as well as from cities across the country. By 1910, two years prior to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s arrival in America, a sum of twenty thousand dollars had been raised—a significant sum at the time and a sign of the solidarity of Bahá’u’lláh’s followers in both the East and the West.

This is only the briefest account of the rise of the Faith in the West. There are many stories associated with this extraordinary period in the history of the Cause and with the receptive souls that were awakened by the summons of Bahá’u’lláh. You may wish to undertake your own inquiry into the life of one of the early Western believers and make a short presentation to the members of your study group. Besides those mentioned in this section—Thornton Chase, Lua Getsinger, May Ellis Maxwell, and Robert Turner—believers like Laura Barney, Thomas Breakwell, Ella Cooper, Hippolyte Dreyfus, John Esslemont, Helen Goodall, Edwin Fischer, Ethel J. Rosenberg, and Consul Schwarz will inspire generations to come and serve as testimony to the power of the Covenant that Bahá’u’lláh has established with humanity. In presenting the account of the life of one of these believers, or some story revolving around them, try to show how each was quickened by the power of the Covenant. Such research may prove difficult if the necessary material is not available to you. In that case, you may wish to keep this assignment in mind, should you ever come across the names of one of these early believers in the future.

SECTION 21

The entombment of the Báb’s remains on Mt. Carmel is another accomplishment that we need to consider in our brief survey of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ministry.

In the middle of the second night following the execution of the Báb and His companion, Anís, in 1850, a devoted believer removed their mangled bodies from the edge of the moat outside Tabríz where they had been cast and took them to a silk factory owned by one of the friends. Their precious remains were laid in a wooden casket, which was then carried to a place of safety. Later the casket was taken to Tīhrán at Bahá’u’lláh’s instruction and kept hidden until 1899. That year, following directives issued by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the casket was brought overland to Beirut and by sea to ‘Akká, arriving there on 31 January 1899.

In the same year, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá laid the cornerstone for the edifice on Mount Carmel that would be built on the site selected by Bahá’u’lláh Himself to receive the Báb’s remains. On four occasions the Blessed Beauty had visited Haifa. During one of these visits, when His tent was pitched on the slope of that mountain, He had pointed out to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the site which was to serve as the permanent resting-place of the Báb. Though construction on the monument began a

few months after the cornerstone was in place, nearly a decade would pass before ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would be able to complete the historic task entrusted to Him by His Father. Shoghi Effendi explains:

“The long-drawn out negotiations with the shrewd and calculating owner of the building-site of the holy Edifice, who, under the influence of the Covenant-breakers, refused for a long time to sell; the exorbitant price at first demanded for the opening of a road leading to that site and indispensable to the work of construction; the interminable objections raised by officials, high and low, whose easily aroused suspicions had to be allayed by repeated explanations and assurances given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself; the dangerous situation created by the monstrous accusations brought by Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí and his associates regarding the character and purpose of that building; the delays and complications caused by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s prolonged and enforced absence from Haifa, and His consequent inability to supervise in person the vast undertaking He had initiated—all these were among the principal obstacles which He, at so critical a period in His ministry, had to face and surmount ere He could execute in its entirety the Plan, the outline of which Bahá’u’lláh had communicated to Him on the occasion of one of His visits to Mt. Carmel.”⁴⁴

No obstacle could, of course, prevent the fulfillment of God’s purpose:

“Every stone of that building, every stone of the road leading to it,” He, many a time was heard to remark, ‘I have with infinite tears and at tremendous cost, raised and placed in position.’ ‘One night,’ He, according to an eye-witness, once observed, ‘I was so hemmed in by My anxieties that I had no other recourse than to recite and repeat over and over again a prayer of the Báb which I had in My possession, the recital of which greatly calmed Me. The next morning the owner of the plot himself came to Me, apologized and begged Me to purchase his property.’”⁴⁵

Finally, on Naw-Rúz day in 1909, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had a marble sarcophagus, offered as a token of love by the Bahá’ís of Rangoon, taken to the vault prepared for it. That evening, by the light of a single lamp, He laid within it, with His own hands—in the presence of believers from the East and from the West—the wooden casket containing the sacred remains of the Báb and His companion. With these words does Shoghi Effendi describe that event:

“When all was finished, and the earthly remains of the Martyr-Prophet of Shíráz were, at long last, safely deposited for their everlasting rest in the bosom of God’s holy mountain, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Who had cast aside His turban, removed His shoes and thrown off His cloak, bent low over the still open sarcophagus, His silver hair waving about His head and His face transfigured and luminous, rested His forehead on the border of the wooden casket, and, sobbing aloud, wept with such a weeping that all those who were present wept with Him. That night He could not sleep, so overwhelmed was He with emotion.”⁴⁶

From such an extraordinary beginning, the world administrative center of the Faith would be brought into existence on the slope of Mount Carmel, emerging as a symbol of the majesty of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh. Near the mausoleum of the Báb, along a path in the shape of an arc traced by Shoghi Effendi, four edifices would be erected. Its apex would be crowned with the

Seat of the Universal House of Justice, flanked by the International Archives, the Centre for the Study of the Texts, and the International Teaching Centre Building. The mausoleum itself, embellished by a golden-domed structure, would become the focal point of eighteen terraces, nine rising above it to the mountain's crest and nine cascading below it to the foot. Gardens of exquisite beauty would be laid around them all. The following words of the Universal House of Justice, written in 2001 on the occasion of the completion of the construction projects, put in perspective the significance of that singular act, on that portentous Naw-Rúz evening, many decades before:

“The majestic buildings that now stand along the Arc traced for them by Shoghi Effendi on the slope of the Mountain of God, together with the magnificent flight of garden terraces that embrace the Shrine of the Báb, are an outward expression of the immense power animating the Cause we serve. They offer timeless witness to the fact that the followers of Bahá’u’lláh have successfully laid the foundations of a worldwide community transcending all differences that divide the human race, and have brought into existence the principal institutions of a unique and unassailable Administrative Order that shapes this community’s life. In the transformation that has taken place on Mount Carmel, the Bahá’í Cause emerges as a visible and compelling reality on the global stage, as the focal centre of forces that will, in God’s good time, bring about the reconstruction of society, and as a mystic source of spiritual renewal for all who turn to it.”⁴⁷

So many beautiful photographs are available of the Shrine of the Báb, “the Spot round which the Concourse on high circle in adoration,”⁴⁸ its Terraces and the other edifices on Mount Carmel. You and your fellow participants may wish to bring some to your next meeting, simply to enjoy the sheer splendor of the world administrative center of the Faith, remembering that the slope of the mountain was but barren land in the days of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

SECTION 22

The establishment of the Faith in the Western Hemisphere is, we have already noted, one of the most significant achievements associated with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ministry. His decade-long effort to nurture the emerging community there eventually culminated, as He had promised, in His historic travels to the West.

One September afternoon in the year 1910, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá set sail from Haifa for Egypt. From there He intended to proceed to Europe. Approaching seventy years of age at the time, He was in poor health, having spent nearly a lifetime in exile and imprisonment. Yet, once he was free, He arose “with sublime courage, confidence and resolution”, Shoghi Effendi tells us, “to consecrate what little strength remained to Him, in the evening of His life, to a service of such heroic proportions that no parallel to it is to be found in the annals of the first Bahá’í century.”⁴⁹ The Guardian writes:

“He Who, in His own words, had entered prison as a youth and left it an old man, Who never in His life had faced a public audience, had attended no school, had never moved in Western circles, and was unfamiliar with Western customs and language, had arisen not only to proclaim from pulpit and platform, in some of the

chief capitals of Europe and in the leading cities of the North American continent, the distinctive verities enshrined in His Father’s Faith, but to demonstrate as well the Divine origin of the Prophets gone before Him, and to disclose the nature of the tie binding them to that Faith.”⁵⁰

After a brief sojourn stay in Egypt, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá embarked on a ship for Europe but, because of His health, was forced to land at the port in Alexandria and postpone His voyage. The following year, on 11 August 1911, He sailed with a party of four for London, where He remained for about one month before proceeding to Paris. He returned to Egypt in December to pass the winter and embarked on His second journey to the West on 25 March 1912, arriving in New York two and a half weeks later. In the course of His eight-month tour of North America, He stopped in over forty cities in the United States and Canada. He then made His way back to Europe, where He visited England, Scotland, France, Germany, Hungary and Austria. On 12 June 1913 He sailed from France for Egypt, and He returned to Haifa six months later, concluding His historic journeys on 5 December 1913.

Throughout His travels ‘Abdu’l-Bahá displayed “a vitality, a courage, a single-mindedness, a consecration to the task He had set Himself to achieve”⁵¹ that astonished those who had the privilege of observing Him from day to day. He gave hundreds of public addresses, private talks, and interviews on both continents. His first public appearance took place on 10 September 1911, soon after His arrival in London. From the pulpit of the City Temple, He addressed an overflowing crowd, proclaiming in the clearest terms the oneness of religion and the unity of all races, religions, and classes. The Guardian sums up in these words the social principles of the Faith which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá presented on the many occasions that followed, before audiences of all types:

“The independent search after truth, unfettered by superstition or tradition; the oneness of the entire human race, the pivotal principle and fundamental doctrine of the Faith; the basic unity of all religions; the condemnation of all forms of prejudice, whether religious, racial, class or national; the harmony which must exist between religion and science; the equality of men and women, the two wings on which the bird of human kind is able to soar; the introduction of compulsory education; the adoption of a universal auxiliary language; the abolition of the extremes of wealth and poverty; the institution of a world tribunal for the adjudication of disputes between nations; the exaltation of work, performed in the spirit of service, to the rank of worship; the glorification of justice as the ruling principle in human society, and of religion as a bulwark for the protection of all peoples and nations; and the establishment of a permanent and universal peace as the supreme goal of all mankind—these stand out as the essential elements of that Divine polity which He proclaimed to leaders of public thought as well as to the masses at large in the course of these missionary journeys.”⁵²

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also warned audiences of the impending conflict that would set Europe ablaze, if the leaders of the world failed to act. Sadly, all too soon World War I would break out as He had foreshadowed. Yet He made it clear that, no matter what the course of immediate events, the “banner of the unity of mankind would be hoisted, that the tabernacle of universal peace would be raised and the world become another world.” Month after month, to the rich and poor, young and old, in parks and public squares, at receptions and banquets, in slums and in mansions, He delivered His Father’s message. In all quarters there was marked receptivity to the

teachings of the Faith. Even the press was quick to appreciate the import of the message He brought to people of all walks of life.

During His travels, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá devoted an equal amount of energy to deepening the community of followers that had arisen in Europe and North America. Among the many events associated with His visit to the community in the West, two are particularly noteworthy. While in Chicago, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá laid with His own hands the cornerstone of the House of Worship on the recently purchased property facing Lake Michigan. Bahá’ís from both the East and the West assembled on that occasion. “The power which has gathered you here today notwithstanding the cold and windy weather is, indeed, mighty and wonderful,” He addressed those present. “It is the power of God, the divine favor of Bahá’u’lláh which has drawn you together. We praise God that through His constraining love human souls are assembled and associated in this way.”⁵³

Earlier, in New York City, He had chosen to affirm the implications of the Covenant instituted by Bahá’u’lláh. Following the reading of the Tablet of the Branch, which had recently been translated into English, He made a formal proclamation of His station before a general assembly of believers. One of those present left a record of the words He uttered on that occasion:

“...I am the Covenant, appointed by Bahá’u’lláh. And no one can refute His Word. This is the Testament of Bahá’u’lláh. You will find it in the Holy Book of Aqdas. Go forth and proclaim, ‘This is the Covenant of God in your midst.’”⁵⁴

In recognition of that momentous event, New York City was henceforth designated the “City of the Covenant”.

These few paragraphs fall short of conveying the full import of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s travels to the West. Perhaps what would be most useful now is for you to read with the other members of your group the following passage written by the Guardian:

“Who knows what thoughts flooded the heart of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as He found Himself the central figure of such memorable scenes as these? Who knows what thoughts were uppermost in His mind as He sat at breakfast beside the Lord Mayor of London, or was received with extraordinary deference by the Khedive himself in his palace, or as He listened to the cries of ‘Alláh-u-Abhá’ and to the hymns of thanksgiving and praise that would herald His approach to the numerous and brilliant assemblages of His enthusiastic followers and friends organized in so many cities of the American continent? Who knows what memories stirred within Him as He stood before the thundering waters of Niagara, breathing the free air of a far distant land, or gazed, in the course of a brief and much-needed rest, upon the green woods and countryside in Glenwood Springs, or moved with a retinue of Oriental believers along the paths of the Trocadero gardens in Paris, or walked alone in the evening beside the majestic Hudson on Riverside Drive in New York, or as He paced the terrace of the Hotel du Parc at Thonon-les-Bains, overlooking the Lake of Geneva, or as He watched from Serpentine Bridge in London the pearly chain of lights beneath the trees stretching as far as the eye could see? Memories of the sorrows, the poverty, the overhanging doom of His earlier years; memories of His mother who sold her gold buttons to provide Him, His brother and His sister with sustenance, and who was forced, in her darkest hours, to place a handful of dry flour in the palm of His hand to appease His hunger; of His own childhood when

pursued and derided by a mob of ruffians in the streets of Tīhrán; of the damp and gloomy room, formerly a morgue, which He occupied in the barracks of ‘Akká and of His imprisonment in the dungeon of that city—memories such as these must surely have thronged His mind. Thoughts, too, must have visited Him of the Báb’s captivity in the mountain fastnesses of Ádhirbáyján, when at night time He was refused even a lamp, and of His cruel and tragic execution when hundreds of bullets riddled His youthful breast. Above all His thoughts must have centered on Bahá’u’lláh, Whom He loved so passionately and Whose trials He had witnessed and had shared from His boyhood. The vermin-infested Síyáh-Chál of Tīhrán; the bastinado inflicted upon Him in Ámul; the humble fare which filled His *kaškúl* while He lived for two years the life of a dervish in the mountains of Kurdistán; the days in Baghdád when He did not even possess a change of linen, and when His followers subsisted on a handful of dates; His confinement behind the prison-walls of ‘Akká, when for nine years even the sight of verdure was denied Him; and the public humiliation to which He was subjected at government headquarters in that city—pictures from the tragic past such as these must have many a time overpowered Him with feelings of mingled gratitude and sorrow, as He witnessed the many marks of respect, of esteem, and honor now shown Him and the Faith which He represented. ‘O Bahá’u’lláh! What hast Thou done?’ He, as reported by the chronicler of His travels, was heard to exclaim one evening as He was being swiftly driven to fulfill His third engagement of the day in Washington, ‘O Bahá’u’lláh! May my life be sacrificed for Thee! O Bahá’u’lláh! May my soul be offered up for Thy sake! How full were Thy days with trials and tribulations! How severe the ordeals Thou didst endure! How solid the foundation Thou hast finally laid, and how glorious the banner Thou didst hoist!’”⁵⁵

After you have read the passage with your group, consider with the other members how the historical events described by the Guardian are a testimony to the power inherent in the Covenant established by Bahá’u’lláh.

SECTION 23

To complete our brief survey of the achievements of the Faith during ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ministry, let us now undertake a review of its systematic expansion and consolidation worldwide, in both the East and the West, under His guidance.

Even prior to the inauguration of His ministry, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s influence in His native land, which He had not seen during the long years of exile since His childhood, was notable. As early as 1875, responding to His Father’s instruction, He had addressed a lengthy message to the rulers and people of Persia that was later published under the title *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. The message began with the following passage extolling the power of thought and then set out the principles that should guide the shaping of Persian society or, in fact, any society:

“In the Name of God the Clement, the Merciful. Praise and thanksgiving be unto Providence that out of all the realities in existence He has chosen the reality of man and has honored it with intellect and wisdom, the two most luminous lights in either world. Through the agency of this great endowment, He has in every epoch cast on

the mirror of creation new and wonderful configurations. If we look objectively upon the world of being, it will become apparent that from age to age, the temple of existence has continually been embellished with a fresh grace, and distinguished with an ever-varying splendor, deriving from wisdom and the power of thought.”⁵⁶

This message foreshadowed the guidance that would later flow from the pen of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to His homeland. Following the ascension of Bahá’u’lláh, the believers in Persia, who had received infinite bounties from the Manifestation of God, were now nurtured by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s wise and loving care. Through a stream of Tablets, some sent to the remotest villages in the country, He was able not only to stimulate the expansion of the Persian Bahá’í community but also to effect a profound transformation in its collective life. The number of the Faith’s adherents multiplied rapidly in every region of the country during His ministry, and the first systematic attempts were made to organize the teaching work undertaken by the Persian believers. It was also during this period that rudimentary consultative bodies were established—the forerunners of future Assemblies—enabling the community to take on the challenge of administering its own affairs.

Moreover, at a time when state schools were practically non-existent in the country, and when the education given in existing religious institutions was defective, the earliest Bahá’í schools were established, some of which would eventually gain national renown. With the assistance of visiting Bahá’ís from both Europe and America—nurses, instructors, and physicians—clinics and other medical facilities would follow. In the span of three decades the Bahá’í community had been so strengthened that, despite prevalent misconceptions about the Faith, the nobility of character of its members was acknowledged by high and low alike.

It was not only through Tablets that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was able to encourage the development of the Persian Bahá’í community. The steady stream of believers who traveled to the Holy Land returned home galvanized by the vision of the Faith imparted to them by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. And as the community of followers in Persia became increasingly consolidated under His guidance, many began to arise to carry the message of the Faith to other parts of the world and to reinforce the efforts of their fellow believers in the few outposts already established.

In India and Burma to the East, the scope of Bahá’í activity gradually expanded as people from diverse religious backgrounds embraced the Faith. In one district in Burma, a community of no less than eight hundred Bahá’ís operated its own school and hospital, as well as land for collective cultivation, the proceeds of which were used to advance the interests of the Faith. In Japan, in China, and in Hawaii Bahá’í teachers, some from the East and others from the West, traveled and settled. In all of these places the evidences of the guiding hand of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá could be seen. He Himself had expressed the desire to travel to China and is reported to have said:

“China, China, China-ward the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh must march. Where is that holy, sanctified Bahá’í to become the teacher of China! China has most great capability. The Chinese people are most simple-hearted and truth-seeking. The Bahá’í teacher of the Chinese people must first be imbued with their spirit, know their sacred literature, study their national customs and speak to them from their own standpoint and their own terminologies. He must entertain no thought of his own but ever think of their spiritual welfare. In China one can teach many souls and train and educate such divine personages that each one of them may become the

bright candle of the world of humanity. Truly I say the Chinese are free from any deceit and hypocrisies and are prompted with ideal motives. Had I been feeling well I would have taken a journey to China myself! . . .”⁵⁷

Meanwhile, the foundations of the Faith were systematically strengthened in centers scattered across Central Asia to the shores of the Mediterranean. In ‘Iráq, steps were taken at ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s instruction to restore the House occupied by His Father in Baghdád, where a small community faced with constant opposition continued valiantly to administer its affairs. The first local community in Tunis was firmly established. In Egypt a steady increase in the number of the adherents of the Faith was accompanied by a general expansion in its activities, including the translation into Arabic and the dissemination of some of the most important Writings of Bahá’u’lláh revealed in Persian. Small groups of Bahá’ís sprang up in the Caucasus through the efforts of pilgrims traveling from Persia to the Holy Land. One of the most significant achievements of the period, however, was the erection of the first Mashriqu’l-Adhkár of the Bahá’í world in the city of ‘Ishqábád, located in the Russian province of Turkestan—a project undertaken by the thriving Bahá’í community there and fostered at every stage in its development by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

Likewise, the nascent communities in North America and Europe continued to be the recipients of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s constant encouragement and unerring guidance. Following His travels to the West, Bahá’í centers gradually multiplied, new periodicals were published, translations of the Writings were printed and circulated in English, French, and German, and initial attempts to organize the affairs and consolidate the foundations of the communities were undertaken. By the close of His ministry, the excavations for the Mother Temple of the West had been carried out and a contract placed for beginning its construction.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s tireless efforts for the promotion of His Father’s Faith worldwide culminated towards the close of His life in the revelation of the Tablets of the Divine Plan. In these Tablets He traced a broad outline for the systematic propagation of the Faith and charged the small body of believers in Canada and the United States with the task of ensuring that the Divine message would reach the remotest corners on Earth. Among the first to respond to His call were Hyde and Clara Dunn who promptly forsook their home in California and settled as pioneers in Australia, opening that continent to the Faith. Designated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá “herald of the Kingdom” and “harbinger of the Covenant”, Martha Root embarked in 1919 in response to His summons on the first of her historic journeys which were to extend over a period of twenty years and to carry her several times around the globe. Not long after her departure Leonora Holsapple Armstrong set out from her native state of Massachusetts and settled in Brazil, the first pioneer to Latin America. It was to such souls and those who would follow in their footsteps that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá referred in the Tablets of the Divine Plan as “sanctified from attachment to this earth” and “vivified with the breaths of eternal life”⁵⁸—those who would “illumine this dark universe and quicken to life this dead world”⁵⁹.

In the next two units of this book, we will see how the Grand Design delineated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has proceeded to unfold through successive stages. You know that, at the present stage, Bahá’ís everywhere are focused on advancing the process of the entry of humanity into the Cause by troops. For now, then, you may wish to think about your own participation in the Divine Plan and write a paragraph or two describing the contributions you hope to make towards its successful execution.

Some rose-water was brought to Him, of which He drank, after which He again lay down, and when offered food, distinctly remarked: ‘You wish Me to take some food, and I am going?’ A minute later His spirit had winged its flight to its eternal abode, to be gathered, at long last, to the glory of His beloved Father, and taste the joy of everlasting reunion with Him.”⁶⁰

Shoghi Effendi then describes for us in some detail the events that followed as news of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s sudden and unexpected passing spread throughout the city and across the globe. No less than ten thousand people assembled on Tuesday morning for the funeral procession—among them Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Druzes; Egyptians, Greeks, Turks, Arabs, and Kurds; Europeans and Americans; men, women, and children; government officials, diplomats, and notables of various kinds. Together, in a sign of admiration and respect, they made their way behind the coffin containing the remains of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as it was carried on the shoulders of His loved ones up the slopes of Mount Carmel to the mausoleum of the Báb. Following a simple ceremony close to the eastern entrance of the Shrine, the coffin was taken to one of its chambers, where it was lowered into its resting-place.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s great work was now ended. Having accepted to live the life of an exile with His Father from the tender age of nine, He had laid the foundations of a worldwide Bahá’í community over the course of His ministry and had set in motion so many of the processes that we continue to pursue today. Perhaps no passage better sums up the achievements of that ministry than the following excerpt from *God Passes By*:

“Through Him the Covenant, that ‘excellent and priceless Heritage’ bequeathed by the Author of the Bahá’í Revelation, had been proclaimed, championed and vindicated. Through the power which that Divine Instrument had conferred upon Him the light of God’s infant Faith had penetrated the West, had diffused itself as far as the Islands of the Pacific, and illumined the fringes of the Australian continent. Through His personal intervention the Message, Whose Bearer had tasted the bitterness of a life-long captivity, had been noised abroad, and its character and purpose disclosed, for the first time in its history, before enthusiastic and representative audiences in the chief cities of Europe and of the North American continent. Through His unrelaxing vigilance the holy remains of the Báb, brought forth at long last from their fifty-year concealment, had been safely transported to the Holy Land and permanently and befittingly enshrined in the very spot which Bahá’u’lláh Himself had designated for them and had blessed with His presence. Through His bold initiative the first Mashríqu’l-Adhkár of the Bahá’í world had been reared in Central Asia, in Russian Turkistán, whilst through His unfailing encouragement a similar enterprise, of still vaster proportions, had been undertaken, and its land dedicated by Himself in the heart of the North American continent. Through the sustaining grace overshadowing Him since the inception of His ministry His royal adversary had been humbled to the dust, the arch-breaker of His Father’s Covenant had been utterly routed, and the danger which, ever since Bahá’u’lláh had been banished to Turkish soil, had been threatening the heart of the Faith, definitely removed. In pursuance of His instructions, and in conformity with the principles enunciated and the laws ordained by His Father, the rudimentary institutions, heralding the formal inauguration of the Administrative Order to be founded after His passing, had taken shape and been established. Through His unremitting labors, as reflected in the treatises He composed, the

thousands of Tablets He revealed, the discourses He delivered, the prayers, poems and commentaries He left to posterity, mostly in Persian, some in Arabic and a few in Turkish, the laws and principles, constituting the warp and woof of His Father’s Revelation, had been elucidated, its fundamentals restated and interpreted, its tenets given detailed application and the validity and indispensability of its verities fully and publicly demonstrated. Through the warnings He sounded, an unheeding humanity, steeped in materialism and forgetful of its God, had been apprized of the perils threatening to disrupt its ordered life, and made, in consequence of its persistent perversity, to sustain the initial shocks of that world upheaval which continues, until the present day, to rock the foundations of human society. And lastly, through the mandate He had issued to a valiant community, the concerted achievements of whose members had shed so great a lustre on the annals of His own ministry, He had set in motion a Plan which, soon after its formal inauguration, achieved the opening of the Australian continent, which, in a later period, was to be instrumental in winning over the heart of a royal convert to His Father’s Cause, and which, today, through the irresistible unfoldment of its potentialities, is so marvelously quickening the spiritual life of all the Republics of Latin America as to constitute a befitting conclusion to the records of an entire century.”⁶¹

In the next few sections we will study ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament, a document to which Shoghi Effendi refers as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “greatest legacy to posterity” and the “brightest emanation of His mind”, and we will examine some of its fundamental statements related to the Covenant. Before moving on, you may wish to complete the following sentences on the basis of the above passage:

1. Through ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the Covenant, the “excellent and priceless Heritage” given to us by Bahá’u’lláh had been _____

2. Through the power that the Covenant had conferred on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the light of the Faith had _____

3. Through ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s intervention, Bahá’u’lláh’s message had been _____
_____, and its character and purpose had been _____

4. Through ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s unrelaxing vigilance, the holy remains of the Báb, brought forth at long last from their fifty-year concealment, had been _____

5. Through ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s bold initiative, the first Mashriqu’l-Adhkár of the Bahá’í world had been _____
6. Through ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s unfailing encouragement, a project to construct the first Mashriqu’l-Adhkár in North America had been _____
7. Through the sustaining grace overshadowing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá since the inception of His ministry, His royal adversary, the Sultán of the Ottoman empire, had been _____
_____, the arch-breaker of the Covenant, Muḥammad-‘Alí, had been _____
_____ and the danger which, since Bahá’u’lláh banishment to Turkish soil, had been threatening the heart of the Faith had been _____
8. In pursuance of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s instruction, and in conformity with the principles enunciated and the laws ordained by His Father, the rudimentary institutions of the Faith had _____
9. Through ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s unremitting labors, the laws and principles of His Father’s Revelation had been _____, its fundamentals _____
_____, its tenets _____,
and the validity and indispensability of its verities _____
_____.
10. Through the warnings ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sounded, an unheeding humanity had been _____

_____ and made _____

11. Through the mandate ‘Abdu’l-Bahá issued to a valiant community, He had set in motion a Plan which, by the time the Guardian had written this passage towards the end of the first century of the Bahá’í Era, had achieved _____
_____, was instrumental in _____
_____ and was so marvelously _____

SECTION 25

The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá consists of three parts. All three were written by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His own hand, and the first two were signed and sealed by Him. Although the sections are undated, it is reasonable to assume, on the basis of events to which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes reference in the document, that the first one was revealed around 1905 and the second and third sometime around 1907.

In the introduction to *God Passes By*, Shoghi Effendi refers to the Will and Testament as the “Charter of Bahá’u’lláh’s New World Order, the offspring resulting from the mystic intercourse between Him Who is the Source of the Law of God and the mind of the One Who is the vehicle and interpreter of that Law.”⁶² In a letter dated 27 February 1929, he explains further that the Will and Testament, together with the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, “constitutes the chief depository wherein are enshrined those priceless elements of that Divine Civilization, the establishment of which is the primary mission of the Bahá’í Faith.”⁶³

The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, as mentioned earlier in the unit, will surely be the object of your reflection over the course of your life. You will study it on many occasions, each time gaining further insight into its profound implications for the progress of the Cause. We will not read the Will and Testament in its entirety here, although many passages will be quoted in full. In reading the passages selected, we should remember that our aim in this unit is to deepen our appreciation of the influence which the power of the Covenant exerts on our individual and collective lives and that we are seeking insight into the statement “the pivot of the oneness of mankind is nothing else but the power of the Covenant”. With these thoughts in mind, you are encouraged first to gain an overview of the content of the entire document by reading through the paragraph below from *God Passes By*, which describes the Will and Testament, and to complete the exercises that follow.

“The Document establishing that Order, the Charter of a future world civilization, which may be regarded in some of its features as supplementary to no less weighty a Book than the Kitáb-i-Aqdas; signed and sealed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá; entirely written with His own hand; its first section composed during one of the darkest periods of His incarceration in the prison-fortress of ‘Akká, proclaims, categorically and unequivocally, the fundamental beliefs of the followers of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh; reveals, in unmistakable language, the twofold character of the Mission of the Báb; discloses the full station of the Author of the Bahá’í Revelation; asserts that ‘all

others are servants unto Him and do His bidding'; stresses the importance of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas; establishes the institution of the Guardianship as a hereditary office and outlines its essential functions; provides the measures for the election of the International House of Justice, defines its scope and sets forth its relationship to that Institution; prescribes the obligations, and emphasizes the responsibilities, of the Hands of the Cause of God; and extolls the virtues of the indestructible Covenant established by Bahá'u'lláh. That Document, furthermore, lauds the courage and constancy of the supporters of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant; expatiates on the sufferings endured by its appointed Center; recalls the infamous conduct of Mírzá Yahyá and his failure to heed the warnings of the Báb; exposes, in a series of indictments, the perfidy and rebellion of Mírzá Muḥammad-'Alí, and the complicity of his son Shu 'á'u'lláh and of his brother Mírzá Badí'u'lláh; reaffirms their excommunication, and predicts the frustration of all their hopes; summons the Afnán (the Báb's kindred), the Hands of the Cause and the entire company of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh to arise unitedly to propagate His Faith, to disperse far and wide, to labor tirelessly and to follow the heroic example of the Apostles of Jesus Christ; warns them against the dangers of association with the Covenant-breakers, and bids them shield the Cause from the assaults of the insincere and the hypocrite; and counsels them to demonstrate by their conduct the universality of the Faith they have espoused, and vindicate its high principles. In that same Document its Author reveals the significance and purpose of the Ḥuqúqu'lláh (Right of God), already instituted in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas; enjoins submission and fidelity towards all monarchs who are just; expresses His longing for martyrdom, and voices His prayers for the repentance as well as the forgiveness of His enemies.”⁶⁴

1. The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

- proclaims _____

- reveals _____

- discloses _____

- asserts _____

- stresses _____

- establishes _____

- outlines _____

- provides _____

- defines _____

- sets forth _____

- prescribes _____

- emphasizes _____

- extolls _____

2. Furthermore, the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

- lauds _____

- expatiates _____

- recalls _____

- exposes _____

- reaffirms _____

- predicts _____

- summons _____

- warns _____

- bids _____

- counsels _____

3. In His Will and Testament, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

- reveals _____

- enjoins _____

- expresses _____

- voices _____

The two statements of Shoghi Effendi quoted in the beginning of the section merit a great deal of reflection. One explains that the Will and Testament is the “Charter of Bahá’u’lláh’s New World Order, the offspring resulting from the mystic intercourse between Him Who is the Source of the Law of God and the mind of the One Who is the vehicle and interpreter of that Law”. The other tells us that the Will and Testament constitutes, together with the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, “the chief depository wherein are enshrined those priceless elements of that Divine Civilization, the establishment of which is the primary mission of the Bahá’í Faith”. It may prove useful for you to discuss these statements briefly in your group and reflect on their significance.

SECTION 26

In the context of safeguarding the unity of the Bahá'í community, we discussed earlier the concept of a center to which all must turn. The Will and Testament ensures that the Bahá'í world would have such a center after 'Abdu'l-Bahá for the remainder of Bahá'u'lláh's Dispensation. Shoghi Effendi tells us that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have “in unequivocal and emphatic language, appointed those twin institutions of the [Universal] House of Justice and of the Guardianship as their chosen Successors, destined to apply the principles, promulgate the laws, protect the institutions, adapt loyally and intelligently the Faith to the requirements of progressive society, and consummate the incorruptible inheritance which the Founders of the Faith have bequeathed to the world.”⁶⁵ In this and the next several sections we will study extracts from the Will and Testament regarding the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice and will see how these two institutions perpetuate Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant with His followers.

The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá formally establishes the institution of the Guardianship. It explicitly names Shoghi Effendi the Guardian, allows for the possibility of other Guardians succeeding him, and sets out in clear terms the conditions according to which such a successor would have to be named. Let us begin by reading the paragraph below.

“O my loving friends! After the passing away of this wronged one, it is incumbent upon the Aghṣán (Branches), the Afnán (Twigs) of the Sacred Lote-Tree, the Hands (pillars) of the Cause of God and the loved ones of the Abhá Beauty to turn unto Shoghi Effendi—the youthful branch branched from the two hallowed and sacred Lote-Trees and the fruit grown from the union of the two offshoots of the Tree of Holiness,—as he is the sign of God, the chosen branch, the guardian of the Cause of God, he unto whom all the Aghṣán, the Afnán, the Hands of the Cause of God and His loved ones must turn. He is the Interpreter of the Word of God and after him will succeed the first-born of his lineal descendants.”⁶⁶

We should analyze with great care this passage, which is central to Bahá'í belief. In the Bahá'í Writings the phrase “the Sacred Lote-Tree” symbolizes the Manifestation of God. The paragraph speaks of “two hallowed and sacred Lote-Trees”, that is, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. You already know that the term “aghṣán”, the plural form of “ghuṣn” in Arabic, means branches. It is employed here and in other instances in the Will and Testament, as in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, to refer to His male descendants. The word “afnán”, you also know, is used to indicate the relatives of the Báb.

The passage refers to Shoghi Effendi as the “chosen branch” and states that he has “branched from the two hallowed and sacred Lote-Trees” and is the “fruit grown from the union of the two offshoots of the Tree of Holiness”. Shoghi Effendi's mother was the daughter of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, making him a direct male descendant of Bahá'u'lláh, while his father was a grandson of a cousin of the Báb's mother and therefore an Afnán.

In this passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is calling upon the descendants of Bahá'u'lláh, the family of the Báb, the Hands of the Cause of God, and the generality of the believers to turn after His passing to Shoghi Effendi. Clearly, then, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was naming Shoghi Effendi as that center which we have said is so essential for the unity of the Cause. He also states unmistakably that Shoghi Effendi is the Interpreter of the Word of God and addresses the question of his successor.

We will reserve our study of this last point for the next section, where we will analyze the above statement in conjunction with other relevant passages from the Will and Testament.

With the above ideas in mind, you are encouraged to reread the passage a number of times until you have committed it to memory. After you have done so, it is suggested that you study the two opening paragraphs from the Will and Testament quoted here, in which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá extolls the Covenant and speaks of Shoghi Effendi in the most exalted terms. To assist you, some exercises are included below. It is hoped that you will be able to memorize these two paragraphs as part of your study.

“All-praise to Him Who, by the Shield of His Covenant, hath guarded the Temple of His Cause from the darts of doubtfulness, Who by the Hosts of His Testament hath preserved the Sanctuary of His most Beneficent Law and protected His Straight and Luminous Path, staying thereby the onslaught of the company of Covenant-breakers, that have threatened to subvert His Divine Edifice; Who hath watched over His Mighty Stronghold and All-Glorious Faith, through the aid of men whom the slander of the slanderer affect not, whom no earthly calling, glory and power can turn aside from the Covenant of God and His Testament, established firmly by His clear and manifest words, writ and revealed by His All-Glorious Pen and recorded in the Preserved Tablet.

“Salutation and praise, blessing and glory rest upon that primal branch of the Divine and Sacred Lote-Tree, grown out, blest, tender, verdant and flourishing from the Twin Holy Trees; the most wondrous, unique and priceless pearl that doth gleam from out the Twin surging seas; upon the offshoots of the Tree of Holiness, the twigs of the Celestial Tree, they that in the Day of the Great Dividing have stood fast and firm in the Covenant; upon the Hands (pillars) of the Cause of God that have diffused widely the Divine Fragrances, declared His Proofs, proclaimed His Faith, published abroad His Law, detached themselves from all things but Him, stood for righteousness in this world, and kindled the Fire of the Love of God in the very hearts and souls of His servants; upon them that have believed, rested assured, stood steadfast in His Covenant and followed the Light that after my passing shineth from the Dayspring of Divine Guidance—for behold! he is the blest and sacred bough that hath branched out from the Twin Holy Trees. Well is it with him that seeketh the shelter of his shade that shadoweth all mankind.”⁶⁷

1. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá begins His Will and Testament by expressing praise to Bahá’u’lláh for having guarded the Temple of His Cause from the darts of doubtfulness by _____
_____.
2. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá expresses praise to Bahá’u’lláh for having preserved the Sanctuary of His most Beneficent Law and protected His Straight and Luminous Path by _____, staying thereby the onslaught of the company of Covenant-breakers, that have threatened to subvert His Divine Edifice.

3. He offers praise to Bahá'u'lláh for having watched over His Mighty Stronghold and All-Glorious Faith, through the aid of men whom _____
_____, whom _____
_____ from the Covenant of God and His Testament.
4. He concludes the opening paragraph by acknowledging that the Testament of Bahá'u'lláh was established firmly by His clear and manifest words, _____
_____ .
5. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá then extols the person of Shoghi Effendi, stating that he has _____ from the Twin Holy Trees.
6. He further praises Shoghi Effendi, referring to him as _____
_____ that does gleam from out the Twin surging seas.
7. Having asked for blessings to rest upon the descendants of Bahá'u'lláh and relatives of the Báb that have stood fast and firm in the Covenant, upon the Hands of the Cause of God, and upon the believers who have stood steadfast in the Covenant, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá again extolls Shoghi Effendi, referring to him as that _____
_____ that has branched out from the Twin Holy Trees.
8. Still referring to Shoghi Effendi, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá states that well is it with those who _____

SECTION 27

In the last section, we read the statement from the Will and Testament that explicitly names Shoghi Effendi the Guardian of the Cause and the authorized interpreter of the Word of God. The Will and Testament then states that “after him will succeed the first-born of his lineal descendants”. The question of succession is elaborated further in the Will as follows:

“O ye beloved of the Lord! It is incumbent upon the guardian of the Cause of God to appoint in his own life-time him that shall become his successor, that differences may not arise after his passing. He that is appointed must manifest in himself detachment from all worldly things, must be the essence of purity, must show in himself the fear of God, knowledge, wisdom and learning. Thus, should the first-born of the guardian of the Cause of God not manifest in himself the truth of the

words:—‘The child is the secret essence of its sire,’ that is, should he not inherit of the spiritual within him (the guardian of the Cause of God) and his glorious lineage not be matched with a goodly character, then must he, (the guardian of the Cause of God) choose another branch to succeed him.

“The Hands of the Cause of God must elect from their own number nine persons that shall at all times be occupied in the important services in the work of the guardian of the Cause of God. The election of these nine must be carried either unanimously or by majority from the company of the Hands of the Cause of God and these, whether unanimously or by a majority vote, must give their assent to the choice of the one whom the guardian of the Cause of God hath chosen as his successor. This assent must be given in such wise as the assenting and dissenting voices may not be distinguished (i.e., secret ballot).”⁶⁸

The above two paragraphs set out the provisions for the appointment of a successor to Shoghi Effendi. They make it clear that the institution of the Guardianship is a hereditary office to be filled by the first-born male child of Shoghi Effendi or another living male descendant of Bahá’u’lláh, that is, another “ghusn”. Answer the following questions:

1. Who is to appoint the successor to the Guardian? _____

2. Why is it stipulated that the Guardian is to appoint his successor during his own life-time? _____

3. Do the above paragraphs make it possible for anyone other than Shoghi Effendi to appoint his successor? _____
4. What qualities must the appointed successor to Shoghi Effendi manifest? _____

5. If the first-born of Shoghi Effendi does not manifest in himself the truth of the words “the child is the secret essence of its sire,” that is, if he does not inherit of “the spiritual within him (the guardian of the Cause of God)” and his glorious lineage is not matched with “a goodly character”, then who can the Guardian name his successor? _____

6. Do the above paragraphs make it possible for Shoghi Effendi to choose a successor outside the lineal descendants of Bahá’u’lláh? _____

7. After Shoghi Effendi has named his successor, who must give assent to the choice of the one that he has chosen? _____

8. How is the assent of the nine Hands of the Cause of God elected from among all the Hands to be given? _____

You probably know that Shoghi Effendi did not have any children, and during his lifetime all the surviving Aghṣán had broken the Covenant, making it impossible for him to fulfill the provisions set out by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His Will and Testament to appoint a successor. The Institution of the Guardianship, then, involves only one Guardian. Through the foundations he laid and the enormous body of writings he left behind—a testimony to the extraordinary capacity with which he was endowed—the institution will continue to exert its influence on the progress of the Faith as it continues to evolve through successive stages under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice to its Golden Age.

SECTION 28

Now let us read the next paragraph of the Will and Testament in which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers largely to the Guardian, but in which He also makes several essential statements about the Universal House of Justice:

“The sacred and youthful branch, the guardian of the Cause of God, as well as the Universal House of Justice to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of the Exalted One (may my life be offered up for them both). Whatsoever they decide is of God. Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God; whoso rebelleth against him and against them hath rebelled against God; whoso opposeth him hath opposed God; whoso contendeth with them hath contended with God; whoso disputeth with him hath disputed with God; whoso denieth him hath denied God; whoso disbelieveth in him hath disbelieved in God; whoso deviateth, separateth himself and turneth aside from him hath in truth deviated, separated himself and turned aside from God. May the wrath, the fierce indignation, the vengeance of God rest upon him! The mighty stronghold shall remain impregnable and safe through obedience to him who is the guardian of the Cause of God. It is incumbent upon the members of the House of Justice, upon all the Aghṣán, the Afnán, the Hands of the Cause of God to show their obedience, submissiveness and subordination unto the guardian of the Cause of God, to turn unto him and be lowly before him. He that opposeth him hath opposed the True One, will make a breach in the Cause of God, will subvert His Word and will become a manifestation of the Center of Sedition. Beware, beware, lest the days after the ascension (of Bahá’u’lláh) be repeated when the Center of Sedition waxed haughty and rebellious and with Divine Unity for his excuse deprived himself and perturbed and poisoned others. No doubt every vainglorious one that purposeth

dissension and discord will not openly declare his evil purposes, nay rather, even as impure gold, will he seize upon divers measures and various pretexts that he may separate the gathering of the people of Bahá. My object is to show that the Hands of the Cause of God must be ever watchful and so soon as they find anyone beginning to oppose and protest against the guardian of the Cause of God, cast him out from the congregation of the people of Bahá and in no wise accept any excuse from him. How often hath grievous error been disguised in the garb of truth, that it might sow the seeds of doubt in the hearts of men!”⁶⁹

The above paragraph is quoted from the first part of the Will and Testament. A similar passage is found in the third section, quoted below:

“O ye the faithful loved ones of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá! It is incumbent upon you to take the greatest care of Shoghi Effendi, the twig that hath branched from and the fruit given forth by the two hallowed and Divine Lote-Trees, that no dust of despondency and sorrow may stain his radiant nature, that day by day he may wax greater in happiness, in joy and spirituality, and may grow to become even as a fruitful tree.

“For he is, after ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the guardian of the Cause of God, the Afnán, the Hands (pillars) of the Cause and the beloved of the Lord must obey him and turn unto him. He that obeyeth him not, hath not obeyed God; he that turneth away from him, hath turned away from God and he that denieth him, hath denied the True One. Beware lest anyone falsely interpret these words, and like unto them that have broken the Covenant after the Day of Ascension (of Bahá’u’lláh) advance a pretext, raise the standard of revolt, wax stubborn and open wide the door of false interpretation. To none is given the right to put forth his own opinion or express his particular conviction. All must seek guidance and turn unto the Center of the Cause and the House of Justice. And he that turneth unto whatsoever else is indeed in grievous error.”⁷⁰

To gain a better understanding of the station of the Guardian of the Cause of God, complete the following sentences in light of the two quotations above:

1. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that the sacred and youthful branch, _____, as well as _____ to be universally _____ and _____, are _____ under the _____ and _____ of Bahá’u’lláh.
2. The Guardian and the Universal House of Justice are _____ under the shelter and _____ of the Báb.
3. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes several emphatic statements about the Guardian to impress upon the friends the absolute necessity of obedience to him. The act of writing down a few of these in the space provided—for example, the statement that whoever rebels against the Guardian has rebelled against God—will help to crystallize this idea in your mind.

SECTION 29

Now let us turn to passages in the Will and Testament that refer to the Universal House of Justice. You know, of course, that Bahá'u'lláh Himself ordained the institution of the Universal House of Justice in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. 'Abdu'l-Bahá confirms its authority in His Will and Testament and provides specific details regarding its election and functions:

“And now, concerning the House of Justice which God hath ordained as the source of all good and freed from all error, it must be elected by universal suffrage, that is, by the believers. Its members must be manifestations of the fear of God and daysprings of knowledge and understanding, must be steadfast in God’s faith and the well-wishers of all mankind. By this House is meant the Universal House of Justice, that is, in all countries a secondary House of Justice must be instituted, and these secondary Houses of Justice must elect the members of the Universal one. Unto this body all things must be referred. It enacteth all ordinances and regulations that are not to be found in the explicit Holy Text. By this body all the difficult problems are to be resolved and the Guardian of the Cause of God is its sacred head and the distinguished member for life of that body. Should he not attend in person its deliberations, he must appoint one to represent him. Should any of the members commit a sin, injurious to the common weal, the guardian of the Cause of God hath at his own discretion the right to expel him, whereupon the people must elect another one in his stead. This House of Justice enacteth the laws and the government enforceth them. The legislative body must reinforce the executive, the executive must aid and assist the legislative body so that through the close union and harmony of these two forces, the foundation of fairness and justice may become firm and strong, that all the regions of the world may become even as Paradise itself.”⁷¹

The above passage treats several subjects that will be addressed over the next few sections. We will discuss in this section the method outlined by 'Abdu'l-Bahá for the election of the Universal House of Justice. In subsequent sections we will consider its sphere of action and will then reflect on the nature of the authority conferred on it. This will be followed by a discussion of the provisions made in the Will and Testament to safeguard the Faith and ensure its steady advancement into the future, whatever circumstances confronted it, by naming Shoghi Effendi the Guardian and by confirming the authority of the Universal House of Justice.

'Abdu'l-Bahá states that the Universal House of Justice is to be elected by “universal suffrage”. This is achieved through a three-stage process. While certain features of this process may change over time according to the decision of the House of Justice, it presently unfolds in the following way. In every national Bahá'í community, all adult believers in good standing, 21 years of age or older, are eligible to take part in unit conventions held once a year throughout the country. At the unit convention the believers vote by secret ballot for one or more delegates. The number of delegates assigned to the various electoral units is in proportion to the number of Bahá'ís resident in each one.

The delegates thus elected gather during the Riḍván period to elect, from among the adult believers of the country, nine persons to serve on the National Spiritual Assembly presently for the term of one administrative year. This annual meeting is called the National Convention. In

every country provisions are in place for the collection of the ballots of any delegates who are unable to attend the annual meeting in person. Beyond the election itself, the National Convention provides an opportunity for consultations to take place among the delegates, consultations which will inform the work of the National Assembly over the coming year. A National Spiritual Assembly is, of course, a “secondary House of Justice” referred to in the passage above. “Spiritual Assembly”, whether Local or National, is a temporary appellation which, Shoghi Effendi has indicated, will gradually be superseded by the “permanent and more appropriate designation of House of Justice” as the “position and aims of the Bahá’í Faith are better understood and more fully recognized”.⁷²

Finally, the process culminates in the election by the members of all National Spiritual Assemblies of nine men, from the Bahá’í community, to serve on the Universal House of Justice. The election is conducted once every five years during the Ríḍván period. Of several days’ duration, the International Bahá’í Convention is held at the administrative and spiritual center of the Faith, where the members of the National Spiritual Assemblies are able to visit the Holy Shrines in preparation for the sacred duty they are called upon to discharge. In approaching this responsibility, they are sheltered in the impregnable stronghold of the Cause, which is protected by the unifying power of the Covenant. Foremost in their minds as they cast their ballots are surely passages like the one above, in which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes the qualities of those who are to serve on such an august body referring to them as the “manifestations of the fear of God” and as “daysprings of knowledge and understanding”, as “steadfast in God’s faith” and as the “well-wishers of all mankind”. Provisions are, of course, made for National Assembly members who, unable to travel to the Holy Land, must cast their ballots in absentia. Though not participating in the electoral process, the Continental Counsellors are called to the World Centre at the same time to be present, with the members of the International Teaching Centre, at the International Convention.

That the membership of the Universal House of Justice, as noted above, is confined to men may well be surprising. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has stated in the plainest terms that this provision was ordained by Bahá’u’lláh Himself and that its wisdom would “ere long be made manifest as clearly as the sun at high noon.”⁷³ Therefore, it is not possible for us to know at the present time the reason for such a stipulation. What we can say with certainty is that, given the unequivocal statements in the Writings establishing the equality between men and women, this restriction can in no way be regarded as a sign of the superiority of men over women.

With this brief description of the electoral process in mind, think about the fact that, having reached a certain age, each one of us becomes an active participant in this sacred process through our involvement in the unit convention. How should we approach our participation in the convention? What kind of thoughts should pervade our hearts and minds when we cast our ballots for those who will serve as delegates to the National Convention? You may wish to discuss these questions in your group.

SECTION 30

The passage we read in the last section, in addition to describing the method for the election of the Universal House of Justice, refers to its functions:

“Unto this body all things must be referred. It enacteth all ordinances and regulations that are not to be found in the explicit Holy Text. By this body all the difficult problems are to be resolved...”⁷⁴

Before examining other statements from the Will and Testament that make reference to the functions of the Universal House of Justice, we should study a few passages from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh. What is important to recognize at the outset is that the powers and duties of the Universal House of Justice are rooted in the revealed Word of Bahá’u’lláh; He entrusts the affairs of humanity into the hands of the members of the Universal House of Justice, referring to them as the Trustees of God and the daysprings of authority:

“This passage, now written by the Pen of Glory, is accounted as part of the Most Holy Book: The men of God’s House of Justice have been charged with the affairs of the people. They, in truth, are the Trustees of God among His servants and the daysprings of authority in His countries.

“O people of God! That which traineth the world is Justice, for it is upheld by two pillars, reward and punishment. These two pillars are the sources of life to the world. Inasmuch as for each day there is a new problem and for every problem an expedient solution, such affairs should be referred to the House of Justice that the members thereof may act according to the needs and requirements of the time. They that, for the sake of God, arise to serve His Cause, are the recipients of divine inspiration from the unseen Kingdom. It is incumbent upon all to be obedient unto them. All matters of State should be referred to the House of Justice, but acts of worship must be observed according to that which God hath revealed in His Book.”⁷⁵

In another passage Bahá'u'lláh calls upon the members of the Universal House of Justice to protect and safeguard the people of the world and to promote their best interests:

“We exhort the men of the House of Justice and command them to ensure the protection and safeguarding of men, women and children. It is incumbent upon them to have the utmost regard for the interests of the people at all times and under all conditions.”⁷⁶

And He further explains:

“It is incumbent upon the Trustees of the House of Justice to take counsel together regarding those things which have not outwardly been revealed in the Book, and to enforce that which is agreeable to them. God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth, and He, verily, is the Provider, the Omniscient.”⁷⁷

These and other passages disclose to us a vision of the grandeur of the Universal House of Justice and the immensity of its ordained sphere of action. The statements of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the Will and Testament broaden this vision and provide insight into the mode of operation of the institution:

“Unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn, and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the truth and the purpose of God Himself.”⁷⁸

And He further states:

“It is incumbent upon these members (of the Universal House of Justice) to gather in a certain place and deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book. Whatsoever they decide has the same effect as the Text itself. Inasmuch as the House of Justice hath power to enact laws that are not expressly recorded in the Book and bear upon daily transactions, so also it hath power to repeal the same. Thus for example, the House of Justice enacteth today a certain law and enforceth it, and a hundred years hence, circumstances having profoundly changed and the conditions having altered, another House of Justice will then have power, according to the exigencies of the time, to alter that law. This it can do because these laws form no part of the divine explicit Text. The House of Justice is both the initiator and the abrogator of its own laws.”⁷⁹

While clearly this small selection of quotations does not touch on all the functions of the Universal House of Justice, we can glean from them at least a few. Below are some of the powers and duties with which the Universal House of Justice has been invested. Reread the above passages and try to identify statements from which these powers and duties have each been derived. Write them in the space provided.

1. To foster that which is conducive to the enlightenment and illumination of souls and the advancement and betterment of the world: _____

2. To advance the interests of the Faith of God: _____

3. To give attention to the development of countries and the stability of states: _____

4. To deliberate and decide upon all problems which have caused differences: _____

5. To elucidate questions that are obscure: _____

6. To enact laws and ordinances not expressly recorded in the Sacred Texts: _____

7. To abrogate, according to the changes and requirements of the time, its own enactments:

8. To provide for the enforcement of its decisions: _____
-
-
-
-

SECTION 31

Even from this brief study of passages referring to the Universal House of Justice, it must be apparent to you that its existence is a feature unique to the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh. Its implications for the perpetuation of the Covenant, particularly as it pertains to the statement “the pivot of the oneness of mankind is nothing else but the power of the Covenant”, are vast. Let us try to gain an understanding of some of these implications.

We know that all the religions of the past have suffered from internal divisions that gave rise to sects. We have already seen how the question of succession was often a cause for confusion among the believers. Invariably other kinds of difficulties, related to the lack of a clear line of succession, confronted every religion. Over the course of time, as society developed and circumstances changed, questions arose about matters not expressly revealed in the Holy Scriptures, about the application of various aspects of the teachings, and about the intended meaning of specific passages. In the absence of an indisputably authoritative source of guidance to which the followers could turn for answers to these questions, profound disagreements emerged and the religion began to break into sects as conflicting views could not be reconciled.

Never can such schisms tear the fabric of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, for its integrity is preserved and its unity safeguarded through the existence of the Universal House of Justice, which is invested with the authority to decide on all matters not explicitly revealed in the Writings, to elucidate questions that are obscure, and to settle all disputes. It is the final arbiter. We should not underestimate just how extraordinary is this feature of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. To consolidate your thinking on this matter, the implications of which are so far-reaching, you are encouraged to reread the following two quotations from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh that you studied in the last section:

“Inasmuch as for each day there is a new problem and for every problem an expedient solution, such affairs should be referred to the House of Justice that the members thereof may act according to the needs and requirements of the time. They that, for the sake of God, arise to serve His Cause, are the recipients of divine inspiration from the unseen Kingdom. It is incumbent upon all to be obedient unto them. All matters of State should be referred to the House of Justice, but acts of worship must be observed according to that which God hath revealed in His Book.”⁸⁰

“It is incumbent upon the Trustees of the House of Justice to take counsel together regarding those things which have not outwardly been revealed in the Book, and to enforce that which is agreeable to them. God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth, and He, verily, is the Provider, the Omniscient.”⁸¹

And now read again the statement below from the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

“It is incumbent upon these members (of the Universal House of Justice) to gather in a certain place and deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book. Whatsoever they decide has the same effect as the Text itself. Inasmuch as the House of Justice hath power to enact laws that are not expressly recorded in the Book and bear upon daily transactions, so also it hath power to repeal the same. Thus for example, the House of Justice enacteth today a certain law and enforceth it, and a hundred years hence, circumstances having profoundly changed and the conditions having altered, another House of Justice will then have power, according to the exigencies of the time, to alter that law. This it can do because these laws form no part of the divine explicit Text. The House of Justice is both the initiator and the abrogator of its own laws.”⁸²

Elaborating on this theme, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states in another Tablet:

“Those matters of major importance which constitute the foundation of the Law of God are explicitly recorded in the Text, but subsidiary laws are left to the House of Justice. The wisdom of this is that the times never remain the same, for change is a necessary quality and an essential attribute of this world, and of time and place. Therefore the House of Justice will take action accordingly. . .

“Briefly, this is the wisdom of referring the laws of society to the House of Justice. In the religion of Islam, similarly, not every ordinance was explicitly revealed; nay not a tenth part of a tenth part was included in the Text; although all matters of major importance were specifically referred to, there were undoubtedly thousands of laws which were unspecified. These were devised by the divines of a later age according to the laws of Islamic jurisprudence, and individual divines made conflicting deductions from the original revealed ordinances. All these were enforced. Today this process of deduction is the right of the body of the House of Justice, and the deductions and conclusions of individual learned men have no authority, unless they are endorsed by the House of Justice. The difference is precisely this, that from the conclusions and endorsements of the body of the House of Justice whose members are elected by and known to the worldwide Bahá’í community, no differences will arise; whereas the conclusions of individual divines and scholars would definitely lead to differences, and result in schism, division, and dispersion. The oneness of the Word would be destroyed, the unity of the Faith would disappear, and the edifice of the Faith of God would be shaken.”⁸³

The existence of the Universal House of Justice ensures that humanity will benefit from a continuous source of guidance for the duration of Bahá’u’lláh’s Dispensation. One need only think of the magnitude of the challenge that the Bahá’í community is called upon to meet in this Day to appreciate the significance of the unique bounty God has bestowed on humanity in the

institution of the House of Justice. The implications for the unity of the community are clear enough. But, together with the other members of your group, think about how the following processes, each connected to the establishment of a world civilization, are affected by the existence of an authoritative source of guidance.

- The growth of the Faith
- The spiritual vigor of the Bahá'í community
- The administration of justice
- The promotion of peace
- The abolition of prejudice
- The social and economic development of nations
- The equitable distribution of resources
- The safeguarding and enforcement of that rectitude of conduct which the Law of God enjoins
- The development of the spiritual and intellectual capacities of the individual
- The extension of spiritual education to children
- The preservation of human honor

SECTION 32

In the last few lessons we have examined the method for the election of the Universal House of Justice and its powers and duties. We should now pause to reflect on an important concept, one that surely you have noted over the course of your study of these lessons. The authority conferred on the Universal House of Justice carries with it the promise of Bahá'u'lláh that it will be the recipient of divine inspiration. “God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth” are His words. Passages throughout the Will and Testament reiterate this promise, and it is therefore good for you to reread the ones from that document which we have studied in earlier sections:

“And now, concerning the House of Justice which God hath ordained as the source of all good and freed from all error...”⁸⁴

“Unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn, and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the truth and the purpose of God Himself. Whoso doth deviate therefrom is verily of them that love discord, hath shown forth malice, and turned away from the Lord of the Covenant.”⁸⁵

“The sacred and youthful branch, the guardian of the Cause of God, as well as the Universal House of Justice to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of the Exalted One (may my life be offered up for them both). Whatsoever

they decide is of God. Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God; whoso rebelleth against him and against them hath rebelled against God; whoso opposeth him hath opposed God; whoso contendeth with them hath contended with God....”⁸⁶

“To none is given the right to put forth his own opinion or express his particular conviction. All must seek guidance and turn unto the Center of the Cause and the House of Justice. And he that turneth unto whatsoever else is indeed in grievous error.”⁸⁷

In other Tablets, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá speaks in equally unequivocal terms on this matter so central to the Covenant:

“Let it not be imagined that the House of Justice will take any decision according to its own concepts and opinions. God forbid! The Supreme House of Justice will take decisions and establish laws through the inspiration and confirmation of the Holy Spirit, because it is in the safekeeping and under the shelter and protection of the Ancient Beauty, and obedience to its decisions is a bounden and essential duty and an absolute obligation, and there is no escape for anyone.

“Say, O People: Verily the Supreme House of Justice is under the wings of your Lord, the Compassionate, the All-Merciful, that is under His protection, His care, and His shelter; for He has commanded the firm believers to obey that blessed, sanctified, and all-subduing body, whose sovereignty is divinely ordained and of the Kingdom of Heaven and whose laws are inspired and spiritual.”⁸⁸

“Beware, beware lest anyone create a rift or stir up sedition. Should there be differences of opinion, the Supreme House of Justice would immediately resolve the problems. Whatever will be its decision, by majority vote, shall be the real truth, inasmuch as that House is under the protection, unerring guidance, and care of the one true Lord. He shall guard it from error and will protect it under the wing of His sanctity and infallibility. He who opposes it is cast out and will eventually be of the defeated.”⁸⁹

An individual believer’s relationship with the Universal House of Justice is a profoundly personal one. It is left to each of us to reflect on the posture of love and obedience we assume towards that body divinely ordained by Bahá’u’lláh to guide humanity. Our understanding of its powers will, of course, deepen over time as we witness it act in the world in accordance with Divine will and feel our hearts fill with a profound sense of gratitude and awe.

One question that deserves our reflection here is what it means to obey the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. The word “obedience” can conjure up various notions in people’s minds. There are rules and instructions that one obeys because one has no other choice. Then there are those decisions that are obeyed for the sake of unity and harmony, whether or not one agrees with them. Our obedience to the guidance we receive from the Universal House of Justice is of a different kind altogether. Obedience to its guidance springs from within us. We embrace its guidance and at every moment are striving to align our thoughts and actions with its wishes.

This is the obedience of a humanity that has come of age. It has the capacity to grasp the implications of a system as far-reaching as the one ordained by Bahá'u'lláh and to appreciate the value of its institutions. Indeed, that His teachings call for the independent search after truth suggests that it is our understanding of the workings of His system which compels us to place our trust in the institutions it comprises. We know that, in the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'u'lláh has given humanity a body which, unlike any social institutions of the past, is completely protected from the misuse of authority by God Himself. Far from childish acceptance, then, obedience to the Universal House of Justice involves conscious acknowledgement that humanity has reached the stage in its development that makes possible the establishment of an elected center to which all can turn in love and loyalty.

SECTION 33

Having examined in some detail the institutions of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice, we are ready to reflect on how the Will and Testament perpetuates the Covenant that Bahá'u'lláh made with His followers. We will do this by studying a passage from the second part of the Will and Testament, portions of which we have already seen.

As mentioned earlier, on the basis of references made in the document, it is reasonable to conclude that the second part of the Will and Testament was written around 1907. As you know, at that time, the machinations of the Covenant-breakers had once again raised suspicion about 'Abdu'l-Bahá among the authorities, and the Second Commission of Inquiry had arrived in the Holy Land from the capital of the Ottoman empire to investigate Him. There was every indication that He would be executed or exiled. Though urged by the friends to protect Himself and leave the country, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refused to flee in the face of danger. He wrote a Tablet to a trusted believer and relative of the Báb, Hájí Mírzá Muḥammad-Taqí, stating clearly that, should anything happen to Him, he should do everything in his power to ensure the Universal House of Justice was elected.

Let us read the following paragraph from the second part of the Will and Testament, written at that time. You will see that it begins by describing the danger that 'Abdu'l-Bahá faced and then makes a statement about the fundamental beliefs of the followers of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. Within this context, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to the Most Holy Book and to the Universal House of Justice:

“O dearly beloved friends! I am now in very great danger and the hope of even an hour’s life is lost to me. I am thus constrained to write these lines for the protection of the Cause of God, the preservation of His Law, the safeguarding of His Word and the safety of His Teachings. By the Ancient Beauty! This wronged one hath in no wise borne nor doth he bear a grudge against any one; towards none doth he entertain any ill-feeling and uttereth no word save for the good of the world. My supreme obligation, however, of necessity, prompteth me to guard and preserve the Cause of God. Thus, with the greatest regret, I counsel you saying: Guard ye the Cause of God, protect His law and have the utmost fear of discord. This is the foundation of the belief of the people of Bahá (may my life be offered up for them): ‘His Holiness, the Exalted One (the Báb), is the Manifestation of the Unity and Oneness of God and the Forerunner of the Ancient Beauty. His Holiness the Abhá

Beauty (may my life be a sacrifice for His steadfast friends) is the Supreme Manifestation of God and the Dayspring of His Most Divine Essence. All others are servants unto Him and do His bidding.’ Unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn, and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the truth and the purpose of God Himself. Whoso doth deviate therefrom is verily of them that love discord, hath shown forth malice, and turned away from the Lord of the Covenant. By this House is meant that Universal House of Justice which is to be elected from all countries, that is from those parts in the East and West where the loved ones are to be found, after the manner of the customary elections in Western countries such as those of England.”⁹⁰

We know of course that the first part of the Will and Testament makes mention of both the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice and clearly envisages their working together. We read, for instance, the passage which indicates that the Guardian of the Cause of God would be the “sacred head” of the Universal House of Justice and its “distinguished member for life”. Yet in passages such as the above the Universal House of Justice and its authority are treated independently of the Guardianship.

In the Will and Testament, then, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá provides means for the Bahá’í community to remain protected by the power of the Covenant and continue to benefit from Divine guidance through the Golden Age of the Faith, irrespective of how circumstances would unfold. The followers of Bahá’u’lláh would never find themselves without an authoritative center to which they could turn. The unity of the Bahá’í community was safeguarded, ensuring that it would fulfill its sacred task to establish a pattern for a future society, the splendors of which we can but dimly imagine.

You know, of course, what came to pass historically. The Bahá’í world had the bounty of being guided by Shoghi Effendi—that wondrous, unique and priceless pearl—as the Guardian of the Cause from 1921 to 1957, during which time the Universal House of Justice did not exist. Five and a half years after his passing, on 21 April 1963, that promised institution came into being. Shoghi Effendi had been unable to name a successor who would fulfill the conditions set so explicitly by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the Will and Testament. Whether or not there were means to appoint another Guardian, and how the Universal House of Justice would organize its work in the absence of a living Guardian, were questions that could only be addressed by the House of Justice itself, since all obscure matters, not explicit in the Sacred Text, were left for it to decide. And, indeed, soon after its election, the House of Justice advised the Bahá’í world that it found no way “to appoint or to legislate to make it possible to appoint a second Guardian to succeed Shoghi Effendi.”⁹¹

We will take up the study of this part of the history of the Faith in more detail later in the book. For now you may wish to reflect further about the fundamentals of Bahá’í belief as stated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His Will and Testament. How does our understanding of these fundamentals bind us together as a community? To help you in your reflections, you are encouraged to commit to memory the following portion of the above passage:

“This is the foundation of the belief of the people of Bahá (may my life be offered up for them): ‘His Holiness, the Exalted One (the Báb), is the Manifestation of the Unity and Oneness of God and the Forerunner of the Ancient Beauty. His Holiness

the Abhá Beauty (may my life be a sacrifice for His steadfast friends) is the Supreme Manifestation of God and the Dayspring of His Most Divine Essence. All others are servants unto Him and do His bidding.’ Unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn, and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the truth and the purpose of God Himself. Whoso doth deviate therefrom is verily of them that love discord, hath shown forth malice, and turned away from the Lord of the Covenant.”⁹²

SECTION 34

In the last section we completed our study of those statements from the Will and Testament that refer to the institutions of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice, the twin Successors of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Apart from these statements, the Will and Testament contains within it several other elements central to the development of the Cause. Let us begin our examination of these by studying passages from that document regarding the institution of the Hands of the Cause.

You have already read several references made by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to the Hands of the Cause of God in His Will. You know that, according to its provisions, nine Hands would have had to give assent to Shoghi Effendi’s choice of a successor as Guardian, had he been able to name one. You have also read the instructions of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to the Hands to remain vigilant against those who would oppose the Guardian and His praise of them for having “kindled the Fire of the Love of God in the very hearts and souls of His servants”.

The institution of the Hands of the Cause of God traces its origins to the Ministry of Bahá’u’lláh when, during the years preceding His passing, He appointed four outstanding believers in Persia to this station. Their appointment, Shoghi Effendi tells us, can be regarded as one of the “preliminary steps aiming at the disclosure of the scope and working of [the] Administrative Order”.⁹³ In these words of Bahá’u’lláh do we catch a glimpse of the services performed by the Hands and the influence exerted by them on the life of the Cause:

“Light and glory, greeting and praise be upon the Hands of His Cause, through whom the light of fortitude hath shone forth and the truth hath been established that the authority to choose rests with God, the Powerful, the Mighty, the Unconstrained, through whom the ocean of bounty hath surged and the fragrance of the gracious favors of God, the Lord of mankind, hath been diffused.”⁹⁴

Although ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did not appoint any believers to this station during His own lifetime, He refers to a further four as Hands of the Cause in His Writings, describing one as “an emblem of the fear of God” and “a sign of guidance” and another as “accomplished, learned, and much honored”, “a great personage, perfect in all things”, “calling the people to the Kingdom” with every waking breath. You can read about the services of some of the Hands of the Cause in *Memorials of the Faithful*, the book which comprises ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s accounts of the lives of many outstanding early believers.

In His Will and Testament, then, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá formally defines the institution of the Hands of the Cause, explaining the means for the appointment of believers to this high rank and the obligations they are called upon to fulfill. Let us read the relevant passages:

“O friends! The Hands of the Cause of God must be nominated and appointed by the guardian of the Cause of God. All must be under his shadow and obey his command. Should any, within or without the company of the Hands of the Cause of God disobey, and seek division, the wrath of God and His vengeance will be upon him, for he will have caused a breach in the true Faith of God.

“The obligations of the Hands of the Cause of God are to diffuse the Divine Fragrances, to edify the souls of men, to promote learning, to improve the character of all men and to be, at all times and under all conditions, sanctified and detached from earthly things. They must manifest the fear of God by their conduct, their manners, their deeds and their words.

“This body of the Hands of the Cause of God is under the direction of the guardian of the Cause of God. He must continually urge them to strive and endeavor to the utmost of their ability to diffuse the sweet savors of God, and to guide all the peoples of the world, for it is the light of Divine Guidance that causeth all the universe to be illumined. To disregard, though it be for a moment, this absolute command which is binding upon everyone, is in no wise permitted, that the existent world may become even as the Abhá Paradise, that the surface of the earth may become heavenly, that contention and conflict amidst peoples, kindreds, nations and governments may disappear, that all the dwellers on earth may become one people and one race, that the world may become even as one home. . .”⁹⁵

In this connection, it would be useful to read again the passage studied earlier in which the Hands are warned to guard against opposition. Note specifically the action they are required to take:

“No doubt every vainglorious one that purposeth dissension and discord will not openly declare his evil purposes, nay rather, even as impure gold, will he seize upon divers measures and various pretexts that he may separate the gathering of the people of Bahá. My object is to show that the Hands of the Cause of God must be ever watchful and so soon as they find anyone beginning to oppose and protest against the guardian of the Cause of God, cast him out from the congregation of the people of Bahá and in no wise accept any excuse from him. How often hath grievous error been disguised in the garb of truth, that it might sow the seeds of doubt in the hearts of men!”⁹⁶

The following exercises will help to further your understanding of the institution of the Hands of the Cause of God:

1. According to the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, by whom must the Hands of the Cause of God be nominated and appointed? _____

2. Under whose direction does the body of the Hands of the Cause of God operate? _____

3. The obligations of the Hands of the Cause of God are
 - to _____
 - to _____
 - to _____
 - to _____
4. What does ‘Abdu’l-Bahá say the Hands of the Cause of God must manifest in their conduct, their manners, their deeds and their words? _____

5. What does the Will and Testament state the Hands of the Cause of God must strive to diffuse? _____

6. Whom does the Will and Testament state the Hands of the Cause of God must strive to guide? _____

7. What does the Will and Testament state the Hands of the Cause of God must do as soon as they find anyone beginning to oppose and protest against the Guardian of the Cause? _____

8. If you have the resources available to you, see whether you can find the names of the four Hands of the Cause of God appointed by Bahá’u’lláh and the other four to whom ‘Abdu’l-Bahá referred as Hands in His Writings. You will want to keep their names in mind and accumulate as much information as you can about them over the years as part of your own study of the history of the Faith.

As delineated in the Will and Testament, the institution of the Hands of the Cause of God was further developed during the ministry of the Guardian and its functions elaborated. Shoghi Effendi appointed thirty-two believers to this high-ranking station from 1951 to 1957, twenty-seven of whom were still living at the time of his passing in 1957. A further ten believers were named Hands by him from 1925 to 1952 posthumously, that is, following their deaths, including

such early believers as Martha Root and John Esslemont. We will see later how the Hands of the Cause of God, in their capacity as Chief Stewards of Bahá'u'lláh's embryonic World Commonwealth, steered the Bahá'í community through the critical five and a half years between the passing of Shoghi Effendi and the election of the Universal House of Justice. We will also see how the Universal House of Justice, having concluded that it could not legislate to make possible the appointment of additional Hands, extended their vital functions into the future through the establishment of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

In anticipation of your study of these significant developments in the history of the Faith, discuss the following question in your group: In what way does the existence of an institution of such an exalted rank, comprising appointed individuals of so high a caliber, charged with specific functions related to the propagation and protection of the Faith, contribute to the establishment of the oneness of humankind?

SECTION 35

In carrying out any study of the Will and Testament, one cannot help but be struck by the extensive passages that refer to the behavior of Covenant-breakers, especially that of Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí, whom ‘Abdu’l-Bahá designates the “Center of Sedition”. One of these was quoted in a previous section, as part of our discussion on the ways in which those who violate the Covenant try to sow the seeds of dissension. In this respect, it will be important for you to bear a particular point in mind when you continue your own study of the Will and Testament: Because the Kitáb-i-‘Ahd had provided for the possibility of Muḥammad-‘Alí’s succeeding ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had he remained faithful to His Father’s wishes, it was necessary for the Will and Testament to leave no doubt that Muḥammad-‘Alí had, through his own words and actions, manifestly violated the Covenant. In this way ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would protect the friends from falling prey to any false claims raised by His half-brother after His passing. You can surely imagine how essential it was for the progress of the Cause and the development of the Bahá'í community to make Muḥammad-‘Alí’s position so absolutely clear. Think of the immensity of the task that would fall on the shoulders of Shoghi Effendi as the Guardian of the Cause and the obstacles Muḥammad-‘Alí would attempt to lay in his path.

We will look at only one lengthy passage related to Covenant-breakers here. It follows immediately after the two opening paragraphs from the first part of the Will and Testament that you memorized earlier. As you will see, it begins with an exhortation on the importance of protecting the Faith of God, recalling the sacrifice that so many noble souls made for the Cause, laying down their lives in the path of their Beloved. It then calls to mind the scene of the martyrdom of the Báb in Tabríz and the suffering that Bahá'u'lláh accepted to endure for some fifty years—the cruel conditions under which He was imprisoned in the Síyáh-Chál and the series of exiles to which He was subjected. To such intense suffering, we are reminded, was added the betrayal of His own half-brother Mírzá Yaḥyá, one whom He had loved and nurtured, which culminated in a devious attempt on His life. Within this context, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes plain the position of Muḥammad-‘Alí:

“O ye beloved of the Lord! The greatest of all things is the protection of the True Faith of God, the preservation of His Law, the safeguarding of His Cause and service unto His Word. Ten thousand souls have shed streams of their sacred blood

in this path, their precious lives they offered in sacrifice unto Him, hastened wrapt in holy ecstasy unto the glorious field of martyrdom, upraised the Standard of God's Faith and writ with their life-blood upon the Tablet of the world the verses of His Divine Unity. The sacred breast of His Holiness, the Exalted One (may my life be a sacrifice unto Him), was made a target to many a dart of woe, and in Mázindarán, the blessed feet of the Abhá Beauty (may my life be offered up for His loved ones) were so grievously scourged as to bleed and be sore wounded. His neck also was put into captive chains and His feet made fast in the stocks. In every hour, for a period of fifty years, a new trial and calamity befell Him and fresh afflictions and cares beset Him. One of them: after having suffered intense vicissitudes, He was made homeless and a wanderer and fell a victim to still new vexations and troubles. In 'Iráq, the Day-Star of the world was so exposed to the wiles of the people of malice as to be eclipsed in splendor. Later on He was sent an exile to the Great City (Constantinople) and thence to the Land of Mystery (Adrianople), whence, grievously wronged, He was eventually transferred to the Most Great Prison ('Akká). He Whom the world hath wronged (may my life be offered up for His loved ones) was four times banished from city to city, till at last, condemned to perpetual confinement, He was incarcerated in this prison, the prison of highway robbers, of brigands and of man-slayers. All this is but one of the trials that have afflicted the Blessed Beauty, the rest being even as grievous as this.

“And still another of His trials was the hostility, the flagrant injustice, the iniquity and rebellion of Mírzá Yaḥyá. Although that Wronged One, that Prisoner, had through His loving-kindness nurtured him in His own bosom ever since his early years, had showered at every moment His tender care upon him, exalted his name, shielded him from every misfortune, endeared him to them of this world and the next, and despite the firm exhortations and counsels of His Holiness, the Exalted One (the Báb) and His clear and conclusive warning;—“Beware, beware, lest the Nineteen Letters of the Living and that which hath been revealed in the Bayán veil thee!” yet notwithstanding this, Mírzá Yaḥyá denied Him, dealt falsely with Him, believed Him not, sowed the seeds of doubt, closed his eyes to His manifest verses and turned aside therefrom. Would that he had been content therewith! Nay, he even attempted to shed the sacred blood (of Bahá'u'lláh) and then raised a great clamor and tumult around him, attributing unto Bahá'u'lláh malevolence and cruelty towards himself. What sedition he stirred up and what a storm of mischief he raised whilst in the Land of Mystery (Adrianople)! At last, he wrought that which caused the Day-Star of the world to be sent an exile to this, the Most Great Prison, and sorely wronged, and in the West of this Great Prison He did set.

“O ye that stand fast and firm in the Covenant! The Center of Sedition, the Prime Mover of mischief, Mírzá Muḥammad-'Alí, hath passed out from under the shadow of the Cause, hath broken the Covenant, hath falsified the Holy Text, hath inflicted a grievous loss upon the true Faith of God, hath scattered His people, hath with bitter rancor endeavored to hurt 'Abdu'l-Bahá and hath assailed with the utmost enmity this servant of the Sacred Threshold. Every dart he seized and hurled to pierce the breast of this wronged servant, no wound did he neglect to grievously inflict upon me, no venom did he spare but he poisoned therewith the life of this hapless one. I swear by the most holy Abhá Beauty and by the Light shining from His Holiness, the Exalted One (may my soul be a sacrifice for Their lowly servants),

that because of this iniquity the dwellers in the Pavilion of the Abhá Kingdom have bewailed, the Celestial Concourse is lamenting, the Immortal Maids of Heaven in the All-Highest Paradise have raised their plaintive cries and the angelic company sighed and uttered their moanings. So grievous the deeds of this iniquitous person became that he struck with his axe at the root of the Blessed Tree, dealt a heavy blow at the Temple of the Cause of God, deluged with tears of blood the eyes of the loved ones of the Blessed Beauty, cheered and encouraged the enemies of the One True God, by his repudiation of the Covenant turned many a seeker after Truth aside from the Cause of God, revived the blighted hopes of Yaḥyá's following, made himself detested, caused the enemies of the Greatest Name to become audacious and arrogant, put aside the firm and conclusive verses and sowed the seeds of doubt. Had not the promised aid of the Ancient Beauty been graciously vouchsafed at every moment to this one, unworthy though he be, he surely would have destroyed, nay exterminated the Cause of God and utterly subverted the Divine Edifice. But, praised be the Lord, the triumphant assistance of the Abhá Kingdom was received, the hosts of the Realm above hastened to bestow victory. The Cause of God was promoted far and wide, the call of the True One was noised abroad, ears in all regions were inclined to the Word of God, His standard was unfurled, the ensigns of Holiness gloriously waved aloft and the verses celebrating His Divine Unity were chanted. Now, that the true Faith of God may be shielded and protected, His Law guarded and preserved and His Cause remain safe and secure, it is incumbent upon everyone to hold fast unto the Text of the clear and firmly established blessed verse, revealed about him. None other transgression greater than his can be ever imagined. He (Bahá'u'lláh) sayeth, glorious and holy is His Word:—"My foolish loved ones have regarded him even as my partner, have kindled sedition in the land and they verily are of the mischief-makers." Consider, how foolish are the people! They that have been in His (Bahá'u'lláh's) Presence and beheld His Countenance, have nevertheless noised abroad such idle talk, until, exalted be His explicit words, He said:—"Should he for a moment pass out from under the shadow of the Cause, he surely shall be brought to naught." Reflect! What stress He layeth upon one moment's deviation: that is, were he to incline a hair's breadth to the right or to the left, his deviation would be clearly established and his utter nothingness made manifest. And now ye are witnessing how the wrath of God hath from all sides afflicted him and how day by day he is speeding towards destruction. Ere long will ye behold him and his associates, outwardly and inwardly, condemned to utter ruin."⁹⁷

SECTION 36

Our examination of the conduct of Covenant-breakers in the preceding section has prepared us to explore one of the most emphatic admonitions found in the Will and Testament. In it, 'Abdu'l-Bahá warns us to be on our guard against those who break the Covenant and to avoid them entirely. In the second section of His Will, He writes:

“And now, one of the greatest and most fundamental principles of the Cause of God is to shun and avoid entirely the Covenant-breakers, for they will utterly destroy the Cause of God, exterminate His Law and render of no account all efforts exerted in

the past. O friends! It behooveth you to call to mind with tenderness the trials of His Holiness, the Exalted One, and show your fidelity to the Ever-Blest Beauty. The utmost endeavor must be exerted lest all these woes, trials and afflictions, all this pure and sacred blood that hath been shed so profusely in the Path of God, may prove to be in vain.”⁹⁸

‘Abdu’l-Bahá continues by describing the unseemly behavior of Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí and then explains:

“My purpose is, however, to show that it is incumbent upon the friends that are fast and firm in the Covenant and Testament to be ever wakeful lest after this wronged one is gone this alert and active worker of mischief may cause disruption, privily sow the seeds of doubt and sedition and utterly root out the Cause of God. A thousand times shun his company. Take heed and be on your guard. Watch and examine; should anyone, openly or privily, have the least connection with him, cast him out from your midst, for he will surely cause disruption and mischief.”⁹⁹

And in the third part of His Will, following a passage in which He speaks unequivocally about the conduct and motives of the Covenant-breakers, He exhorts us:

“Hence, the beloved of the Lord must entirely shun them, avoid them, foil their machinations and evil whisperings, guard the Law of God and His religion, engage one and all in diffusing widely the sweet savors of God and to the best of their endeavor proclaim His Teachings.”¹⁰⁰

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s admonition to shun Covenant-breakers requires some thought. Why, someone may ask, is our treatment of Covenant-breakers so different from the way we are to approach all others who cross our path? Why did ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who exhorted us to shower loving-kindness upon every soul, to regard even the stranger as a friend, tell us to shun those who break the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh? Does not the concept of “shunning”, at least nowadays, create a very negative impression?

In trying to answer these questions, we should realize that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is not asking us to show even the slightest trace of animosity towards Covenant-breakers or to harbor ill feelings towards them. All that He requires of us is to leave them alone and to avoid contact with them. And this He does to protect the Cause. Imagine a believer who might have been disinclined to heed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s warning at the time. “‘Abdu’l-Bahá is worrying too much,” he might have said to himself. “What harm can come from speaking with Muḥammad-‘Alí and his associates and from trying to reason with them? After all, I am firm in the Covenant and cannot be easily deceived.” What consequences would the actions of this friend have brought to himself and the Bahá’í community? To help you think through this question, you are encouraged to read the extract below from a Tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, written to friends in the West.

“O thou who art firm in the Covenant! Three consecutive letters have been received from thee. From their contents it became known that in Cleveland the hearts are afflicted by the murky breaths of the Covenant-breakers and harmony hath decreased among the friends. Gracious God! A hundred times it hath been foretold that the violators are lying in ambush and by every means desire to cause dissension among the friends so that this dissension may end in violation of the Covenant. How

is it that, notwithstanding this warning, the friends have neglected this explicit statement?

“The point at issue is clear, direct and of utmost brevity. Either Bahá’u’lláh was wise, omniscient and aware of what would ensue, or was ignorant and in error. He entered, by His supreme pen, into such a firm Covenant and Testament with all the Bahá’ís, first with the Aghṣán, the Afnán and His kindred, and commanded them to obey and turn toward Him. By His supreme pen He hath explicitly declared that the object of the following verse of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is the Most Great Branch:

“When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation is ended, turn your faces toward Him Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root.’ Its meaning briefly is this: that after My ascension it is incumbent upon the Aghṣán, the Afnán and the kindred, and all the friends of God, to turn their faces to Him Who hath branched from the Ancient Root.”¹⁰¹

SECTION 37

We should end our discussion of Covenant-breaking here, remembering that we are concerned in this unit with the power of the Covenant as a force of unity in our individual and collective lives. There is no need to dwell on what is clearly not a frequent occurrence in the Faith. Most of us will never have the occasion to encounter one who has stepped outside the shadow of the Covenant, and should it ever happen, all we have to do is to avoid contact with them. The burden falls on the institutions of the Faith to counsel such individuals and to counteract the schemes they set in motion.

Protection of the Faith involves, of course, much more than maintaining vigilance against the danger of Covenant-breaking. Many of the phrases we have quoted from the Will and Testament point to the nature of our duty in this respect. “Guard ye the Cause of God,” we read earlier, “protect His law and have the utmost fear of discord.” “The greatest of all things,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá indicated, “is the protection of the True Faith of God, the preservation of His Law, the safeguarding of His Cause and service unto His Word.”

Our duty to safeguard the Cause, though different in character than that of the institutions of the Faith, is weighty nevertheless. The ability to uphold the verities of the Faith is, for instance, one aspect of this manifold responsibility. Yet another has to do with the way that we conduct ourselves. Let us consider the latter point further. Look at the list below and discuss in your group how the actions described serve to safeguard the interests of the Cause of God. Write some of your conclusions in the space provided.

1. Exercising rectitude of conduct in all one’s affairs: _____

2. Holding to the highest standard of chastity: _____

3. Cleansing one’s heart of all forms of prejudice: _____

4. Being a source of encouragement and joy to friends and strangers: _____

5. Being the cause of unity in every situation in which one finds oneself: _____

Now memorize the following quotation if you have not already done so on an earlier occasion:

“Every eye, in this Day, should seek what will best promote the Cause of God. He, Who is the Eternal Truth, beareth Me witness! Nothing whatsoever can, in this Day, inflict a greater harm upon this Cause than dissension and strife, contention, estrangement and apathy, among the loved ones of God. Flee them, through the power of God and His sovereign aid, and strive ye to knit together the hearts of men, in His Name, the Unifier, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.”¹⁰²

SECTION 38

In addition to exhortations calling upon us to be vigilant in protecting the Faith, the Will and Testament summons us to labor tirelessly in propagating the Faith. With these words does ‘Abdu’l-Bahá counsel us:

“O ye that stand fast in the Covenant! When the hour cometh that this wronged and broken-winged bird will have taken its flight into the Celestial Concourse, when it will have hastened to the Realm of the Unseen and its mortal frame will have been either lost or hidden neath the dust, it is incumbent upon the Afnán, that are steadfast in the Covenant of God and have branched from the Tree of Holiness; the Hands, (pillars) of the Cause of God (the glory of the Lord rest upon them), and all the friends and loved ones, one and all to bestir themselves and arise with heart and soul and in one accord, to diffuse the sweet savors of God, to teach His Cause and to promote His Faith. It behooveth them not to rest for a moment, neither to seek repose. They must disperse themselves in every land, pass by every clime, and travel throughout all regions. Bestirred, without rest, and steadfast to the end, they must raise in every land the triumphal cry ‘Yá Bahá’u’l-Abhá!’ (O Thou the Glory of Glories), must achieve renown in the world wherever they go, must burn brightly even as a candle in every meeting and must kindle the flame of Divine love in every assembly; that the light of truth may rise resplendent in the midmost heart of the world, that throughout the East and throughout the West a vast concourse may gather under the shadow of the Word of God, that the sweet savors of holiness may be diffused, that faces may shine radiantly, hearts be filled with the Divine spirit and souls be made heavenly.

“In these days, the most important of all things is the guidance of the nations and peoples of the world. Teaching the Cause is of utmost importance for it is the head corner-stone of the foundation itself. This wronged servant has spent his days and nights in promoting the Cause and urging the peoples to service. He rested not a moment, till the fame of the Cause of God was noised abroad in the world and the celestial strains from the Abhá Kingdom roused the East and the West. The beloved of God must also follow the same example. This is the secret of faithfulness, this is the requirement of servitude to the Threshold of Bahá!

“The disciples of Christ forgot themselves and all earthly things, forsook all their cares and belongings, purged themselves of self and passion, and with absolute detachment scattered far and wide and engaged in calling the peoples of the world to the divine guidance; till at last they made the world another world, illumined the surface of the earth, and even to their last hour proved self-sacrificing in the pathway of that beloved One of God. Finally in various lands they suffered glorious martyrdom. Let them that are men of action follow in their footsteps!”¹⁰³

You have considered the subject of teaching earlier in this sequence of courses and have surely partaken of the joy of sharing the message with many souls. Yet, no matter how intensely the passion to teach burns in our hearts, remembering the Figure of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and reading His counsels to us in His Will and Testament fan further the flame of the love of God and the desire to offer the Sacred Teachings to receptive souls. Complete the following sentence in light of the above passage:

1. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that after His passing, it is incumbent upon us to bestir ourselves and arise with heart and soul and in one accord, to _____

2. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá urges us to not rest _____ or seek _____ ; we should _____ ourselves in every land, _____ by every clime, and _____ throughout all regions.
3. Bestirred, without rest, and steadfast to the end, we must _____ , must _____ , must _____ and must _____ .
4. Bestirred, without rest, and steadfast to the end, we must raise in every land the triumphal cry “Yá Bahá’u’l-Abhá!”, must achieve renown in the world wherever we go, must burn brightly even as a candle in every meeting, and must kindle the flame of Divine love in every assembly
- that _____
 - that _____
 - that _____
 - that _____
5. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states in His Will and Testament that the most important of all things in these days is _____
6. Teaching the Cause is of utmost importance for it is _____
7. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that He spent His days and nights in _____
8. He did not rest for a moment until _____
9. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá urges us to rest not a moment in promoting the Cause, for this is the secret of _____ and the requirement of _____ .

The passage above seems to suggest a special connection between efforts to promote the Cause and servitude. Together with the other members of your group, you may wish to think about the requirements of servitude and consider in what way teaching can be regarded as one such requirement.

SECTION 39

Early in our exploration of the Covenant, we noted that our study would make us aware of two ever-present, interwoven themes. One is related to the concept of a center to which all must turn, and the other is concerned with the standard of conduct that Bahá'u'lláh calls on us to follow and which we pledge to uphold upon entering into the Tabernacle of His Covenant. Beyond those specific counsels exhorting us to protect and propagate the Cause, the Will and Testament contains passages which, like the Kitáb-i-'Ahd, address other aspects of this code of conduct:

“O ye beloved of the Lord! In this sacred Dispensation, conflict and contention are in no wise permitted. Every aggressor deprives himself of God’s grace. It is incumbent upon everyone to show the utmost love, rectitude of conduct, straightforwardness and sincere kindness unto all the peoples and kindreds of the world, be they friends or strangers. So intense must be the spirit of love and loving kindness, that the stranger may find himself a friend, the enemy a true brother, no difference whatsoever existing between them. For universality is of God and all limitations earthly. Thus man must strive that his reality may manifest virtues and perfections, the light whereof may shine upon everyone. The light of the sun shineth upon all the world and the merciful showers of Divine Providence fall upon all peoples. The vivifying breeze reviveth every living creature and all beings endued with life obtain their share and portion at His heavenly board. In like manner, the affections and loving kindness of the servants of the One True God must be bountifully and universally extended to all mankind. Regarding this, restrictions and limitations are in no wise permitted.

“Wherefore, O my loving friends! Consort with all the peoples, kindreds and religions of the world with the utmost truthfulness, uprightness, faithfulness, kindness, good-will and friendliness, that all the world of being may be filled with the holy ecstasy of the grace of Bahá, that ignorance, enmity, hate and rancor may vanish from the world and the darkness of estrangement amidst the peoples and kindreds of the world may give way to the Light of Unity. Should other peoples and nations be unfaithful to you show your fidelity unto them, should they be unjust toward you show justice towards them, should they keep aloof from you attract them to yourselves, should they show their enmity be friendly towards them, should they poison your lives, sweeten their souls, should they inflict a wound upon you, be a salve to their sores. Such are the attributes of the sincere! Such are the attributes of the truthful.”¹⁰⁴

In the next two units of this book we will discuss further the standard of conduct laid down for us as members of the community of Bahá'u'lláh's followers. For the purposes of our study here, it will be sufficient for us to explore two vital themes in this respect.

First, the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá admonishes us to avoid conflict and contention, as did the Kitáb-i-‘Ahd. This subject has been treated on a number of previous occasions in this sequence of courses, and it arose once again in our discussion of the protection of the Cause in one of the preceding sections. You have had ample opportunities, then, to reflect on the harmful effects of disunity on the Bahá’í community. What would be useful at this stage is to think about some of the traits of character and individual shortcomings that are often causes of contention and conflict. As is always the case when we analyze characteristics that are to be overcome, we each have to be wary of falling into the trap of backbiting. So, without making reference to any specific individuals, try to gain some insights in your group into how each of the following can become, if not checked, the cause of stress and strain on the fabric of the community. Space is provided for you to write down a few of your conclusions.

1. Desire to dominate others: _____

2. Desire to control everything: _____

3. Desire to be the center of attention: _____

4. Ambition for prestige: _____

5. Inflexibility: _____

6. Defensiveness: _____

7. Jealousy and envy: _____

8. Lack of generosity: _____

9. Contempt for other people’s ideas: _____

10. Lack of faith in other people: _____

It is true that each of the above can, in one way or another, fuel contention in a community. We should not, however, attribute to individuals who display these shortcomings bad intentions or malice. Indeed, to do so would, in itself, be contentious. When situations arise that can lead to disunity, it is more fruitful to view such characteristics as signs of immaturity or as habits of thinking and behavior that individuals carry with them into the Faith. This is not to say, of course, that we should dismiss others as immature. We are all in a process of maturing as individuals and, to a certain degree, manifest some of these signs in our interactions and dealings. This is one of the features of the current stage in the unfoldment of our collective life. Recognizing this enables us to help our communities most effectively in moments of crisis.

The second aspect of the code of behavior that we should examine in the above passage from the Will and Testament concerns the universality of the Faith. The intermingling of the peoples of the world is vital to the patterns of life that we are striving to establish as followers of Bahá’u’lláh. Our words and our deeds should acknowledge that the Faith is intended for all humanity. This, too, is a matter upon which we have often reflected in the past. How many passages have we studied in this sequence of courses alone that summon us to consort with people of every religion and background in a spirit of fellowship and friendliness. But, once again, there are a number of obstacles that must be overcome if we are to demonstrate by our conduct the universality of the Faith. Let us look at just one of them.

As individuals, but especially as groups, we can exhibit a human tendency towards estrangement from others. There seems to exist a natural inclination to see others as separate from ourselves and to make distinctions between what we perceive as “us” and “them”. So engrained is this tendency that it can come to form part of how human groups and organizations define themselves. “Who they are” is determined, at least to an extent, by that which they are not but which others are. The erroneous assumption is that the maintenance of unity and cohesion as a group requires excluding others.

This kind of posture towards others goes against the very principle of oneness central to the Faith. By definition, the Bahá’í community seeks to embrace all of humanity. Discuss with the other participants in the course how the culture being established by the Bahá’í community is endeavoring to uproot the tendency to exclude others.

SECTION 40

As we have progressed through this unit, the majestic Figure of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has grown more luminous before our eyes and our consciousness of His extraordinary station heightened. It seems fitting, then, that we should end the unit by thinking about our relationship as individual believers with Him, the Center of Bahá’u’lláh’s peerless Covenant. This we will do over the final sections by reflecting on several quotations from His Writings. No exercises will be included in these sections; however, in addition to your own personal reflections on the quotations, you may wish to discuss them with the participants in your group.

So often in our daily lives we turn our hearts in contemplation to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and derive comfort and assurance from the warmth of His presence and draw strength and sustenance from His loving counsels. What are some of His repeated exhortations to us? What do we hear Him telling us over and over again? His counsels, of course, are many and their wisdom inexhaustible; here we confine ourselves to four.

Perhaps foremost among the themes we find in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talks and Tablets is love. He longs for us to show forth loving-kindness to all people and to associate with one another in complete amity and accord. Love, to be sure, expresses itself in varying degrees. The love of which He speaks is a reflection of the love of God, which, unlike other expressions of love that are limited, is all-pervading. Below are a few passages, selected from only one collection of His Tablets.

“Be thou a summoner to love, and be thou kind to all the human race. Love thou the children of men and share in their sorrows. Be thou of those who foster peace. Offer thy friendship, be worthy of trust. Be thou a balm to every sore, be thou a medicine for every ill. Bind thou the souls together.”¹⁰⁵

“Know thou of a certainty that Love is the secret of God’s holy Dispensation, the manifestation of the All-Merciful, the fountain of spiritual outpourings. Love is heaven’s kindly light, the Holy Spirit’s eternal breath that vivifieth the human soul. Love is the cause of God’s revelation unto man, the vital bond inherent, in accordance with the divine creation, in the realities of things. Love is the one means that ensureth true felicity both in this world and the next. Love is the light that guideth in darkness, the living link that uniteth God with man, that assureth the progress of every illumined soul. Love is the most great law that ruleth this mighty and heavenly cycle, the unique power that bindeth together the divers elements of this material world, the supreme magnetic force that directeth the movements of the spheres in the celestial realms. Love revealeth with unfailing and limitless power the mysteries latent in the universe. Love is the spirit of life unto the adorned body of mankind, the establisher of true civilization in this mortal world, and the shedder of imperishable glory upon every high-aiming race and nation.”¹⁰⁶

“How good it is if the friends be as close as sheaves of light, if they stand together side by side in a firm unbroken line. For now have the rays of reality from the Sun of the world of existence, united in adoration all the worshippers of this light; and these rays have, through infinite grace, gathered all peoples together within this wide-spreading shelter; therefore must all souls become as one soul, and all hearts

as one heart. Let all be set free from the multiple identities that were born of passion and desire, and in the oneness of their love for God find a new way of life.”¹⁰⁷

“One amongst His Teachings is this, that love and good faith must so dominate the human heart that men will regard the stranger as a familiar friend, the malefactor as one of their own, the alien even as a loved one, the enemy as a companion dear and close. Who killeth them, him will they call a bestower of life; who turneth away from them, him will they regard as turning towards them; who denieth their message, him will they consider as one acknowledging its truth. The meaning is that they must treat all humankind even as they treat their sympathizers, their fellow-believers, their loved ones and familiar friends.”¹⁰⁸

“O thou son of the Kingdom! All things are beneficial if joined with the love of God; and without His love all things are harmful, and act as a veil between man and the Lord of the Kingdom. When His love is there, every bitterness turneth sweet, and every bounty rendereth a wholesome pleasure. For example, a melody, sweet to the ear, bringeth the very spirit of life to a heart in love with God, yet staineth with lust a soul engrossed in sensual desires. And every branch of learning, conjoined with the love of God, is approved and worthy of praise; but bereft of His love, learning is barren—indeed, it bringeth on madness. Every kind of knowledge, every science, is as a tree: if the fruit of it be the love of God, then is it a blessed tree, but if not, that tree is but dried-up wood, and shall only feed the fire.”¹⁰⁹

“O living flame of heavenly love! Thine heart hath been so fired with the love of God that from ten thousand leagues afar its warmth and radiance may be felt and seen. The fire lit by mortal hand imparteth light and warmth to but a little space, whereas that sacred flame which the Hand of God hath kindled, though burning in the east, will set aflame the west and give warmth to both the north and the south; nay, it shall rise from this world to glow with the hottest flame in the realms on high, flooding with light the Kingdom of eternal glory.

“Happy art thou to have obtained so heavenly a gift. Blessed art thou to be favored with His divine bestowals.

“The glory of God rest upon thee and upon them that hold fast unto the sure handle of His Will and holy Covenant.”¹¹⁰

SECTION 41

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s call to love is accompanied by exhortations to obey the laws and ordinances brought by His Father and to follow the teachings. We know, of course, that this submission is not one imposed from outside, but an obedience generated from within by the force of love; it is a response to the summons of Bahá’u’lláh: “Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty.”

“The Faith of the Blessed Beauty is summoning mankind to safety and love, to amity and peace; it hath raised up its tabernacle on the heights of the earth, and directeth

its call to all nations. Wherefore, O ye who are God's lovers, know ye the value of this precious Faith, obey its teachings, walk in this road that is drawn straight, and show ye this way to the people.”¹¹¹

“It is certain that man's highest distinction is to be lowly before and obedient to his God; that his greatest glory, his most exalted rank and honor, depend on his close observance of the Divine commands and prohibitions. Religion is the light of the world, and the progress, achievement, and happiness of man result from obedience to the laws set down in the holy Books. Briefly, it is demonstrable that in this life, both outwardly and inwardly the mightiest of structures, the most solidly established, the most enduring, standing guard over the world, assuring both the spiritual and the material perfections of mankind, and protecting the happiness and the civilization of society—is religion.”¹¹²

“O army of God! Through the protection and help vouchsafed by the Blessed Beauty—may my life be a sacrifice to His loved ones—ye must conduct yourselves in such a manner that ye may stand out distinguished and brilliant as the sun among other souls. Should any one of you enter a city, he should become a center of attraction by reason of his sincerity, his faithfulness and love, his honesty and fidelity, his truthfulness and loving-kindness towards all the peoples of the world, so that the people of that city may cry out and say: ‘This man is unquestionably a Bahá'í, for his manners, his behavior, his conduct, his morals, his nature, and disposition reflect the attributes of the Bahá'ís.’ Not until ye attain this station can ye be said to have been faithful to the Covenant and Testament of God. For He hath, through irrefutable Texts, entered into a binding Covenant with us all, requiring us to act in accordance with His sacred instructions and counsels.”¹¹³

“O ye real companions! Day and night ‘Abdu'l-Bahá is engaged in the remembrances of the friends, and time after time doth he associate with them and behold their blessed faces. I entreat in the Threshold of the Lord of Existence to confirm them in a befitting manner and assist them to follow wholly the Commands of God!”¹¹⁴

“To thank Him for this, make ye a mighty effort, and choose for yourselves a noble goal. Through the power of faith, obey ye the teachings of God, and let all your actions conform to His laws. Read ye *The Hidden Words*, ponder the inner meanings thereof, act in accord therewith. Read, with close attention, the Tablets of *Ṭarazát* (Ornaments), *Kalimát* (Words of Paradise), *Tajallíyyát* (Effulgences), *Ishráqát* (Splendors), and *Bishárát* (Glad Tidings), and rise up as ye are bidden in the heavenly teachings. Thus may each one of you be even as a candle casting its light, the center of attraction wherever people come together; and from you, as from a bed of flowers, may sweet scents be shed.”¹¹⁵

“Religion, moreover, is not a series of beliefs, a set of customs; religion is the teachings of the Lord God, teachings which constitute the very life of humankind, which urge high thoughts upon the mind, refine the character, and lay the groundwork for man's everlasting honor.”¹¹⁶

“O ye two well-loved handmaids of God! Whatever a man’s tongue speaketh, that let him prove by his deeds. If he claimeth to be a believer, then let him act in accordance with the precepts of the Abhá Kingdom.”¹¹⁷

“If in this day a soul shall act according to the precepts and the counsels of God, he will serve as a divine physician to mankind, and like the trump of Israfil, he will call the dead of this contingent world to life; for the confirmations of the Abhá Realm are never interrupted, and such a virtuous soul hath, to befriend him, the unfailing help of the Company on high. Thus shall a sorry gnat become an eagle in the fullness of his strength, and a feeble sparrow change to a royal falcon in the heights of ancient glory.”¹¹⁸

SECTION 42

Yet another theme we find repeatedly in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talks and Tablets is steadfastness. How often does He urge us to stand firm in the Cause and to remain steadfast in our love for the Abhá Beauty.

“O ye who are holding fast unto the Covenant and Testament! This day, from the realms of the All-Glorious, from the Kingdom of Holiness where hosannas of glorification and praise rise up, the Company on high direct their gaze upon you. Whensoever their gaze lighteth upon gatherings of those who are steadfast in the Covenant and Testament, then do they utter their cry, ‘Glad tidings! Glad tidings!’ Then, exulting, do they lift up their voices, and shout, ‘O ye spiritual communion! O ye gathering of God! Blessed are ye! Glad tidings be unto you! Bright be your faces, and be ye of good cheer, for ye cling to the Covenant of the Beloved of all the worlds, ye are on fire with the wine of His Testament. Ye have plighted your troth to the Ancient of Days, ye have drunk deep from the chalice of loyalty. Ye have guarded and defended the Cause of God; ye have not been a cause of dividing up His Word; ye have not brought His Faith low, but have striven to glorify His Holy Name; ye have not allowed the Blessed Cause to be exposed to the derision of the people. Ye have not permitted the Designated Station to be humbled, nor been willing to see the Center of Authority discredited or exposed to mockery and persecution. Ye have striven to keep the Word whole and one. Ye have passed through the portals of mercy. Ye have not let the Blessed Beauty slip from your minds, to fade unremembered.”¹¹⁹

“Verily, I beseech God to illumine thy sight by witnessing the light of hopes and cause thee to speak His praise among the maid-servants, and to make thee steadfast in this path, on which feet have slipped through the power of tests.”¹²⁰

“Truly, I say unto thee, if thou be steadfast in this Cause and arise with all thy power to promote the Word in those parts, and if thou render thine utmost efforts in breathing the Spirit of Life into the hearts of the righteous, thou wilt find thyself assisted by the angels of heaven and the hosts of the Supreme Concourse; thou wilt

hoist the banner of peace and the sounds of the trumpet will be heard in the tunes of love and union throughout those countries; thou wilt guide people (literally, souls) to the running water of life and lead them to the field of knowledge; thou wilt give them to drink the wine of assurance and quicken them with the fragrances of the Merciful One; thou wilt clothe them with the robes of bestowal and give them to drink the wine of faithfulness in love for Bahá, so that they will be awakened from the sleep of selfish desires and behold the signs of their Mighty Lord in this exalted life. This is better for thee than all the glory and dominion of the world.”¹²¹

“Verily, I set my forehead on the dust and turn my face toward the Lord of Lords and invoke my Lord with intense fervor and attraction, that He may look upon you with the glances of the eye of His providence, watch over you with the gaze of His protection, unite your hearts, dilate your breasts, harmonize your souls, rejoice you with gladness, exhilarate you with the chalices of salvation, make you steadfast in the divine Cause and that He may enable you to cling to the hem of the Almighty, to hasten toward the place of sacrifice and to be sheltered under the shadow of the Blessed Tree whose roots are planted firm and whose branches are extended to heaven...”¹²²

“O ye beloved of God, know that steadfastness and firmness in this new and wonderful Covenant is indeed the spirit that quickeneth the hearts which are overflowing with the love of the Glorious Lord; verily, it is the power which penetrates into the hearts of the people of the world! Your Lord hath assuredly promised His servants who are firm and steadfast to render them victorious at all times, to exalt their word, propagate their power, diffuse their lights, strengthen their hearts, elevate their banners, assist their hosts, brighten their stars, increase the abundance of the showers of mercy upon them, and enable the brave lions (or teachers) to conquer.”¹²³

“The beloved of the Lord must stand fixed as the mountains, firm as impregnable walls. Unmoved must they remain by even the direst adversities, ungrieved by the worst of disasters. Let them cling to the hem of Almighty God, and put their faith in the Beauty of the Most High; let them lean on the unfailing help that cometh from the Ancient Kingdom, and depend on the care and protection of the generous Lord.”¹²⁴

“O ye loved ones of God! Be ye firm of foot, and fixed of heart, and through the power of the Blessed Beauty’s help, stand ye committed to your purpose. Serve ye the Cause of God. Face ye all nations of the world with the constancy and the endurance of the people of Bahá, that all men may be astounded and ask how this could be, that your hearts are as well-springs of confidence and faith, and as mines so rich in the love of God. . . . And if all the believers be put to the sword, and only one be left, let that one cry out in the name of the Lord and tell the joyous tidings; let that one rise up and confront all the peoples of the earth.”¹²⁵

SECTION 43

Finally, as we turn our hearts to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and listen to His words, we hear Him calling upon us to strive, to labor ceaselessly, to make concerted effort in the promotion of the Cause of God.

“Striving means this: Ye must live and move according to the divine commands and behests, be united in loving with ecstasy and joy; do not take any rest but engage continually in the service of the Cause of God.”¹²⁶

“Wherefore, O ye friends of God, redouble your efforts, strain every nerve, till ye triumph in your servitude to the Ancient Beauty, the Manifest Light, and become the cause of spreading far and wide the rays of the Day-Star of Truth.”¹²⁷

“Expend your every breath of life in this great Cause and dedicate all your days to the service of Bahá, so that in the end, safe from loss and deprivation, ye will inherit the heaped-up treasures of the realms above.”¹²⁸

“Wherefore, rest ye neither day nor night and seek no ease. Tell ye the secrets of servitude, follow the pathway of service, till ye attain the promised succor that cometh from the realms of God.”¹²⁹

“Endeavor with thy soul, so that the fountain of knowledge may flow within thy heart and the bounties of mysteries may pour upon thee from the Kingdom of Lights. Then thou wilt understand the meanings hidden and recorded in the symbols in the Holy Scriptures.”¹³⁰

“. . . we must strive with life and heart that, day by day, our deeds may be better, our conduct more beautiful and our forbearance greater.”¹³¹

“Now is the time, O ye beloved of the Lord, for ardent endeavor. Struggle ye, and strive. And since the Ancient Beauty was exposed by day and night on the field of martyrdom, let us in our turn labor hard, and hear and ponder the counsels of God; let us fling away our lives, and renounce our brief and numbered days.”¹³²

“O ye real friends! Make ye an effort that this universe may become another universe and this darkened world find a ray of the Sun of Truth and become luminous and refulgent.”¹³³

“Senses and faculties have been bestowed upon us, to be devoted to the service of the general good; so that we, distinguished above all other forms of life for perceptiveness and reason, should labor at all times and along all lines, whether the occasion be great or small, ordinary or extraordinary, until all mankind are safely gathered into the impregnable stronghold of knowledge.”¹³⁴

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