

# Images of Christ in the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

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## Introduction

‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His talks and letters addressed to the believers of the West often referred to Christ and to Christian subjects. His audience being in majority Christians could better relate to and understand the Master’s message through Christian examples.

This focus becomes particularly strong in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talks given at table in ‘Akká during 1904-1906 to guests and pilgrims from Christian background. These talks have been compiled in *Some Answered Questions*.

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá started His journey to Europe in September 1911 and to the United States in April 1912 His goal was to proclaim for the first time the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh to the Christian West. Inevitably allusions to Christ were numerous. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was introducing Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings on common grounds with Christianity by using quotes from Jesus to make His point and then elaborate on His Father’s precepts.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá has drawn parallels between Christ and Bahá’u’lláh and also He has elucidated the meaning of some of Christ’s words and explained the main traditional Christian doctrine such as the

birth of Christ, baptism, trinity, the symbolism of the bread and the wine, sacrifice for redeeming the original sin, resurrection, and the second coming of Christ. In doing so He has brought a new refreshing and eye opening view on these subjects.

The image of Christ that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has depicted in His talks and letters is multifarious. This presentation will examine the following facets: Christ, Manifestation of God, the Word of God, the Quickener of the world, the Educator-Teacher, the Promised Messiah of the Jews, the Unifier, and the Physician. The parallels between Christ and Bahá’u’lláh and the explanation of the main traditional Christian doctrines will also be covered.

## I. Images of Christ

### First image: Christ, Manifestation of God

Man, according to Abdu’l-Bahá, has received from God the gift of the intellect in order to be able to understand and benefit from Divine Guidance. The Manifestation of God has, like man, the rational soul but what differs is that He

is reflecting perfectly the attributes of God like a polished mirror. Christ likewise was imbued with divine knowledge and the power of the Spirit was apparent in him. He was detached from material life and willing to go through trials and hardships because He had this spiritual power in him that made him a perfect man, a Manifestation of God.

'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

*To man is given the special gift of the intellect by which he is able to receive a larger share of the light Divine. The Perfect Man is as a polished mirror reflecting the Sun of Truth, manifesting the attributes of God.*

*The Lord Christ said, 'He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father' – God manifested in man.*

*The sun does not leave his place in the heavens and descend into the mirror, for the actions of ascent and descent, coming and going, do not belong to the Infinite, they are the methods of finite beings. In the Manifestation of God, the perfectly polished mirror, appear the qualities of the Divine in a form that man is capable of comprehending.<sup>1</sup>*

*HE [Christ] is a Manifestation because He reflects in Himself the divine perfections. The Prophets of God are manifestations for the lordly perfections – that is, the Holy Spirit is apparent in Them.<sup>2</sup>*

*CHRIST was heavenly, divine and belonged to the world of the Kingdom. He was the embodiment of spiritual knowledge. . . . How is it*

*that He overlooked and denied Himself everything in this world? He attached little importance to this material life, denying Himself rest and composure, accepting trials and voluntarily suffering vicissitudes because He was endowed with spiritual susceptibilities and the power of the Holy Spirit. He beheld the splendors of the divine Kingdom, embodied the bounties of God and possessed ideal powers.<sup>3</sup>*

#### Second image: Christ the “glorious Word of God”<sup>4</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that a word is made of letters. Each letter by itself has no specific meaning; once put together, a complete word with a specific meaning becomes apparent. In the same manner the divine perfections manifested in Christ are like letters in a word, when all put together make Him the Manifestation of God, and therefore He is called the Word.

*MAN is the sum of Creation, and the Perfect Man is the expression of the complete thought of the Creator – the Word of God.<sup>5</sup>*

*[A]s Christ conveyed the perfect meaning of divine reality and embodied independent significance, He was the Word. He was as the station of reality compared to the station of metaphor. There is no intrinsic meaning in the leaves of a book, but the thought they convey leads you to reflect upon reality. The reality of Jesus was the perfect meaning, the Christhood in Him which in the Holy*

*Books is symbolized as the Word.*<sup>6</sup>

*As it is said in the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God"; [John 1:1] then the Holy Spirit and the Word are the appearance of God. The Spirit and the Word mean the divine perfections that appeared in the Reality of Christ, and these perfections were with God; so the sun manifests all its glory in the mirror. For the Word does not signify the body of Christ, no, but the divine perfections manifested in Him. . . . The perfections of Christ are called the Word because all the beings are in the condition of letters, and one letter has not a complete meaning, while the perfections of Christ have the power of the word because a complete meaning can be inferred from a word. As the Reality of Christ was the manifestation of the divine perfections, therefore, it was like the word. Why? because He is the sum of perfect meanings. This is why He is called the Word.*<sup>7</sup>

### **Third image: Christ the "Son of the living God"**

*. . . CHRIST asked: Whom do you believe Me to be? and Peter answered: I believe that "Thou art the Son of the living God." . . . Christ wished by suggestion, or an allusion, to confirm the words of Peter; so on account of the suitability of his name, Peter, He said: "and upon this rock I will build My church," meaning, thy belief that Christ is the Son of the living God will be the foundation of the Religion of God, and upon this belief*

*the foundation of the church of God – which is the Law of God – shall be established.*<sup>8</sup>

*VERILY did the Pharisees rise up against Messiah . . . because He had claimed to be Almighty God, the sovereign Lord of all, and told them, 'I am God's Son, and verily in the inmost being of His only Son, His mighty Word, clearly revealed with all His attributes, all His perfections, standeth the Father.' . . .*

*Never would the Pharisees have been emboldened to calumniate Him and charge Him with that grievous sin, but for their ignorance of the inner core of mysteries and the fact that they paid no heed to His splendours and regarded not His proofs. Else would they have acknowledged His words . . .*

*Shouldst thou, however, turn thy gaze unto a Mirror, brilliant, stainless, and pure, wherein the divine Beauty is reflected, therein wilt thou find the Sun shining with Its rays, Its heat, Its disc, Its fair form all entire....*

*This is the meaning of the Messiah's words, that the Father is in the Son. . . .*

*Such were the words uttered by Christ. On account of these words they cavilled at and assailed Him when He said unto them, "Verily the Son is in the Father, and the Father is in the Son."<sup>9</sup>*

*In another passage 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:*

*LET us investigate independently the*

*reality of this matter. What is the meaning of the father and the son? We say that this fatherhood and sonship are allegorical and symbolical. The Messianic reality is like unto a mirror through which the sun of divinity has become resplendent. If this mirror expresses, "The light is in me" – it is sincere in its claim, therefore Jesus was truthful when he said "The Father is in me." The sun which is in the sky and the sun in the mirror are one, are they not? – and yet we see there are apparently two suns.*<sup>10</sup>

#### Fourth image: Christ as the Quickener of the World

Christ was called the Quickener of the World because He had the capacity to shake people, touch their hearts and transform their lives. The coming of any Manifestation shakes the world in its own ways. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the coming of Christ very tenderly and yet in a powerful manner:

*WHEN Christ appeared in this world, it was like the vernal bounty . . . the human world found new life.*<sup>11</sup>

*. . . [I]T caused a great commotion and vibrant movement in the world of humanity. The Sun of Reality dawned, the cloud of mercy poured down its rain, the breezes of providence moved, the world became a new world, mankind reflected an extraordinary radiance, souls were educated, minds were developed, intelligences became acute, and the human world attained a new freshness of life, like unto the advent of*

*spring.*<sup>12</sup>

*...[T]O gain control over physical bodies is an extremely easy matter, but to bring spirits within the bonds of serenity is a most arduous undertaking. . . . It necessitates a divine and holy potency, the potency of inspiration, the power of the Holy Spirit. For example, Christ was capable of leading spirits into that abode of serenity. He was capable of guiding hearts into that haven of rest. From the day of His manifestation to the present time He has been resuscitating hearts and quickening spirits. He has exercised that vivifying influence in the realm of hearts and spirits; therefore, His resuscitating is everlasting.*<sup>13</sup>

#### Fifth image: Christ the Teacher-Educator

Christ through His example and teachings educated the various nations of His time; He started with twelve followers and later His teachings were spread all over the world. 'Abdu'l-Bahá shows us how Christ was a true educator. He states:

*ALL the Prophets of God, including Jesus Christ, appeared in the world for the education of humanity, to develop immature souls into maturity, to transform the ignorant of mankind into the knowing, thereby establishing love and unity through divine education and training.*<sup>14</sup>

*CONSIDER the days of Christ: how the light of guidance brightened twelve*

hearts. How limited it seemed, but how expansive it became afterward and illumined the world!<sup>15</sup>

. . . CHRIST educated and developed mankind universally. He rescued nations and peoples from the bondage of superstition and idolatry. He summoned them all to the knowledge of the oneness of God. They were dark, they became illumined; they were material, they became spiritual; earthly they were, they became heavenly. He enlightened the world of morality.<sup>16</sup>

JESUS Christ was an Educator of humanity. His teachings were altruistic; His bestowal, universal. He taught mankind by the power of the Holy Spirit and not through human agency, for the human power is limited, whereas the divine power is illimitable and infinite.<sup>17</sup>

JESUS Christ came to teach the people of the world this heavenly civilization and not material civilization. He breathed the breath of the Holy Spirit into the body of the world and established an illumined civilization. Among the principles of divine civilization He came to proclaim is the Most Great Peace of mankind. Among His principles of spiritual civilization is the oneness of the kingdom of humanity. Among the principles of heavenly civilization He brought is the virtue of the human world. Among the principles of celestial civilization He announced is the improvement and betterment of human morals.<sup>18</sup>

HE was a real Educator, the Instructor of reality.<sup>19</sup>

DURING the ministry of Jesus Christ in Palestine He was surrounded by people of various nations, including the Jews, all of them living in the condition of extreme ignorance, bereft of the Word of God and darkened in consciousness. Christ educated these people and quickened them with the life of the Word so that they in turn became the instruments of educating the world, illumining the East and the West.<sup>20</sup>

THE Jews had become dispersed and widely scattered. This single and unique Personage overcame all the then known world, founding an everlasting sovereignty, a mighty nation indeed. Such a result proved Him to be a great man, the first Educator of His time, the first Teacher of His period.<sup>21</sup>

### Sixth image: Christ the Promised Messiah of the Jews

The Jews failed to recognize Christ as the Promised Messiah; they were so blinded by their superstitions and imitations that they missed His coming. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says:

[T]HE Hebrew prophets were sent to announce Christ, but unfortunately the Talmud and its superstitions veiled Him so completely that they crucified their promised Messiah. Had they renounced the talmudic traditions and investigated the reality of the religion of Moses, they would

*have become believers in Christ.*<sup>22</sup>

*It is easy to read the Holy Scriptures, but it is only with a clean heart and a pure mind that one may understand their true meaning.*<sup>23</sup>

*CONSIDER the symbolical meanings of the Words and teachings of Christ. He said, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever." When the Jews heard this, they took it literally and failed to understand the significance of His meaning and teaching. The spiritual truth which Christ wished to convey to them was that the reality of Divinity within Him was like a blessing which had come down from heaven and that he who partook of this blessing should never die. That is to say, bread was the symbol of the perfections which had descended upon Him from God, and he who ate of this bread, or endowed himself with the perfections of Christ, would undoubtedly attain to everlasting life.*<sup>24</sup>

*THE Jews were expecting the appearance of the Messiah, looking forward to it with devotion of heart and soul, but because they were submerged in imitations, they did not believe in Jesus Christ when He appeared.*<sup>25</sup>

### **Seventh image: Christ, the one who brought Unity and Love**

Christ brought together many different peoples of His time; they were able to live next to each other in harmony and love. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

*ALL the Prophets have striven to make love manifest in the hearts of men. Jesus Christ sought to create this love in the hearts.*<sup>26</sup>

*CHRIST appeared in this world nineteen hundred years ago to establish ties of unity and bonds of love between the various nations and different communities. He cemented together the sciences of Rome and the splendors of the civilization of Greece. He also accomplished affiliation between the Assyrian kingdom and the power of Egypt. The blending of these nations in unity, love and agreement had been impossible, but Christ through divine power established this condition among the children of men.*<sup>27</sup>

*CONSIDER how many different nations and divergent religious beliefs existed when Christ appeared. Enmity and strife prevailed among them – Romans, Greeks, Assyrians, Egyptians – all warring and hostile toward each other. Christ, through the breaths of the Holy Spirit, united them, established fellowship among them so that no trace of strife remained. Under His standard they became united and lived in peace through His teachings.*<sup>28</sup>

*WHEN the Messianic star of Jesus Christ dawned, He declared He had come to gather together the lost tribes or scattered sheep of Moses. He not only shepherded the flock of Israel but brought together people of Chaldea, Egypt, Syria, ancient Assyria and Phoenicia. These people*

were in a state of utmost hostility, thirsting for the blood of each other with the ferocity of animals; but Jesus Christ brought them together, cemented and united them in His Cause and established such a bond of love among them that enmity and warfare were abandoned.<sup>29</sup>

JESUS Christ established the religion of God through love. His sovereignty is everlasting. . . . Christ was a conqueror of human hearts. . . . Love is the eternal sovereignty. Love is the divine power.<sup>30</sup>

JESUS Christ was mercy itself, was love itself. He even prayed in behalf of His executioners – for those who crucified Him – saying, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” If they knew what they were doing, they would not have done it. Consider how kind Jesus Christ was, that even upon the cross He prayed for His oppressors.<sup>31</sup>

### **Eighth image: Christ the Physician**

Christ brought teachings for His time as a physician would prescribe a medicine. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* Abdu'l-Bahá states:

*[I]N the day of Jesus Christ the world of humanity was afflicted with various ailments. Jesus Christ was the real Physician. He appeared, recognized the symptoms and prescribed the real remedy. What was that remedy? It was His revealed teaching especially applicable to that age.<sup>32</sup>*

## **II. Parallels between Christ and Bahá'u'lláh**

‘Abdu'l-Bahá expresses with beautiful images and in a very poetic language the similarities between Christ and Bahá'u'lláh. Here are some quotes.

### **First parallel: The teachings of the Prophets**

The Manifestations in every age brought teachings that with time have been forgotten or altered by material laws. Likewise Christ's guidance were introduced in a manner that people were not able to fathom the depth of them; Bahá'u'lláh explains those teachings and expands them to the whole world.

*THE Prophets and Manifestations of God bring always the same teaching; at first men cling to the Truth but after a time they disfigure it. The Truth is distorted by man-made outward forms and material laws. The veil of substance and worldliness is drawn across the reality of Truth.*

*As Moses and Jesus brought their Message to the people, so Bahá'u'lláh brings the same Message.<sup>33</sup>*

*KNOW that the attributes of perfection, the splendor of the divine bounties, and the lights of inspiration are visible and evident in all the Holy Manifestations; but the glorious Word of God, Christ, and the Greatest Name, Bahá'u'lláh, are manifestations and evidences which are beyond imagination, for they possess all perfections of former*

*Manifestations; and more than that, They possess some perfections which make other Manifestations dependent upon Them.*<sup>34</sup>

*TRUTH is one, and without division. The teachings of Jesus are in a concentrated form. Men do not agree to this day as to the meaning of many of His sayings. His teachings are as a flower in the bud. Today, the bud is unfolding into a flower! Bahá'u'lláh has expanded and fulfilled the teachings, and has applied them in detail to the whole world.*<sup>35</sup>

**Second parallel: The Teachings have always come from the East to the West**

*THE West has always received spiritual enlightenment from the East. . . . The Lord Christ arose as a bright Star in the Eastern sky, but the light of His Teaching shone more perfectly in the West . . .*<sup>36</sup>

*IT is a long time since the Sun of Truth mirrored forth by the Lord Christ has shed its radiance upon the West, for the Face of God has been veiled by the sin and forgetfulness of man. But now again, praise be to God, the Holy Spirit speaks anew to the world! The constellation of love and wisdom and power is once more shining from the Divine Horizon to give joy to all who turn their stifling the souls of men.*<sup>37</sup>

*IN the time of Jesus Christ there was an outpouring of the Light from East to West that brought the people*

*under a heavenly banner and illumined them with divine insight. Western lands have been kindled by the Light of the Christ.*<sup>38</sup>

*IN every age of great spiritual darkness, a light is kindled in the East. So once again the light of the teachings of God has come unto you. Even as education and progress travel from West to East, so does the spiritual fire travel from East to West.*<sup>39</sup>

**Third parallel: The light of the Prophet**

*WHEN the Lord Christ came He spread the light of the Holy Spirit on all around Him, and His disciples and all who received His illumination became enlightened, spiritual beings.*

*It was to manifest this light that Bahá'u'lláh was born, and came into the world. He taught Eternal Truth to men, and shed the rays of Divine Light in all lands.*<sup>40</sup>

**Fourth parallel: The trials of the Prophets**

Christ and Bahá'u'lláh endured terrible trials.

*WHY should all this suffering have been, if not to prove the everlasting life of the spirit?*<sup>41</sup>

*FROM the beginning of the world until the present time each 'Manifestation' [i.e. Divine Manifestation] sent from God has been opposed by an embodiment of the 'Powers of Darkness'. . . . In the day of Christ, Annas and Caiaphas inflamed the*



*Jewish people against Him and the learned doctors of Israel joined together to resist His Power. All sorts of calumnies were circulated against Him. . . .*

*Now, in our own day, history repeats itself.*

*Those who would have men believe that religion is their own private property once more bring their efforts to bear against the Sun of Truth: they resist the Command of God; they invent calumnies, not having arguments against it, neither proof. . . . They write all they can think of against the Divine Messenger, Bahá'u'lláh.<sup>42</sup>*

#### **Fifth parallel: The renewal of the Teachings**

*THE appearances of the Manifestations of God are the divine springtime. When Christ appeared in this world, it was like the vernal bounty. . . . Bahá'u'lláh has come into this world. He has renewed that springtime.<sup>43</sup>*

#### **Sixth Parallel: Christ and Bahá'u'lláh both founders of a spiritual civilization**

*JESUS Christ came to teach the people of the world this heavenly civilization. . . . Bahá'u'lláh appeared in [Persia] and founded the spiritual civilization.<sup>44</sup>*

#### **Seventh parallel: The Manifestation of God as a Physician**

*CHRIST was a heavenly Physician. He*

*brought spiritual health and healing into the world. Bahá'u'lláh is, likewise, a divine Physician. He has revealed prescriptions for removing disease from the body politic and has remedied human conditions by spiritual power.<sup>45</sup>*

#### **Eighth parallel: The promulgation of the teachings through disciples**

*WHEN Christ appeared, certain blessed souls followed His example.... After the ascension of Christ they hastened to various regions of the world, scattering broadcast the teachings and instructions which He had given them. Through their devotion and efforts other places and remote nations became informed of the principles revealed by Him. . . .*

*Now we have, likewise, come from the Orient, announcing the appearance of Bahá'u'lláh, Who shone from the horizon of the East. We have been witnesses of His ordeals and sufferings, observers of His imprisonment and exile. . . . [W]e who are His disciples have been scattered throughout the world in order that His teachings may be widespread and be heard by every ear.<sup>46</sup>*

### **III. Interpretation of some Christian Beliefs**

#### **1. The Birth of Christ**

**Q:** How was Christ born of the Holy Spirit?

'Abdu'l-Bahá answers:

A: *THE theologians believe that Christ was born of the Holy Spirit, but the materialists think his is impossible and inadmissible, and that without doubt He had a human father. . . .*

*[T]he theologians say: "This thing is not impossible and unachievable, but it has not been seen; and there is a great difference between a thing which is impossible and one which is unknown. . . . Is this globe eternal or phenomenal?" The materialists answer that, according to science and important discoveries, it is established that it is phenomenal. . . .*

*The theologians say: "Then from your statement it has become evident and clear that mankind is phenomenal upon the globe, and not eternal. Then surely the first man had neither father nor mother, for the existence of man is phenomenal. . . . [T]here can remain no doubt that a man without a human father is also possible and admissible; you cannot consider this impossible; otherwise, you are illogical."<sup>47</sup>*

*A great man is a great man, whether born of a human father or not. If being without a father is a virtue, Adam is greater and more excellent than all the Prophets and Messengers. . . . The honor and greatness of Christ is not due to the fact that He did not have a human father, but to His perfections, bounties and divine glory."<sup>48</sup>*

'Abdu'l-Bahá in another passage implies that Joseph was not the father of Christ. He states:

*JOSEPH was of the descendants of Jesse, the father of David; but as Christ found existence through the Spirit of God, He called Himself the Son of God."<sup>49</sup>*

The Christian doctrine of the Virgin Birth is recognized by the Bahá'í Teachings, as Shoghi Effendi notes:

*THE Master clearly writes in a Tablet that Christ was not begotten in the ordinary way, but by the Holy Spirit. So we must accept this. Every Faith has some miracles, and this is the great miracle of the Christian faith."<sup>50</sup>*

## 2. Baptism

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains how during the time of John the Baptist this practice had a different meaning than today's meaning which has become only a custom.

*THE principle of baptism is purification by repentance. John admonished and exhorted the people, and caused them to repent; then he baptized them. Therefore, it is apparent that this baptism is a symbol of repentance from all sin: its meaning is expressed in these words: "O God! as my body has become purified and cleansed from physical impurities, in the same way purify and sanctify my spirit from the impurities of the world of nature, which are not worthy of the Threshold of Thy Unity!" Repentance is the return from disobedience to obedience. . . .*

*As Christ desired that this institution of John should be used at that time by all, He Himself conformed to it in order to awaken the people and*

to complete the law of the former religion. Although the ablution of repentance was the institution of John, it was in reality formerly practiced in the religion of God.

Christ was not in need of baptism; but as at that time it was an acceptable and praiseworthy action, and a sign of the glad tidings of the Kingdom, therefore, He confirmed it. However, afterward He said the true baptism is not with material water, but it must be with spirit and with water. In this case water does not signify material water, for elsewhere it is explicitly said baptism is with spirit and with fire, from which it is clear that the reference is not to material fire and material water, for baptism with fire is impossible.

Therefore, the spirit is the bounty of God, the water is knowledge and life, and the fire is the love of God. For material water does not purify the heart of man; no, it cleanses his body. But the heavenly water and spirit, which are knowledge and life, make the human heart good and pure; the heart which receives a portion of the bounty of the Spirit becomes sanctified, good and pure – that is to say, the reality of man becomes purified and sanctified from the impurities of the world of nature. These natural impurities are evil qualities: anger, lust, worldliness, pride, lying, hypocrisy, fraud, self-love, etc.

Man cannot free himself from the rage of the carnal passions except by the help of the Holy Spirit. That is why He says baptism with the spirit, with water and with fire is necessary, and that it is essential – that is to say, the spirit of divine bounty, the water

of knowledge and life, and the fire of the love of God. Man must be baptized with this spirit, this water and this fire so as to become filled with the eternal bounty. Otherwise, what is the use of baptizing with material water? No, this baptism with water was a symbol of repentance, and of seeking forgiveness of sins.

But in the cycle of Bahá'u'lláh there is no longer need of this symbol; for its reality, which is to be baptized with the spirit and love of God, is understood and established.<sup>51</sup>

### 3. The Trinity

The Three persons of the Christian Godhead (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) as constituting one God, is explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as follows:

*GOD is pure perfection, and creatures are but imperfections. For God to descend into the conditions of existence would be the greatest of imperfections; on the contrary, His manifestation, His appearance, His rising are like the reflection of the sun in a clear, pure, polished mirror. . . . [T]he Reality of Christ was a clear and polished mirror of the greatest purity and fineness. The Sun of Reality, the Essence of Divinity, reflected itself in this mirror and manifested its light and heat in it; but from the exaltation of its holiness, and the heaven of its sanctity, the Sun did not descend to dwell and abide in the mirror. . . .*

*This is why Christ said, "The Father is in the Son," meaning that the Sun is visible and manifest in this mirror.*

*The Holy Spirit is the Bounty of*

*God which becomes visible and evident in the Reality of Christ. The Sonship station is the heart of Christ, and the Holy Spirit is the station of the spirit of Christ. Hence it has become certain and proved that the Essence of Divinity is absolutely unique and has no equal, no likeness, no equivalent.*<sup>52</sup>

#### 4. The symbolism of the bread and the wine

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

*THIS bread signifies the heavenly food and divine perfections. So, "If any man eateth of this bread" means if any man acquires heavenly bounty, receives the divine light, or partakes of Christ's perfections, he thereby gains everlasting life. The blood also signifies the spirit of life and the divine perfections, the lordly splendor and eternal bounty. For all the members of the body gain vital substance from the circulation of the blood.*

*In the Gospel of St. John, chapter 6, verse 26, it is written: "Ye seek Me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled."*

*It is evident that the bread of which the disciples ate and were filled was the heavenly bounty; for in verse 33 of the same chapter it is said: "For the bread of God is He which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world. . . ."*

*Reflect how clear it is that what Christ meant by the heavenly bread was His spirit, His bounties, His perfections and His teachings; for it is*

*said in the 63<sup>rd</sup> verse: "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing."*

*Therefore, it is evident that the spirit of Christ is a heavenly grace which descends from heaven; whosoever receives light from that spirit in abundance — that is to say, the heavenly teachings — finds everlasting life. That is why it is said in the 35<sup>th</sup> verse: "And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to Me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst."*

*Notice that "coming to Him" He expresses as eating, and "belief in Him" as drinking. Then it is evident and established that the celestial food is the divine bounties, the spiritual splendors, the heavenly teachings, the universal meaning of Christ. To eat is to draw near to Him, and to drink is to believe in Him. . . .*

*The disciples had taken many meals from the hand of Christ; why was the last supper distinguished from the others? It is evident that the heavenly bread did not signify this material bread, but rather the divine nourishment of the spiritual body of Christ, the divine graces and heavenly perfections of which His disciples partook, and with which they became filled.*

*In the same way, reflect that when Christ blessed the bread and gave it to His disciples, saying, "This is My body," [Matt. 26:26] and gave grace to them, He was with them in person, in presence, and form. He was not transformed into bread and wine; if He had been turned into bread and wine, He could not have remained with the disciples in body, in person*

and in presence.

*Then it is clear that the bread and wine were symbols which signified: I have given you My bounties and perfections, and when you have received this bounty, you have gained eternal life and have partaken of your share and your portion of the heavenly nourishment.<sup>53</sup>*

## 5. Sacrifice for redeeming the original sin

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains this concept through logic and reason. He states:

*THEY say that Adam disobeyed the command of God and partook of the fruit of the forbidden tree, thereby committing a sin which was transmitted as a heritage to His posterity. They teach that because of Adam's sin all His descendants have, likewise, committed transgression and have become responsible through inheritance; that, consequently, all mankind deserves punishment and must make retribution; and that God sent forth His Son as a sacrifice in order that man might be forgiven and the human race delivered from the consequences of Adam's transgression*

*We wish to consider these statements from the standpoint of reason. Could we conceive of the Divinity, Who is Justice itself, inflicting punishment upon the posterity of Adam for Adam's own sin and disobedience? Even if we should see a governor, an earthly ruler punishing a son for the wrongdoing of his father, we would look upon that ruler as an unjust man. Granted the father com-*

*mitted a wrong, what was the wrong committed by the son? There is no connection between the two. Adam's sin was not the sin of His posterity, especially as Adam is a thousand generations back of the man today. If the father of a thousand generations committed a sin, is it just to demand that the present generation should suffer the consequences thereof? . . . These interpretations and statements are due to a misunderstanding of the meanings of the Bible.*

*In order to understand the reality of sacrifice let us consider the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ. It is true that He sacrificed Himself for our sake. What is the meaning of this? When Christ appeared, He knew that He must proclaim Himself in opposition to all the nations and peoples of the earth. He knew that mankind would arise against Him and inflict upon Him all manner of tribulations. There is no doubt that one who put forth such a claim as Christ announced would arouse the hostility of the world and be subjected to personal abuse. He realized that His blood would be shed and His body rent by violence. Notwithstanding His knowledge of what would befall Him, He arose to proclaim His message, suffered all tribulation and hardships from the people and finally offered His life as a sacrifice in order to illumine humanity — gave His blood in order to guide the world of mankind. He accepted every calamity and suffering in order to guide men to the truth. Had He desired to save His own life, and were He without wish to offer Himself in sacrifice, He would not have been able to guide a*

single soul. There was no doubt that His blessed blood would be shed and His body broken. Nevertheless, that Holy Soul accepted calamity and death in His love for mankind.<sup>54</sup>

## 6. The Resurrection of Christ

'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

*THE resurrections of the Divine Manifestations are not of the body. All Their states, Their conditions, Their acts, the things They have established, Their teachings, Their expressions, Their parables and Their instructions have a spiritual and divine signification, and have no connection with material things. . . .*

*[Christ's] disappearance under the earth for three days has an inner signification and is not an outward fact. In the same way, His resurrection from the interior of the earth is also symbolical; it is a spiritual and divine fact, and not material; and likewise His ascension to heaven is a spiritual and not material ascension. . . .*

*Therefore, we say that the meaning of Christ's resurrection is as follows: the disciples were troubled and agitated after the martyrdom of Christ. The Reality of Christ, which signifies His teachings, His bounties, His perfections and His spiritual power, was hidden and concealed for two or three days after His martyrdom, and was not resplendent and manifest. No, rather it was lost, for the believers were few in number and were troubled and agitated. The Cause of Christ was like a lifeless body; and when after three days the disciples became assured and steadfast, and*

*began to serve the Cause of Christ, and resolved to spread the divine teachings, putting His counsels into practice, and arising to serve Him, the Reality of Christ became resplendent and His bounty appeared; His religion found life; His teachings and His admonitions became evident and visible. In other words, the Cause of Christ was like a lifeless body until the life and the bounty of the Holy Spirit surrounded it.<sup>55</sup>*

## 7. The return of Christ

'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

*CHRIST was the Sun of Reality which shone from the heavenly horizon of Christianity, training, protecting, confirming minds, souls and spirits until they came into harmony with the divine Kingdom and attained capacity for descent of the infinite bounties of God. Were it not for the appearance of His splendor, they would have remained in the darkness of imperfection and remoteness from God. But because that Sun of Reality shone forth and flooded its light into the world of minds, souls and spirits, they became radiant. He conferred a new and eternal life upon them. . . .*

*There is a day and a night in the world of spirituality. After each departure there is a return and the dawning light of a new day.<sup>56</sup>*

*IN the Divine Scriptures and Holy Books "return" is spoken of, but the ignorant have not understood the meaning, and those who believed in reincarnation have made conjectures on the subject. For what the divine Prophets meant by "return" is not the*

return of the essence, but that of the qualities; it is not the return of the Manifestation, but that of the perfections.<sup>57</sup>

KNOW that the return of Christ for a second time doth not mean what the people believed, but rather, signifieth that One promised to come after Him.<sup>58</sup>

I would like now to conclude with quotations from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that summarize the image of Christ.

*As the sun is to the body of a man so is the Sun of Truth to his soul.*

*A man may have attained to a high degree of material progress, but without the light of truth his soul is stunted and starved. . . . The Christian Teaching was illumined by the Divine Sun of Truth. . . .*

*If the followers of the Lord Christ had continued to follow out these principles with steadfast faithfulness, there would have been no need for a renewal of the Christian Message....<sup>59</sup>*

*. . . CHRIST appeared in order to illumine the world of humanity, to render the earthly world celestial, to make the human kingdom a realm of angels, to unite the hearts, to enkindle the light of love in human souls, so that such souls might become independent, attaining complete unity and fellowship, turning to God, entering into the divine Kingdom, receiving the bounties and bestowals of God and partaking of the manna from heaven.<sup>60</sup>*

*THIS young Man, Christ, by the help of a supernatural power, abrogated*

*the ancient Mosaic Law, reformed the general morals, and once again laid the foundation of eternal glory for the Israelites. Moreover, He brought to humanity the glad tidings of universal peace, and spread abroad teachings which were not for Israel alone but were for the general happiness of the whole human race. . . .*

*[I]t becomes clear and evident that this Glorious Being was a true Educator of the world of humanity, and that He was helped and confirmed by divine power.<sup>61</sup>*

#### Notes

1. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 13.
2. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 127.
3. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 312.
4. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 149.
5. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 43-44.
6. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 155.
7. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 206-207.
8. *Ibid.* p. 135.
9. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, pp. 40-42.
10. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Talks of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, rev. ed.
11. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 10.
12. *Ibid.* pp. 54-55.
13. *Ibid.* p. 277.
14. *Ibid.* p. 40.
15. *Ibid.* p. 194.
16. *Ibid.* p. 206.
17. *Ibid.* p. 85.
18. *Ibid.* p. 11.
19. *Ibid.* p. 401.
20. *Ibid.* p. 331.
21. *Ibid.* p. 412.
22. *Ibid.* p. 16.

23. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 49.
24. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 459.
25. Ibid. p. 180.
26. Ibid. p. 15.
27. Ibid. p. 18.
28. Ibid. p. 42.
29. Ibid. p. 117.
30. Ibid. p. 211.
31. Ibid. p. 42.
32. Ibid. p. 204.
33. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London*, p. 57.
34. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 149-150.
35. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London*, p. 92.
36. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 23.
37. Ibid. p. 24.
38. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London*, p. 48.
39. Ibid. p. 49.
40. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 59.
41. Ibid. p. 93.
42. Ibid. pp. 101-103.
43. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 10.
44. Ibid. pp. 11-12.
45. Ibid. p. 249.
46. Ibid. pp. 370-371.
47. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 87-88.
48. Ibid. p. 89
49. Ibid. pp. 62-63.
50. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 23 December 1948, in the International Bahá’í Archives. Quoted in *A Study Guide to the Kitáb-i-Íqán* by Hooper Dunbar.
51. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 91-92.
52. Ibid. p. 113.
53. Ibid. pp. 97-99.
54. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 449-450.
55. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 103.
56. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 271.

57. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 288.
58. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Abbas*, p. 138.
59. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 21-22.
60. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 443.
61. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 16.

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- Hooper Dunbar, *A Study Guide to the Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1998).