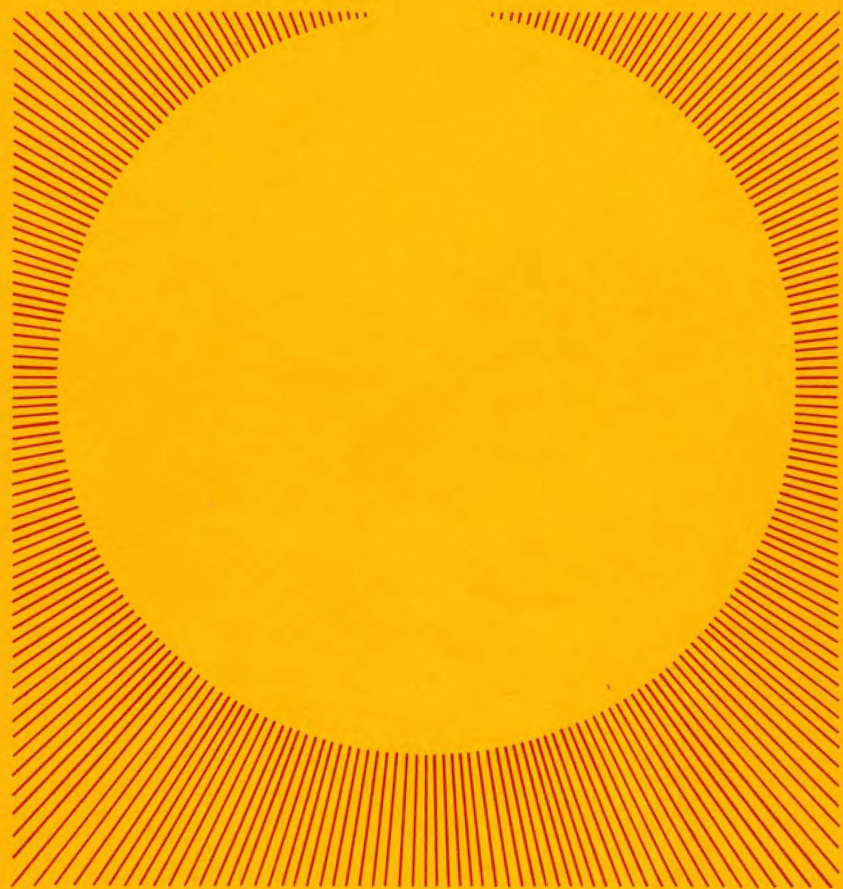
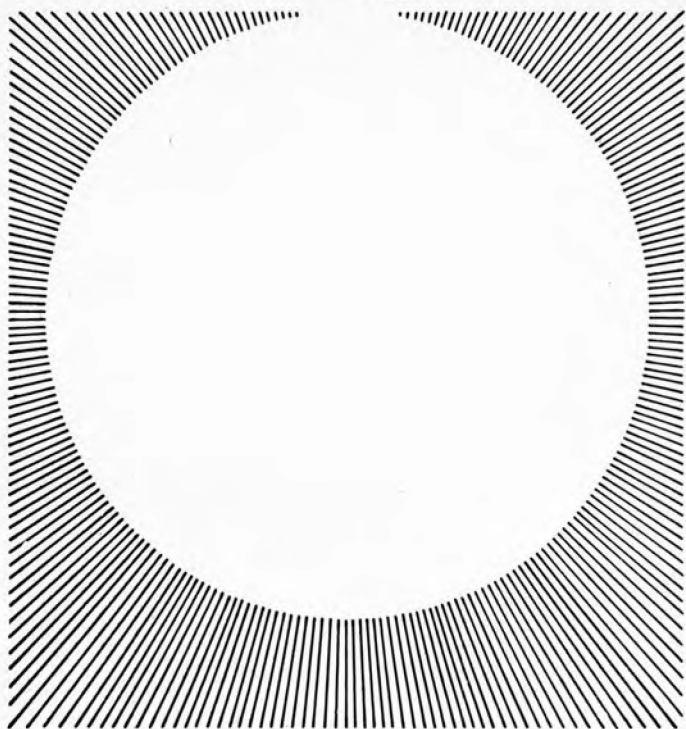


**The Light of**



**Bahá'u'lláh**

# The Light of

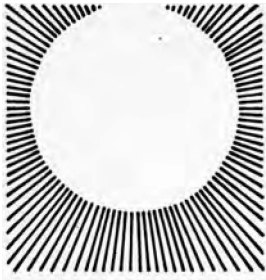


# Bahá'u'lláh

An Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith



Bahá'í Publishing Trust  
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## Foreword

The study of the Bahá'í Faith can never be completed, even in a lifetime. Once the spark of faith has been kindled and one can say, "I believe Bahá'u'lláh speaks with the authority of God for this Day," that one has committed himself or herself to a lifetime of inquiry, a lifetime of attempting to translate the inspiration of Bahá'u'lláh into daily living. The guidance of God has the power to assist us in every life decision, to help us discover how to bring every moment of our lives into harmony with divine purpose. But because of our imperfections, we do not always see how to apply this power. Therefore, our understanding needs the aid that comes from constant study of the Bahá'í writings.

In a statement on the importance of teaching the masses The Universal House of Justice wrote that new believers must "become enchanted with the beauty of the teachings, and touched by the love of Bahá'u'lláh." The aim of this book is to help believers catch a spark of the love of Bahá'u'lláh and become deepened in the basic teachings of the Faith. By this means they will be able better to contribute to the development of strong Bahá'í communities, which are the foundation of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.

There are many ways by which to bring the light of Bahá'u'lláh into our lives. This book offers one way. It

## vi Foreword

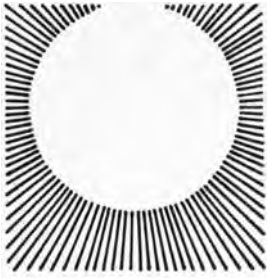
divides the study of our Faith into nine major topics, which can be thought of as the points of a nine-pointed star. Each major topic has its own star of nine subtopics. It seems helpful to group the major topics according to the following points. Three points deal with the history of the Faith: progressive revelation, Bahá'u'lláh, and Bahá'í history. Another three points have to do with the teachings of the Faith: the spiritual teachings, the social teachings, and the Bahá'í laws. And yet another three points are concerned with the organization of the Faith: Bahá'í administration, the Local Spiritual Assembly, and Bahá'í community life.

This book is useful for personal study. It can be a study guide for new Bahá'ís and for youth. It can give new Bahá'í teachers the confidence to teach others because it provides them with nine different introductory presentations, which can be studied in any order.

It is hoped that the study of this book will stimulate the inquirer's thirst for more knowledge about each of the topics covered. That knowledge can come from reading the Creative Word, from discussions with fellow Bahá'ís, from participation in study classes, from private thought and meditation. This book can help sow the seeds of understanding in each of us. It introduces the inquirer to a range and variety of the Bahá'í teachings from which anyone can gain specific guidance.

This book can help you understand and reflect the light of Bahá'u'lláh.

DWIGHT W. ALLEN



# Bahá'í History

## 1 The Heroic Age

The period of time from the Declaration of the Báb's mission in 1844 until the death of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1921 is known as the Heroic Age of the Bahá'í Faith. It was a time of heroic deeds, great sacrifices, tragedies, and victories—"a period whose splendors no victories in this or any future age, however brilliant, can rival. . . ." <sup>1</sup> During this age the Founders of the Faith lived, taught, and opened the door to the Kingdom of God. The early believers courageously proclaimed the dawn of a new day and became known as "the dawn-breakers." By studying the lives of the Central Figures and the dramatic events of this Age, a believer can now learn about the roots of his Faith. He also begins to understand the responsibilities facing present-day Bahá'ís, whom Shoghi Effendi calls the descendants of the dawn-breakers.

The first major Figure of the Heroic Age was the Báb. His task was to prepare the way for the coming of the Promised One of all religions. Though His ministry lasted only six years, the Báb set on fire the hearts of thousands of seekers by the purity of His life and by the power and beauty of His words. The Báb's followers, known as Bábís, soon spread the news of His coming throughout Persia.

## 2 The Light of Bahá'u'lláh

The Persian government and the Muslim religion were, at this time, corrupt. The leaders became frightened by the spread of the Báb's teachings. Like the leaders of Jesus' time, they were afraid of losing their power over the people. They decided to persecute the Bábís and destroy the new Faith.

The Báb was arrested and imprisoned several times. His followers were ridiculed, tortured, and put to death. Táhirih, the first woman apostle in religious history, who tore away the veil that women had been forced to wear and boldly proclaimed an age of dignity and equality for women, was strangled. Mullá Husayn, the first to believe in the Báb, and Quddús, the last of the Báb's eighteen chosen apostles, were betrayed and murdered after a Persian prince swore on the Qur'án, the Muslim Holy Book, to guarantee their safety if they would leave the fort where they and some three hundred other Bábís had been defending themselves against the army. Bábís were tortured and killed in front of their families in an effort to make the families deny their faith. Sometimes all the Bábís in an entire village were murdered. Young and old, rich and poor, men and women—all were called to give their lives for their religion. During the opening years of the Heroic Age more than twenty thousand believers were martyred.

Eventually the Báb Himself, like Jesus, offered His life for the Cause of God. In 1850, at the age of thirty-one, the Báb was shot by a firing squad while a crowd of nearly ten thousand people watched. With sorrow and compassion He spoke these last words to the heedless crowd: "*O wayward generation! . . . The day will come when you will have recognized Me; that day I shall have ceased to be with you.*"<sup>2</sup>

Although the life and ministry of the Báb were short, His mission had been completed. He had succeeded in preparing the pure-hearted seekers for the coming of the Promised One. The Báb had told His followers: "*Well it is with him who fixeth his gaze upon the Order of Bahá'u'lláh, and rendereth thanks unto his Lord! For He will assuredly be made manifest.* . . ."<sup>3</sup>

After Bahá'u'lláh announced in 1863 that He was the One promised by the Báb, He and His followers were also persecuted. They, too, gladly sacrificed their homes, their

families, and their lives to spread the news that God had again spoken to man, as He had in the past.

Bahá'ís can look back on their past with pride and admiration. Time after time the early believers proved to be examples of love, courage, and steadfastness. Their sacrifices can inspire present-day Bahá'ís to rise to new heights of service to the Cause of God.

## 2 The Covenant

God has promised never to leave mankind alone. This promise of eternal guidance is called the Ancient Covenant or the Most Great Covenant. A covenant is an agreement, and it always has two parts. God has kept His part of the Covenant by continually sending Manifestations to guide man. Man fulfills his part of the Covenant by accepting and obeying these Manifestations with a joyful and radiant heart.

Each Manifestation makes a covenant with His followers about other Manifestations. Each speaks of the One Who came before Him and the One Who will come after Him. Jesus, for example, said, "For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me."<sup>4</sup> He also referred many times to the Comforter or Spirit of Truth Whom God would send after His passing.

All Manifestations have told Their people to expect the One Who would come at the time of the end. All religions have waited for the day when "there shall be one fold, and one shepherd."<sup>5</sup> The coming of Bahá'u'lláh has fulfilled the promises and prophecies of all religions.

One sign of the greatness of the Bahá'í Revelation is the new Covenant Bahá'u'lláh has made to protect the unity of the Bahá'í Faith. In the past, religions have been torn apart by religious disagreements. Their unity has been destroyed by the formation of sects and denominations. Members of the same religion have fought and even killed each other because of their differences. Usually these disagreements have occurred because the Manifestations did not give clear guidance about whom Their followers should turn to after

## 4 The Light of Bahá'u'lláh

Their death. Bahá'u'lláh, however, established a firm and unshakable Covenant with His followers:

*"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."*<sup>6</sup>

*. . . refer ye whatsoever ye understand not in the Book to Him Who hath branched from this mighty Stock.*<sup>7</sup>

The Branch is 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh's eldest son and the Center of His Covenant. Only 'Abdu'l-Bahá was given the authority to interpret and explain the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. By requiring all Bahá'ís to turn to 'Abdu'l-Bahá for guidance, Bahá'u'lláh made sure that no divisions could ever take place in the Faith. No Bahá'í would be able to form a sect based on his own understanding of the Writings because all loyal Bahá'ís would refuse to turn away from the authorized interpreter.

'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke often of the importance and power of this Covenant:

*Were it not for the protecting power of the Covenant . . . , there would arise among the Bahá'ís, in one day, a thousand different sects as was the case in former ages.*<sup>8</sup>

*. . . the pivot of the oneness of mankind is nothing else but the power of the Covenant.*<sup>9</sup>

*The lamp of the Covenant is the light of the world. . . .*<sup>10</sup>

## 3 'Abdu'l-Bahá

From His birth on the very night of the Báb's Declaration in 1844 to His passing in 1921 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life was completely devoted to service to the Cause of God. While still a child, and before Bahá'u'lláh had revealed His station, 'Abdu'l-Bahá recognized His Father as a Manifestation of God and threw Himself at Bahá'u'lláh's feet, asking to lay down His life for Him.



'Abdu'l-Bahá was given many titles—the Most Great Branch, the Master, the Center of the Covenant—but He preferred to be known only as 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Servant of Bahá'u'lláh. 'Abdu'l-Bahá shared His Father's sufferings and hardships and was an exile and prisoner for more than fifty years. Throughout His life, however, He served His Father, the Cause of God, and mankind with supreme joy and confidence. He said that the only real prison is the prison of self and that service and sacrifice in the path of God are the sources of true happiness. His services to mankind were noticed by both Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís. The British government made Him a Knight of the Empire in recognition of His work to relieve suffering and starvation during World War I.

Bahá'u'lláh called His son "The Mystery of God," a title referring to His unique position.<sup>11</sup> While not a Manifestation, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is the Center of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant and the Interpreter of His Word. He is also the Exemplar of the Faith, and His life is the perfect example that every Bahá'í must try to follow. No other religion has ever been blessed with a Figure like 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Bahá'u'lláh tells the Bahá'ís:

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

*We have made Thee ['Abdu'l-Bahá] a shelter for all mankind, a shield unto all who are in heaven and on earth, a stronghold for whosoever hath believed in God, the Incomparable, the All-Knowing.*<sup>13</sup>

Of all the tasks that 'Abdu'l-Bahá accomplished during His ministry three stand out prominently. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was responsible for seeing that the first House of Worship was built. Although He laid the cornerstone for the House of Worship in Wilmette during His trip to America, the first Temple, located in Russia, was the only one completed in His lifetime. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was also responsible for bringing the remains of the Báb to the Holy Land and laying them in their final resting place in the heart of Mount Carmel on the exact spot chosen by Bahá'u'lláh years before.

## 6 The Light of Bahá'u'lláh

Perhaps the most outstanding project that 'Abdu'l-Bahá undertook was His teaching trip to the West. After being released from prison when He was nearly seventy years old 'Abdu'l-Bahá sailed to Europe and America. During His journey 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke at churches, synagogues, universities, human rights groups, and meetings in private homes. He met with great leaders of thought and with humble seekers. By His words and His deeds He showed what the Faith offers mankind, and through His teaching efforts the Faith was firmly established in the West.

Throughout His life 'Abdu'l-Bahá set an example of selflessness, sacrifice, love, and obedience. He showed the true meaning of service. By studying His life and by learning how He treated all who came to Him—rich and poor, learned and unschooled, admirer and enemy—Bahá'ís can learn how to put the teachings of the Faith into action in their daily lives.

## 4 Shoghi Effendi

Bahá'u'lláh's appointment of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the Center of the Covenant kept the Bahá'í Faith unified. 'Abdu'l-Bahá preserved this unity by writing a Will and Testament appointing Shoghi Effendi the Guardian of the Cause of God. Shoghi Effendi was the eldest grandson of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the great-grandson of Bahá'u'lláh. He was also related to the Báb. 'Abdu'l-Bahá called Shoghi Effendi the "sign of God" and told the Bahá'ís to turn to him for guidance after His death:

*O my loving friends! After the passing away of this wronged one, it is incumbent . . . to turn unto Shoghi Effendi . . . the fruit grown from the union of the two offshoots of the Tree of Holiness. . . .*

*. . . Whoso obeyeth him not . . . hath not obeyed God; . . . whoso opposeth him hath opposed God. . . .<sup>14</sup>*

Shoghi Effendi was born and raised in the Holy Land. He spent his youth serving 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a secretary and studying English so that he could translate 'Abdu'l-Bahá's letters and interpret for Him. Shoghi Effendi was still a

college student in England when 'Abdu'l-Bahá died and his appointment was revealed.

The young Guardian's first task was to guide the growth of the Administrative Order. Slowly new Spiritual Assemblies were formed and old ones were strengthened. When the foundations of the Administrative Order were firmly established, the Guardian gave the believers a series of teaching plans, each one more challenging than the one before. Under Shoghi Effendi's direction hundreds of cities, islands, and countries were opened to the Faith. The Guardian kept a large map of the world in his home, and whenever a pioneer reported a new teaching victory, he stuck a colored pin in the map. He enjoyed looking at the map because he could see with pride and satisfaction how quickly the Faith was spreading.

One of the priceless gifts Shoghi Effendi gave English-speaking Bahá'ís is his translations of prayers and Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Few of these were available in the West until the Guardian arranged for their publication. Since Shoghi Effendi was the Interpreter of the Faith, these translations reflect the spirit and true meaning of the original Persian and Arabic Tablets. In addition to translating, Shoghi Effendi wrote several books and many letters of his own. Some tell the history of the Faith and describe how the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh will be built. Others answer believers' questions on a variety of subjects.

Despite his many tasks Shoghi Effendi was able to develop and beautify the World Center of the Faith in Haifa. He supervised the building of the Shrine of the Báb and the International Archives building and also designed the lovely gardens surrounding them.

After thirty-six years of guiding the Bahá'í community Shoghi Effendi died in London in 1957 while making final arrangements for the completion of the Archives building. During his ministry the Faith had grown from a handful of devoted but isolated believers to an organized world community. Shoghi Effendi had helped the friends channel their love and loyalty into the building of the Administrative Order and by his many years of sacrificial work had given them a high standard to follow.

## 5 The Universal House of Justice

Shoghi Effendi did not appoint another Guardian before he died. He had no children, and there were no members of Bahá'u'lláh's family who were qualified to serve as Guardian of the Faith. However, the Bahá'í world was not left without guidance because Bahá'u'lláh had created the institution of The Universal House of Justice in His Most Holy Book.

In the early years of the Faith loyalty was shown by obedience to a person, either Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, or Shoghi Effendi. Today Bahá'ís must show their firmness and loyalty by obeying God's new institutions. The Universal House of Justice is the supreme institution of the Bahá'í Faith. There is none higher or more powerful. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote in His Will and Testament: *"Unto the Most Holy Book [Kitáb-i-Aqdas] everyone must turn, and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice."*<sup>15</sup> He also wrote that The Universal House of Justice is *"the source of all good and freed from all error. . . ."*<sup>16</sup>

The Universal House of Justice was first elected in April 1963, exactly one hundred years after Bahá'u'lláh announced His Mission to the world. The election took place at the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, Israel, where delegates from fifty-six National Spiritual Assemblies cast their ballots. The Universal House of Justice has its permanent seat in Haifa. There on the side of Mount Carmel, the "Mountain of God," The Universal House of Justice directs the Bahá'í world with its inspiring messages.

Since its election The Universal House of Justice has given the Bahá'í world teaching plans and has established the International Teaching Center. It has created the Continental Boards of Counselors, an institution designed to teach and protect the Cause. It has also continually poured out its guidance and encouragement in letters to the Bahá'í world and has published more translations of the holy texts.

The importance of The Universal House of Justice can be better understood if one thinks of the Bahá'í world as a

wheel with the outer rim representing the Local Spiritual Assemblies. The spokes of the wheel are the National Spiritual Assemblies, and the center or hub of the wheel is The Universal House of Justice. If the wheel is to move forward, it must turn around the central point. Only by turning around the guidance of The Universal House of Justice can the Bahá'í world move the work of the Cause forward.

Today Bahá'ís must follow the directions of The Universal House of Justice as they obeyed Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi in the past. Nothing could better show their desire to serve the Cause of God.

## 6 The Divine Plan

Bahá'ís are assured of the ultimate victory of their Faith and know that the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh will be firmly established. Each believer, however, has an important part to play in this process. Each must teach the Faith. This is a commandment of Bahá'u'lláh, and He has promised assistance and spiritual strength to those who arise to teach:

*Say: Teach ye the Cause of God, O people of Bahá, for God hath prescribed unto every one the duty of proclaiming His Message, and regardeth it as the most meritorious of all deeds.*<sup>17</sup>

*. . . should a man, all alone, arise in the name of Bahá, and put on the armor of His love, him will the Almighty cause to be victorious, though the forces of earth and heaven be arrayed against him.*<sup>18</sup>

Teaching is more than a duty; it is the greatest gift of God:

*"Of all the gifts of God the greatest is the gift of Teaching. . . . Of such a gift how can we deprive ourselves?"*<sup>19</sup>

Today the most important work of individual Bahá'ís and Spiritual Assemblies is teaching the Cause of God and bringing the healing message of Bahá'u'lláh to those who are longing to hear and accept it. Teaching plans help

## 10 The Light of Bahá'ú'lláh

Bahá'ís in their work because plans give a direction and set goals to attain. All teaching plans receive their inspiration from Bahá'ú'lláh's Revelation, and all have as their final goal the unification of mankind through the spiritual power of God's Faith. This goal is so large, though, that it is hard to know where to start. The plans given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the institutions of the Faith break this large goal into smaller goals, such as how many new Spiritual Assemblies to form, how many pioneers to send, and to which countries should the Faith be brought first. These plans channel the energy of the believers and help the teaching work proceed in an orderly, coordinated way.



While World War I was raging in Europe, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote a series of letters called the Tablets of the Divine Plan. These were addressed to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada. The direction of all teaching plans comes from these Tablets. In them 'Abdu'l-Bahá urges the believers to teach the Cause by leaving their homes and pioneering to places where the message of Bahá'ú'lláh is not known. Bahá'ú'lláh writes about the confirmations awaiting pioneers: *"They that have forsaken their country for the purpose of teaching Our Cause—these shall the Faithful Spirit strengthen through its power. . . . By My life! No act, however great, can compare with it, except such deeds as have been ordained by God, the All-Powerful, the Most Mighty."*<sup>20</sup>

The believers who responded to these Tablets achieved great victories and performed services for the Faith that will never be forgotten. Martha Root went to Latin America, Europe, and the Orient. While in Europe she taught the Faith to Queen Marie of Rumania, who became the first member of a royal family to accept Bahá'u'lláh. Mr. and Mrs. Hyde Dunn took the Faith to Australia, where they became known as the Father and Mother of that continent. Emogene Hoagg and Marion Jack pioneered to Alaska. 'Abdu'l-Bahá revealed the great station of those who arose to pioneer when He referred to the teaching work of Agnes Alexander in Hawaii and Japan: *"had this respected daughter founded an empire, that empire would not have been so great! For this sovereignty is eternal sovereignty and this glory is everlasting glory."*<sup>21</sup>

After 'Abdu'l-Bahá's death Shoghi Effendi continued to guide the teaching work. He directed two Seven Year Plans and the Ten Year World Crusade. Under the leadership of The Universal House of Justice the Bahá'í world completed a Nine Year Plan in 1973 and a Five Year Plan in 1979 and began a Seven Year Plan in 1979. The Universal House of Justice will continue to guide the Bahá'í community with a series of teaching plans until the supreme goal of world unity is achieved.

The direction and goals of the Bahá'í community are clear. Bahá'u'lláh has raised the call to teach. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has given the Western believers a detailed teaching plan. Shoghi Effendi has guided the friends through several stages of this plan, and the Bahá'í institutions will continue to guide them. All that now remains is for loyal believers to arise and win the victories.

## 7 The Formative Age

'Abdu'l-Bahá's death in 1921 closed the Heroic Age of the Faith and marked the beginning of the Formative or Transitional Age. The Formative Age is the link in the chain of Bahá'í history that connects the heroic past to the glorious future. During this period the institutions of the

## 12 The Light of Bahá'u'lláh

Faith will grow and develop until they reach their mature form—the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, the foundation of the long-awaited Kingdom of God on earth.

Though Bahá'ís today are at the beginning of this new stage in God's plan, they can already see Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order slowly growing and taking shape. Much of this early growth is due to the loving guidance of Shoghi Effendi. The Guardian explained that two processes help the Faith and its institutions develop: expansion and consolidation. Expansion means growth—an increase in new believers and the establishment of new Spiritual Assemblies. Consolidation refers to strengthening and deepening. Both processes are necessary. If the Faith expands without consolidating, it will be like a tree with many branches but no roots that can be blown away by the first winds of a storm. If the Faith consolidates without expanding, it will be like a tree with many roots but no new leaves and branches to bring fresh energy. The Bahá'í community must aim for a healthy balance of expansion and consolidation. It must have a rhythmic pattern to its growth and development.





No one knows exactly how long the Faith will remain in its formative period, but much will depend on the Bahá'ís. The degree to which Bahá'ís live the life, teach, and deepen themselves can speed up or slow down the progress of the Faith. If they try to purify their lives and teach actively, they will attract many new believers and form new communities. As more and more communities elect, support, and strengthen Spiritual Assemblies, mankind draws closer to the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.

The growth of the Faith can be compared to the growth of a tree. The seed of the tree was planted by the Revelations of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb. The early martyrs watered this seed with the sacrifice of their lifeblood. Now the seed has poked its head above the ground and has begun growing into the mighty tree that will some day shelter all mankind. During its growing period the tree will face many fierce storms, but because it is rooted in the will of God, it will survive and grow.

The Formative Age is an exciting period of Bahá'í history in which to live. The tests and challenges will be many, but the opportunities to win spiritual victories will also be many. Now is the time to arise and serve, confident that, however severe the trials ahead may be, no force on earth can prevent the triumph of God's Cause.

## 8 The Bahá'í World Today

Who could have imagined during the early years of the Bahá'í Faith that in a little more than 130 years it would have encircled the world? The rulers who tried so hard to put out its light certainly did not. Few of the world's great thinkers or leaders recognized the greatness and majesty of the infant religion. Even the faithful followers of Bahá'u'lláh have been amazed by the explosive growth of their Faith. No other religion has ever grown as quickly. Hundreds of years passed before either the Jewish or Christian Faiths were known throughout the world. The message of Bahá'u'lláh has now spread to nearly every country and island on earth. This rapid growth is another proof of the power of God's Cause.

## 14 The Light of Bahá'u'lláh

The diversity of those entering the Faith is as exciting as the growth of the Cause. The Bahá'í Faith is meant for all peoples. It is neither an eastern nor western religion, but a world religion. Men and women of every religious background have accepted Bahá'u'lláh. The Faith has grown among blacks, whites, Hispanics, Orientals, and Indians. Each person, each race, tribe, and nationality entering the Bahá'í family has enriched the Faith by adding to its diversity.



The Administrative Order, the foundation of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order, has been established in most parts of the world. More than one hundred National Spiritual Assemblies and many thousands of Local Spiritual Assemblies have been elected. These Assemblies act as spiritual magnets that attract the confirmations of Bahá'u'lláh. They also guide the teaching work and thus speed the growth of the Faith.

Many other victories have been won. Five Houses of Worship have been built, each on a different continent; two more are being built; and land for many others has been bought. The Seat of The Universal House of Justice is being established on Mount Carmel. Teaching institutes, schools, and centers have also been built around the world.

While the old order dies, the Faith continues to grow and become stronger. These two processes of death and birth are both part of God's plan. As the old order crumbles, the suffering of mankind will increase. Only by turning to

Bahá'u'lláh can the world find peace and rest. The longer mankind ignores His message, the worse will be its suffering. For this reason the near future looks dark, but Bahá'ís know the distant future will be bright beyond imagination.

What is the role of Bahá'ís today? Until Bahá'u'lláh's healing message is delivered to the peoples of the world, there can be no hope of unity and peace. Bahá'u'lláh says, however, that those who arise to teach must first teach themselves and let His words transform their lives. Therefore, Bahá'ís must pray, deepen, purify their lives, and arise to teach. They must never become discouraged but rather, as The Universal House of Justice says, "seize the opportunities of the hour and go forward confident that all things are within His mighty grasp and that, if we but play our part, total and unconditional victory will inevitably be ours."<sup>22</sup>

## 9 The Golden Age

Shoghi Effendi has divided the history of the Faith into three parts: the Heroic Age, the Formative Age, and the Golden Age. This last great period is the fruit of the tree of the Cause of God. It is the time Christ promised when He taught His followers to pray "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven."<sup>23</sup> It is the time of the Most Great Peace. It is the time of the coming of age of the human race.

Several prophets have had visions of this time. Isaiah described it more than 2,500 years ago:

. . . they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.<sup>24</sup>

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid. . . .<sup>25</sup>

. . . the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.<sup>26</sup>

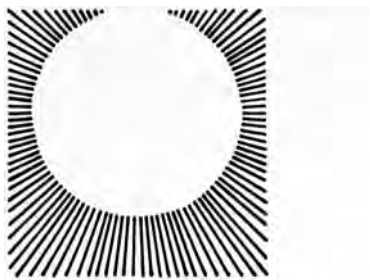
## 16 The Light of Bahá'u'lláh

St. John also recorded his vision:

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth. . . .  
And God shall wipe away all tears . . . and there shall  
be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither  
shall there be any more pain: for the former things  
are passed away.<sup>27</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh has described this Golden Age in detail. The world will be ruled by the law of God, and all of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings will be practiced. Nations will no longer make war but will consult together in a world council. The earth will be one country with all mankind its citizens. Prejudices will be eliminated, and all men will consider themselves members of the same family. Justice will be firmly established, and the rights of all peoples will be protected. The extremes of wealth and poverty will disappear. A world language will be chosen and taught in all schools to increase understanding between men. Artists and musicians around the world will reflect the new spirit of harmony and unity in their creations. Religion and science will cooperate and lead mankind to new truths. A world civilization, the product of the spiritual, intellectual, and artistic gifts of all mankind, will come into being.

The Golden Age has been the dream of every Prophet. Mankind has longed for this Age for thousands of years. Now Bahá'u'lláh has shown the way to establish this Kingdom of God on earth. Although Bahá'ís today may not live to see this glorious Age, they can hasten its coming. They will have the satisfaction of knowing that their efforts to live the life, their work in teaching the Faith, and their sacrifices brought the time of the Golden Age one step closer.



# Bahá'u'lláh

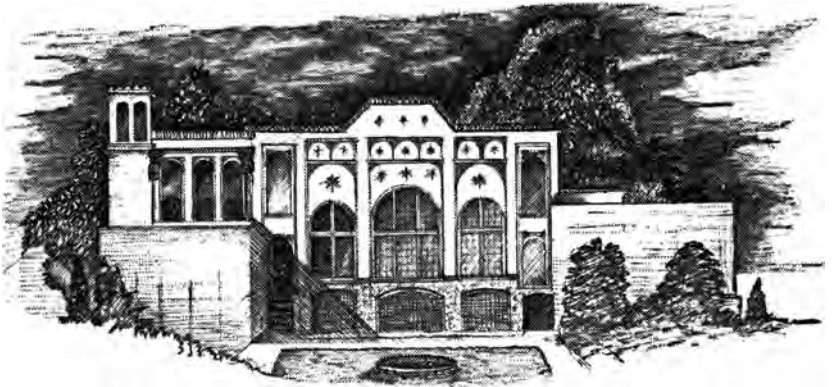
## Introduction

Before He was crucified, Jesus told His followers, "If ye love me, keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever. . . ." <sup>1</sup> When the disciples questioned Him, Jesus said, "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth. . . ." <sup>2</sup> Christians have, ever since, eagerly waited for this promise to come true. Through the ages they have prayed and looked for the One Who is the Spirit of Truth. Isaiah, seeing far into the future, wrote: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." <sup>3</sup>

Now, at last, God has fulfilled His promise. The Prince of Peace, the everlasting Father, has appeared. His name is Bahá'u'lláh—the Glory of God—and the light of His message is filling the earth. His laws and commandments are guiding mankind to unity and obedience to God. Soon men will see the Kingdom of God, for the promise "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven," is becoming a reality.

## 1 Early Life

Bahá'u'lláh was born in Tíhrán, Persia, on 12 November 1817. His parents named Him Ḥusayn-'Alí. His father was a very wealthy nobleman who held a high position at the king's court and was loved and trusted by the people. Like Jesus before Him, Bahá'u'lláh, as a child, was different from other children. Though untutored, He surprised all with His wisdom and understanding. Once when His father was not able to appear in court, Bahá'u'lláh argued the case for him and won! His parents began to realize how unusual their son was.



Writing of Bahá'u'lláh, Nabíl, a Bahá'í historian, stated that the beauty of Bahá'u'lláh's face and His kindly smile left a permanent impression on his soul. But it was not only His physical beauty that attracted people. Bahá'u'lláh had a deep love and concern for people. Every day He showered food, money, and comfort on the poor who came to His door. His home and His heart were never closed to the needy. So loving and kind was Bahá'u'lláh that He soon became known as the "Father of the Poor."

While Bahá'u'lláh was still a young man, His father died, leaving his position at the king's court open. The

government offered the position to Bahá'u'lláh, but He refused it. Like Jesus, Bahá'u'lláh knew that His "business" was "not of this world."

## 2 Acceptance of the Báb

While Bahá'u'lláh continued to care for both His family and those who came to Him for help and comfort, another remarkable man known as the Báb, which means "Gate," was telling people of the new Day of God and of the coming of the Promised One. The Persian clergy was frightened and persuaded the government to jail the Báb. Though He was never able to meet Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb sent a disciple, Mullá Ḥusayn, to deliver a letter to Bahá'u'lláh in Tíhrán. Mullá Ḥusayn prayed daily, asking God to lead him to the One Who was to receive the Báb's letter. One night, as he was saying his evening prayers, Mullá Ḥusayn heard a knock on his door. He opened it and found a man standing in the doorway. Mullá Ḥusayn asked the man whether there was an unusual person living in Núr, the area of Persia where Bahá'u'lláh lived. "Yes," the man replied, "there is a man who cheers the sorrowful and feeds the hungry." "What is His rank and position?" Mullá Ḥusayn asked. "He has none apart from befriending the poor and the stranger," was the reply.<sup>4</sup>

Mullá Ḥusayn knew that this man had been sent by God, so he gave him the Báb's letter to deliver to Bahá'u'lláh. When Bahá'u'lláh read the letter, He immediately became a follower of the Báb, saying that the words of the Báb came from the same source as the words in the Holy Qur'án, the Bible of the Muslims:

Bahá'u'lláh arose to help spread the teachings of the Báb. Nabíl writes that Bahá'u'lláh's dignity, purity, and loving-kindness won the hearts of the townspeople.

The year 1848 was an important year for Bahá'u'lláh and the followers of the Báb. During that year the believers gathered together and held a conference in Badasht, a village in the north of Persia. During the conference Bahá'u'lláh gave each of the believers a new name. He also was called by a new name—Bahá, which means "Glory."

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He told the believers that the conference was the beginning of a new age. The old habits and traditions would be replaced by the new laws and principles of God. New understanding would be given to man. Most of the believers were happy, praying and singing hymns of joy and love. When the conference ended, they spread out to tell others the good news of the Day of the Lord.

### 3 The Beginning of Bahá'u'lláh's Mission

Thousands of people became followers of the Báb. Soon the government and the Muslim clergy started to persecute the Bábís. Those in power had the believers tortured and killed. Eventually they put the Báb Himself to death. By the time the worst of the persecution was over, some twenty thousand people had been killed. However, instead of destroying the new Faith, the persecutions only strengthened it.

Bahá'u'lláh Himself was captured and taken, along with 150 other Bábís, to a dungeon in Tíhrán. This dungeon was so awful that Bahá'u'lláh said, *"No pen can depict that place, nor any tongue describe its loathsome smell. . . . God alone knoweth what befell Us in that most foul-smelling and gloomy place!"*<sup>5</sup>

To help comfort the prisoners Bahá'u'lláh taught them to chant, *"God is sufficient unto me; He verily is the All-Sufficing! In Him let the trusting trust!"*<sup>6</sup> Sometimes the Bábís would sing so powerfully that the king would hear them in his palace, which was not far from the dungeon.

While in prison Bahá'u'lláh learned that He was the Promised One sent by God to free mankind from its bondage. The Holy Spirit that had appeared to Jesus now appeared to Bahá'u'lláh. He heard the words, *"Verily, We shall render Thee victorious by Thyself and by Thy Pen. Grieve Thou not for that which hath befallen Thee, neither be Thou afraid, for Thou art in safety. Erelong will God raise up the treasures of the earth—men who will aid Thee through Thyself and through Thy Name. . . ."*<sup>7</sup> Although Bahá'u'lláh could



hardly sleep because of the weight of His heavy chains, He said, *"in those infrequent moments of slumber I felt as if something flowed from the crown of My head over My breast, even as a mighty torrent. . . . Every limb of My body would, as a result, be set afire. At such moments My tongue recited what no man could bear to hear."*<sup>8</sup>

## 4 Declaration

For ten years Bahá'u'lláh did not reveal that He was the Messenger of God. In 1853, after four months of imprisonment, Bahá'u'lláh was released and ordered to gather His family and leave Persia. He left Tíhrán, never to return, and set out for Baghdád in 'Iráq.

When Bahá'u'lláh arrived in Baghdád, He saw that the Bábís were unhappy and discouraged. Gradually, through His wise and careful leadership, Bahá'u'lláh was able to restore unity and hope to the Bábí community. For several years Bahá'u'lláh taught the people of Baghdád and the Bábís who came from near and far to learn from Him. They received full answers to their questions, gained confidence, and renewed their faith. Many who had not previously heard of the Báb now became Bábís and told others of the saintly One in Baghdád.

As Bahá'u'lláh's prestige and reputation grew, the government and the Muslim clergy became alarmed. They thought the Bábí Faith had died out. The King of Persia asked the King of Turkey to exile Bahá'u'lláh once more. The King of Turkey ordered Him to be brought to Constantinople. Bahá'u'lláh knew that the time had now come to tell the people Who He was.

In April 1863 Bahá'u'lláh went to a garden outside the city gates to pray and meditate in preparation for His new exile. He stayed in the garden for twelve days while His loved ones came to pray and weep because Bahá'u'lláh was about to leave them. Every day the gardeners would pick roses and put them in Bahá'u'lláh's tent. Bahá'u'lláh would then give the flowers to the believers in the city. The river itself seemed to sense the greatness of those days. On the

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ninth day it rose so high that no one could cross it. On the twelfth day, when the river went down, Bahá'u'lláh left the garden, which was now called Riḍván—Paradise.

After centuries of prayers and hope the world had become ready for God's gift. Bahá'u'lláh now revealed to His chosen ones the precious secret: He was their Hope and their Master, the Lord of the Day of Judgment, the Lord of Hosts. Speaking of that Day Bahá'u'lláh said: *"This is the Day whereon the unseen world crieth out: 'Great is thy blessedness, O earth, for thou hast been made the foot-stool of thy God, and been chosen as the seat of His mighty throne.'"*<sup>9</sup>

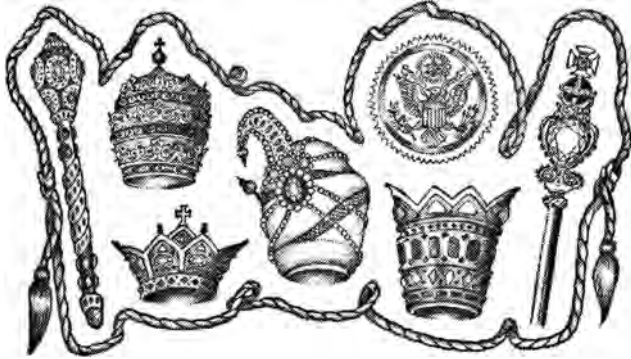
The sadness of the Bábís disappeared as they heard Bahá'u'lláh's announcement, and they became filled with joy and adoration. The Cause of the Báb was now fulfilled. The faithful Bábís became the first Bahá'ís.

## 5 Proclamation

In the nineteenth century most of the world's peoples were governed by kings who had complete power over their subjects and could command whatever they wished. The people had no choice but to obey their kings as if these men were appointed by God. Although the people were generally unhappy, they had to be submissive. Among the rulers were Napoleon III of France, Queen Victoria of England, William I of Prussia, Pope Pius IX, and Alexander II of Russia. Out of His love and concern for the people ruled by these leaders, Bahá'u'lláh wrote each ruler a letter. He told them about Himself and His mission and asked them to follow God's commandments. He told them that the governments should not produce so many weapons and should not hold people in slavery. All people, Bahá'u'lláh said, should be treated with justice and be encouraged to obey the laws of God. Bahá'u'lláh also told the rulers that they must bow before God and worship and obey Him. The rulers held positions of power and authority because of the bounty of God, and it was their responsibility to serve as examples of holiness and service.

Some of Bahá'u'lláh's commands to the leaders were very specific. For example, Bahá'u'lláh told Napoleon III

that unless Napoleon helped the new Faith, his empire would pass from his hands. Napoleon III paid no attention. Bahá'u'lláh sent a message to the Pope, calling him to recognize Bahá'u'lláh as the returned Christ. Bahá'u'lláh warned the Pope not to argue with Him as the Pharisees had argued with Jesus.



All but one of the kings and rulers rejected the message of Bahá'u'lláh\*. Because of their rejection Bahá'u'lláh said that their power would be taken away from them. Today the monarchies of Napoleon, Alexander, and William I no longer exist. Other monarchs have lost much of their former power. Even the Pope does not have the power today that he once had in the Christian nations.

Mankind has suffered greatly because its leaders have rejected the divine guidance of the Promised One. The coming of the Kingdom has been delayed by their spiritual blindness, but God's Plan can never be destroyed. The power to establish the Most Great Peace and build the Kingdom of God on earth, which the rulers of the world rejected, is now available to all those who are willing to turn to Bahá'u'lláh, recognize His station, and follow His commands.

\*Only Queen Victoria of England is reported not to have rejected Bahá'u'lláh's summons. Upon receiving Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet, she was quoted as saying, "If this is of God, it will endure; if not, it can do no harm." (See Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Is Come*, 3d ed. [Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980], p. 65.)

## 6 Persecution and Sufferings of Bahá'u'lláh

The Holy Ones Whom God has sent to tell people of His laws and His great love have always suffered intensely at the hands of their government. Jesus was cruelly tortured and crucified, and the Báb was killed by a firing squad. As soon as Bahá'u'lláh rose to carry forward the Cause of the Báb, His life was filled with banishment, persecution, and suffering. In August 1852 two young Bábís tried, unsuccessfully, to kill the Persian king. Their attempt gave the king an excuse to hunt down and kill the Bábís. Bahá'u'lláh was among those thrown into prison. In the underground dungeon Bahá'u'lláh was joined with heavy chains to other believers. There was no light and no fresh air, and the floor was filthy. Each day one of the Bábís was singled out to be killed. Bahá'u'lláh, however, escaped execution. Eventually He was freed from prison and banished from Írán. Bahá'u'lláh then began the long, difficult journey to Baghdád.

Once in Baghdád Bahá'u'lláh attempted to regroup the community of Bábís but met with fierce opposition from His own half-brother, Mírzá Yaḥyá. As the tensions and difficulties of the Bábí community grew, Bahá'u'lláh saw that if He stayed among the Bábís disunity would develop. He decided to leave. One morning His family awoke to find that He had gone without leaving word where He was going. Two years later some of the Bábís began to hear of a Holy One Who was living in the mountains to the northeast. They recognized Him as Bahá'u'lláh and sent messengers begging Him to return. The Bábís had learned that peace and unity could only come through their obedience and loyalty to Bahá'u'lláh.

When Bahá'u'lláh was summoned by the Turkish government to leave Baghdád and go to Constantinople, He had to endure even more suffering. The journey itself was long and hard. In Constantinople and Adrianople, the cities where He was forced to live, Bahá'u'lláh was mistreated by the Turkish government and betrayed by His

half-brother, Mírzá Yahyá. Mírzá Yahyá was a selfish and jealous man. He wanted to be a leader but had no talent for leadership. He wanted to be admired but had nothing in him that people could admire. Jealousy and lust for power at last drove him to crime. One day he put poison in Bahá'u'lláh's food. Bahá'u'lláh did not die but was very ill from the poison. However, He was so forgiving and generous that He tried to hide His brother's evil deed. But Mírzá Yahyá would not stop. He spread gossip and told lies until the Turkish government once again exiled Bahá'u'lláh. This time He was sent to a prison in a small, unhealthy fortress city named 'Akká in Palestine.

Bahá'u'lláh's enemies hoped He and His Faith would die. He and His family, as well as the other Bahá'ís, suffered from filth, heat, cold, hunger, and disease. The greatest blow to Bahá'u'lláh was the death of His young son, Mírzá Mihdí, named the Purest Branch, who fell through the skylight in the prison roof.

But for a Prophet of God there is no turning back. Jesus did not run from death. The Báb knew He would be martyred and accepted His destiny. In one of His darkest hours Bahá'u'lláh, like Jesus before Him, cried out to God: *"Calamity hath reached its height: Where are the signs of Thy succour, O Salvation of the worlds? . . . I have been forsaken in a foreign land: Where are the emblems of Thy faithfulness, O Trust of the worlds? . . . Bahá is drowning in a sea of tribulation: Where is the Ark of Thy salvation, O Saviour of the worlds?"*<sup>10</sup> And He heard the voice of the Lord saying, *"We have made abasement the garment of Thy glory, and sorrow the beauty of Thy temple, O Thou Treasure of the worlds! Thou seest the hearts are filled with hate and shalt absolve them, Thou Who dost hide the sins of all the worlds! When the swords flash, go forward; when the shafts fly, press onward, O Thou Victim of the worlds."*<sup>11</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh was content with the will of God and submitted to that will, offering Himself up as a living sacrifice: *"The Ancient Beauty hath consented to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage, and hath accepted to be made a prisoner within this most mighty Stronghold that the whole world may attain unto true liberty. He hath drained to its dregs the cup of sorrow, that all the peoples of the earth may attain unto abiding joy, and be filled with gladness."*<sup>12</sup>

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Slowly Bahá'u'lláh's enemies were conquered. The doors of the prison were opened, and He was allowed to live in the town. His eldest son and closest companion, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, secured a large house beyond the city walls. There, at Bahjí, among greenery and trees, Bahá'u'lláh spent the last years of His earthly life. When He passed away in 1892, thousands of His followers had already begun to establish His Faith in Persia and the neighboring countries.

## 7 The Kitáb-i-Aqdas

During Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment in 'Akká one of the greatest bounties and miracles in history occurred. Bahá'u'lláh wrote His Most Holy Book, the book of His laws. Unlike the Books of old religions, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas was dictated by the Prophet Himself and marked with His personal seal. For the first time in history there is no doubt about the directions given by a Prophet of God. All men can read the commandments. All can arise to obey and serve God.

The Most Holy Book covers many subjects. In it Bahá'u'lláh proclaims His mission and gives His commandments. The believers, He writes, must pray, fast, attend the Nineteen Day Feast, and observe holy days. They must live in peace and unity, educate their children, abstain from drugs and alcohol, and lead chaste lives. They must not kill, steal, commit adultery, or cause disunity and hatred. Nations must live in peace. Rulers must choose a language for all men to learn so that they will be able to understand one another. Houses of Justice must be established to guide the believers and maintain order and unity.

The Kitáb-i-Aqdas is the law that has come forth from the New Jerusalem. It is the sign of God's Kingdom on earth, for mankind now has one common Book by which to be governed. God's Plan for humanity as well as for individuals is now revealed. The laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas are clear and easy to follow because they have been interpreted and explained by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi. The administration of the laws of the new age is the responsibility of the Houses of Justice. The path and responsibilities of the Bahá'ís are now clear: they will become spiritual beings by obeying the laws of God.

## 8 Other Writings

One of the greatest blessings in this new day is the vast amount of literature available. With His own hand Bahá'u'lláh wrote hundreds of verses, letters, and prayers. He wrote to kings, noblemen, poor people, students, and learned scholars. Although not all of His writings have been translated into English yet, many books and verses are available.

While Bahá'u'lláh lived in Baghdád, He revealed three books: *The Hidden Words*, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, and the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (The Book of Certitude). Each of these works contains religious truths that are very important for believers to understand. They provide food for the soul of man as do all of Bahá'u'lláh's writings.



In *The Hidden Words* Bahá'u'lláh explains more clearly than had ever before been done the nature of the relationship between God and man. He reveals the basic spiritual truths of all religions:

*O Son of Man!*

*If thou lovest Me, turn away from thyself; and if thou seekest My pleasure, regard not thine own; that thou mayest die in Me and I may eternally live in thee.*<sup>13</sup>

*The Seven Valleys* was written to a learned Muslim who wanted to understand the progress of the human soul. Here Bahá'u'lláh describes the stages a seeker goes through in his search for God. Bahá'u'lláh writes that man can know God only through His chosen Messenger.

*The Book of Certitude* was written in answer to questions that an uncle of the Báb sent to Bahá'u'lláh. This book explains many difficult passages and concepts of past Scriptures and shows how God has sent Prophets through the ages to guide mankind.

Bahá'u'lláh helped man communicate with God and draw close to Him by leaving hundreds of prayers and meditations. When one seeks assistance, health, or forgiveness, he can turn to these beautiful prayers.

Some of Bahá'u'lláh's most powerful messages are those He wrote to the kings of Europe, Turkey, and Persia. He warned these leaders that God would punish them severely if they turned away from Bahá'u'lláh and the law of God that He brought. History has proven the power of His words: Many of these kings lost control of their kingdoms and were stripped of their power.



The last major book of Bahá'u'lláh was written to a priest in Işfahán, Persia, known as the "Son of the Wolf." His father had been responsible for the deaths of two outstanding Bahá'ís, and he himself was an enemy of the Faith. Bahá'u'lláh wrote to this man a very long letter called the *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*. In the letter He calls on him and on all mankind to investigate the truth of His Message.

God has been most generous. Any person who wants knowledge or assistance can turn to the writings of Bahá'u'lláh. In them he will find the source of all wisdom and truth. Bahá'u'lláh's writings are the Word of God, which can recreate souls and enable men to help build God's Kingdom on earth.

## 9 Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh

Bahá'u'lláh's love and wisdom guided the Bahá'ís for forty years. During that time He suffered greatly, wrote thousands of verses, and brought new hope to thousands of souls.

On 8 May 1892 Bahá'u'lláh became ill with a fever, which got worse for a day and then seemed to go away. Although He still received visitors and pilgrims, He was not well. The family tried to keep the many visitors away from His bedside.

Shortly before He passed away, Bahá'u'lláh called His family and the believers who were with them to His side. He told them that He was pleased with them and asked that they remain united.

On 29 May 1892 the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh returned to God. With great sorrow the people buried Bahá'u'lláh's sacred remains next to the mansion where He had lived for several years. This spot is now the most holy Shrine in the world, and believers from all nations gather there to pray and worship.

For a week after the burial hundreds of people, rich and poor alike, came to mourn and pay their respects to the holy family. Everyone praised Bahá'u'lláh; letters of honor and glory were sent by many city officials and government leaders. These letters told of the wonderful qualities and

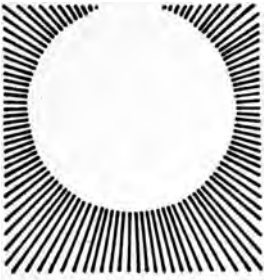
## 30 The Light of Bahá'u'lláh

virtues Bahá'u'lláh had shown and spoke of the great loss the world had suffered with His passing.

With the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh the history of the world reached a turning point. For centuries mankind had awaited the fulfillment of God's promise to send a Divine Teacher Who would guide all peoples to unity, peace, and happiness. Bahá'u'lláh fulfilled all these promises by the holiness of His life and the spiritual power of His writings. He recreated the world by giving its peoples a fresh breath of the Word and love of God.

Bahá'u'lláh also left a unique gift to mankind. In His Will and Testament Bahá'u'lláh called on Bahá'ís to turn to His Son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, for guidance and assistance. 'Abdu'l-Bahá is the example all must strive to imitate in order to fulfill God's commandments and lead good, pure lives.

Although Bahá'u'lláh is no longer alive, His Spirit has not left mankind. It is now guiding and inspiring The Universal House of Justice with the wisdom and knowledge necessary to direct the affairs of men. The biblical promise of the Spirit of the Lord being forever with the people has been fulfilled. This new day should be one of happiness for all people as they seek to build the Kingdom of God on earth.



# Spiritual Teachings

## 1 The Nature of God

All peoples have believed in a mysterious higher Power in the universe. This Power or Supreme Being has been called by many titles—God, Jehovah, Alláh—all of which are names for the One Who is the Creator and Lord of the universe. Bahá'u'lláh has come to teach man about God and to explain God's purpose for man in this day.

What is God like? While man has been created with a desire to know God and draw closer to Him, man's limited mind can never understand God. No created thing can ever understand its creator. The essence of God is unknowable. God has, however, provided a way for man to learn about Him. The Manifestations of God perfectly reflect His attributes. By studying the life and teachings of Moses, Christ, Bahá'u'lláh, and the other Manifestations, man learns that God is just, merciful, loving, and wise.

All the Prophets have taught that man is created in the image of God. Bahá'u'lláh tells man that God says, "*Thou art My lamp and My light is in thee,*" assuring man that "*within thee have I placed the essence of My light.*"<sup>1</sup> As man tears away the veils of ignorance and selfishness that hide the light of God within him and begins to reflect the

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attributes of God, he learns more about the nature of God. He also understands better his own true nature as a servant of God.

While it is difficult to learn about God, man is assured that God is very close to him and loves him. Bahá'u'lláh says that God is closer to man than the veins carrying his lifeblood. When one feels far away from God, he can find comfort in remembering that God has said, *"My love is in thee, know it, that thou mayest find Me near unto thee."*<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Station of the Manifestation

Since the Manifestations of God are the channels through which man learns about the nature and will of God, it is important that Bahá'ís understand Their station and mission.

How are the Manifestations different from other men? Think of God as the sun. Ordinary men are like mirrors that can reflect the light of the sun to a greater or lesser degree, depending on how much dust—selfishness, vanity, ignorance—covers the surface of the mirror. The Manifestations of God are perfectly clean and polished mirrors that reflect the full radiance of the sun. When one looks at a Manifestation of God, it is as if he were looking at God Himself. As Jesus explained, "he that hath seen me hath seen the Father."<sup>3</sup> God does not, of course, live inside the body of a Manifestation any more than the sun lives inside the mirror that reflects its light. God is limitless and cannot be contained in the limited body of a man.

The Manifestations have two natures. They, like all other men, are servants of God and submit to His will. At the same time They are also the mouthpieces of God and speak with the authority, power, and majesty of the Lord of creation.

All the Manifestations of God are equal in station. They have come at different times and places with different physical bodies, but They all reflect the same Spirit. Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus, Muḥammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh all brought the Word of God. They are all one

Voice speaking the same Word. Bahá'u'lláh explains that They all "*soar in the same heaven, are seated upon the same throne, utter the same speech, and proclaim the same Faith.*"<sup>4</sup>

### 3 Oneness of Religion

In the past people did not understand the oneness of religion and thought that all religions other than their own must be false. Bahá'u'lláh explains that the religion of God is one religion that has been taught by many Manifestations. God has sent many Teachers to all parts of the world so that none of His children would be left without guidance.

Why have so many Manifestations been sent? Each comes to call man back to God. During and shortly after the time when a Manifestation appears, man has the pure teachings of God. As the years pass, he forgets or changes the teachings and begins to follow his own will. It is as if the perfect mirror of the religion of God becomes covered with the dust of man's imaginings. God then sends a new Manifestation to clear away the dust so that His will can again be reflected. Today God has sent Bahá'u'lláh. Through His teachings man can draw closer to God and learn His purpose for this day.

Since all the Manifestations come from God and bring divine truth, why are Their laws and teachings sometimes different? Each Manifestation brings two types of teachings. First, He repeats the eternal spiritual truths that never change. All Manifestations remind man that God is the Supreme Being in the universe, that man is His servant, and that God loves man enough to send Messengers to guide him. All tell man that he must love his neighbors because all people are children of the same Father.

Each Manifestation also brings a second type of teachings. These are meant for the people and the age in which He appears. Human needs and capacities change as mankind grows up. Think of the growth of a baby. The best food for the newborn is milk. As the baby grows, he learns to eat solid food. Finally he is able to eat adult food. As wise

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parents feed their child only the type of food he can digest, so the Manifestations feed mankind the spiritual food best suited to its needs.

The Manifestations do not teach man all They know but only that which man can understand at a particular stage in his development. The food given by one Manifestation strengthens and prepares man to accept the revelation of the next Manifestation. The teachings of older religions were right for their age; but this is a new day, and God has sent new spiritual food. To say that one does not need the new teachings because he has the old is like saying that because milk is the best food for babies adults too should have nothing but milk.



Out of His great love for man God has sent not one but many Messengers, Teachers, and Physicians to guide and comfort man as he grows to adulthood. Bahá'ís must show respect and appreciation for all the former Manifestations but must remember that only Bahá'u'lláh's teachings have been given for the needs of this age.

## 4 Twin Duties of Man

Man's first duty is to recognize the Manifestation of God for the age in which he lives. The Manifestation for this age is Bahá'u'lláh. Each person must learn to know and love Him. Fulfilling this duty draws one closer to God. The second duty of man is to obey the laws and commandments given by the Manifestation.

Both duties are important. Neither can be performed without the other. One cannot truly love Bahá'u'lláh without also wanting to obey His laws. How could one claim to love someone but continually go against his wishes and do that which displeases him? Also, one cannot sincerely obey Bahá'u'lláh's laws without first loving Him. How could one wholeheartedly and joyfully obey someone without loving and respecting him?

Bahá'u'lláh says that His laws are not merely rules to limit man. Instead He calls them *"the lamps of My loving providence among My servants, and the keys of My mercy for My creatures."*<sup>5</sup> By obeying these laws man can enjoy the true freedom that comes from submission to God.

It is not enough for man simply to obey the laws of God. One must obey with a joyful, loving heart, not out of fear or as an attempt to "earn" eternal life. Bahá'u'lláh says, *"Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty."*<sup>6</sup> When one obeys out of love, his obedience demonstrates his trust in God and his desire to please his Beloved.

Since the duties of knowing and loving God and of obeying His commandments are inseparable, fulfilling one duty helps man fulfill the other. For example, the more one learns to know and love God, the more he wants to obey the commandment to pray daily. The more regularly one prays, the more his knowledge and love grow.

## 5 Independent Investigation of Truth

In the past, faith was often blind and unquestioning. People believed in something because their family, friends, or religious leaders believed. They did not think and pray

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and investigate truth for themselves. This type of faith is no longer acceptable. Bahá'u'lláh teaches that each person must investigate truth for himself and come to his own conclusions without relying on someone else's thinking. Faith in this day must be built on knowledge and must be one's own decision.

Investigating truth takes much effort and courage, but God has given each person the capacity to recognize truth. Detachment also helps man in his search. Bahá'u'lláh advises the seeker to put aside all love and hate he feels toward the things of the world, for that love may pull him toward error and that hate may drive him away from the truth. Sometimes love makes one do things he knows are not right, and one's feelings may keep him from hearing the truth when it comes from someone he does not like. Detachment tears away some of the veils that blind man to the truth.



While Bahá'u'lláh requires man to investigate truth for himself, He has left man more guidance to help him in his search than has ever before been given by a Manifestation. In addition to leaving hundreds of books and Tablets, Bahá'u'lláh appointed 'Abdu'l-Bahá the authorized interpreter of His teachings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá in turn



appointed Shoghi Effendi the Guardian of the Cause. Their explanations are divinely inspired and must be accepted by all Bahá'ís. No other Bahá'í, however learned, can force another to accept his understanding and explanations of the teachings.

One reason religion has become a source of disunity is that people have blindly followed the religion into which they were born. When they begin to investigate religious truth for themselves with open minds, they will be able to see beyond the man-made differences that divide them. They will learn that the truth in their religion also appears in the other great religions of the world. Truth is truth wherever it is taught, just as light is light in whatever lamp it burns. Knowledge of this will help unite mankind, and religious belief will no longer be a cause of disunity.

## 6 Sacrifice

As one's love for Bahá'u'lláh grows, he wants to find more ways of showing his love—living the life, teaching, and serving. Often the desire to serve involves giving up for the good of the Faith habits or possessions one cherishes. Such sacrifice draws one closer to God.

Sacrifice is a sign of love. When one sacrifices his own desires for the good of another, he demonstrates his love in a clear and unmistakable way. The Manifestations sacrificed everything to bring God's message to man. Jesus gave His life on the cross, and Bahá'u'lláh suffered forty years as a prisoner. The early heroes and heroines of the Faith, such as Quddús and Táhírih, sacrificed their homes, their families, their worldly goods, and their lives to serve the Cause of God.

While most Bahá'ís today are not called upon to give their lives for the Faith, they have many opportunities to sacrifice their desires, time, energy, and material goods. What sacrifices should one make? Each Bahá'í must find his own answer. No one can judge the sacrifice of another. All Bahá'ís, however, can turn to the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who showed the glory of sacrifice by serving His Father and the Faith with complete love and selflessness.

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God instructs those who want to come close to Him: *"If thou lovest Me, turn away from thyself; and if thou seekest My pleasure, regard not thine own; that thou mayest die in Me and I may eternally live in thee."*<sup>7</sup> Sacrifice allows one to draw closer to God by acquiring divine qualities. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that one takes on the qualities of those things for which he sacrifices. Think of what happens to a piece of iron when it is put into the fire. The dark color and coldness disappear, and the iron becomes red and hot. One can say that the iron sacrifices its own qualities and acquires those of the fire. When man sacrifices for worldly goals, he takes on the qualities of the world. His material desires grow, and he becomes greedy for wealth and power. When man sacrifices for God, he develops heavenly qualities. His spiritual desires grow, and he becomes more loving and more selfless. Thus sacrifice causes man to reflect the light of God more brilliantly.

## 7 Prayer and Meditation

Bahá'u'lláh teaches that everyone must pray. Prayer causes a connection between one's soul and God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, *"While man prays he sees himself in the presence of God."*<sup>8</sup> Since prayer is the language of love, Bahá'ís will naturally want to turn to their Beloved often. Bahá'u'lláh instructs Bahá'ís to pray at least once a day, using one of the three obligatory prayers. 'Abdu'l-Bahá notes that praying early in the morning and at night *"is conducive to the joy of hearts."*<sup>9</sup>

How should one pray? First one must free himself from all worldly thoughts and turn to God, Who says: *"O Son of Light! Forget all save Me and commune with My spirit. This is of the essence of My command, therefore turn unto it."*<sup>10</sup> Often man talks with God using the prayers that come from his own heart and that express his needs and desires. At other times he uses the prayers revealed by the Manifestations. These prayers have a special power because they are part of the creative Word of God. They also teach man how to pray. When Jesus was asked by His disciples how to pray, He gave them the Lord's Prayer. Bahá'u'lláh and the Center of

His Covenant, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, have also revealed many prayers to guide and nourish man's soul.

Are prayers always answered? 'Abdu'l-Bahá assures man that *"God will answer the prayer of every servant if that prayer is urgent. His mercy is vast, illimitable."*<sup>11</sup> However, the answer to one's prayers may not be yes or come in the way one expects. Sometimes man, in his ignorance, asks for things that might be harmful to him. God, the All-Knowing, the All-Merciful, must then, like a loving Father, say no.

In addition to praying with words, one can pray with actions. Deeds that are performed for the glory of God and in service to mankind are prayers in action. Bahá'u'lláh says that one's whole life should be a beautiful prayer.

Prayer and meditation are both ways in which man follows Bahá'u'lláh's instruction to *"Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths."*<sup>12</sup>



Meditation is a type of thought or reflection during which man withdraws from the world and turns his inner vision to the mysteries of God. He sees with spiritual eyes and discovers the deeper meanings of things.

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Meditation is the key for opening the doors of God's mysteries. Through meditation man receives new insights and is inspired to make new inventions or to raise the sciences and arts to a new level. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that *"Through the faculty of meditation man . . . receives the breath of the Holy Spirit. . . . Through it he receives Divine inspiration, through it he receives heavenly food."*<sup>13</sup> He also says, *"The spirit of man is itself informed and strengthened during meditation. . . ."*<sup>14</sup>

Not all thoughts that come to man during meditation are inspired by God. Many are useless products of vain imagining. Man's soul is like a mirror. If the mirror is turned to the world during meditation, it will reflect worldly things. If the mirror is turned to the spiritual kingdom, it will reflect the beauty of God. One should direct his thoughts toward the mysteries of the spiritual world and meditate on the life and teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.

As with prayer, one must follow meditation with action. New understandings and insights must be demonstrated by pure and holy deeds. These deeds are the fruit of meditation.

## 8 Work as Worship

'Abdu'l-Bahá says that worship is serving mankind and ministering to the needs of the people. As one studies the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and sees how He helped and comforted all who came to Him, one's heart is filled with the desire to follow 'Abdu'l-Bahá's example and become a worshipping servant. Every Bahá'í can serve mankind through his work.

In this new age Bahá'u'lláh has raised work done in the spirit of service to the level of worship. No longer is one's job separated from religious life. In fact, having some type of job is a command of God. Everyone who is physically able must work, whether as a farmer, factory or office worker, teacher, doctor, student, or housewife. Any form of honest work performed in a spirit of service is acceptable to God.

Whatever his job, one should work to the best of his ability. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that the man who makes a piece

of notebook paper as well as he possibly can is worshipping and giving praise to God. When one remembers that work is worship, he will want to offer only his best to God.

## 9 Life after Death

All the Messengers of God have taught that the soul of man lives on after the death of the body. When the body dies, the soul is untouched. If one breaks a bird's cage, the bird is not hurt. The same is true of the soul of man. Man's body is like the cage, and his soul is like the bird. Death is simply the time when the soul finishes with the body and begins its journey through the next world. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "*The soul is eternal, immortal.*"<sup>15</sup> After separation from the body the soul will continue to develop until it reaches the presence of God.

Although man sees death as an ending, it is really a beginning. Escape from the body is a new birth, and the soul enters into a freer, fuller life. Man cannot understand the next life any more than an unborn child can understand this life. Bahá'ís know that the next world offers peace and spiritual gifts to those who truly believe in God. Bahá'u'lláh says, "*I have made death a messenger of joy to thee.*"<sup>16</sup> He assures man that death leads to a life more beautiful than can be imagined in this world.

Man should not, however, sit around waiting to die. Life in this world should be used to prepare one's soul for the next world. Think about the purpose of a baby's life in the womb. While inside his mother the baby grows eyes, ears, lungs, and limbs to use after birth. He does not need these while living in the womb, but if he fails to develop them, he will be handicapped when he is born. Earthly life, too, is a time of preparation when man must develop the faculties he will need in the life to come.

What are these faculties? They are the spiritual qualities and habits Bahá'u'lláh asks man to develop by turning to Him and obeying His commandments. Through loving and obeying Him one grows spiritually and draws closer to God. One is then able to face with joy the prospect of life in the next world.

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'Abdu'l-Bahá says that prayers for those who have died will assist their growth in their new life. Prayer also brings comfort to those still living in this world. Man does not always see the mercy and love of God in all events. The death of a loved one may remind him of the rude uprooting of a tender plant. However, by praying and trying to see with God's eyes he is helped to understand that the tender plant has been lovingly transplanted to another garden where it can grow better. Loved ones who have died have been moved to a new world where they will continue to grow and progress spiritually.

'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the right attitude toward death: *"How does one look forward to the goal of any journey? With hope and with expectation. It is even so with the end of this earthly journey."*<sup>17</sup> In the past man's progress was hindered by the fear of death. Today Bahá'u'lláh removes this fear by explaining that death is an open door to a new and better life: *"O Son of Love! Thou art but one step away from the glorious heights above and from the celestial tree of love. Take thou one pace and with the next advance into the immortal realm and enter the pavilion of eternity."*<sup>18</sup>



# Social Teachings

## Introduction

Bahá'u'lláh's message has several parts. Some of His teachings tell individuals how to lead a life pleasing to God. Others describe how mankind must build a new God-centered society. Several of these social teachings repeat truths given by other Manifestations in past times. However, the new teachings and principles brought by Bahá'u'lláh are needed now because mankind is living in a new age and has new problems to solve.

## 1 The Oneness of Mankind

Mankind is one. All are members of the human family, all were created by the same Father, and all are dear to Him. Bahá'u'lláh has stressed the importance of this fact. The oneness of mankind is a truth that must constantly be alive in each person's heart and must be reflected in everyone's actions.

Bahá'u'lláh uses many examples to explain the oneness of mankind. He speaks of God as the Shepherd and all people as His sheep. The Shepherd loves and guides

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the whole flock. Why, then, should the sheep quarrel among themselves? Bahá'u'lláh also writes, "*Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch.*"<sup>1</sup> All are part of the Tree of Life and are nourished by the same Source. Explaining how closely everyone must work together, Bahá'u'lláh says, "*Be ye as the fingers of one hand.*"<sup>2</sup> Each finger—each person, race, tribe, and nation—is needed to build the new World Order.

The unity and oneness of mankind is the central point of the Bahá'í Faith and the point from which all its other teachings grow. Applying this principle requires more than just developing a spirit of brotherhood. It requires efforts to create unity. When the principle of unity and oneness is truly put into practice, the entire structure of the world will be changed. Members of all races and nations will share in the governing of the world, and war as a way of solving problems will be replaced by consultation in a world council. Hunger and extreme poverty will disappear because people will be unable to let members of their family starve. Women will play an equal role in the affairs of the world and, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, will go "neck and neck" with men.<sup>3</sup>

By trying to make the principle of the oneness of mankind more a part of their daily lives, Bahá'ís will set the example and show the truth of the Psalm, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!"<sup>4</sup>

## 2 The Importance of the Family

People today have many different ideas about the importance and purpose of the family. Some people even believe families are no longer important. Bahá'u'lláh says, however, that the family is the most basic unit—the building block—of society. Families form the foundation on which society is built. If families are not healthy—loving, unified, and spiritual—society will not be healthy either. Therefore, it is very important for Bahá'ís to understand the importance of the family and develop





healthy families. By doing this they will build the foundation of the new World Order.

Family life must begin with marriage. The commitment to abide by the will of God and to nurture the spiritual growth of one's marriage partner provides the basis for a strong family.

A central purpose of marriage is to raise children. Bahá'u'lláh says *"Marry, O people, that from you may appear he who will remember Me amongst My servants. . . ."*<sup>5</sup> Parents must help their children to know and love God and to recognize and obey His Manifestations. While religious study classes are an important part of spiritual education, children learn first by the examples they see in their home. Children raised in a home filled with respect, encouragement, love, prayer, and laughter have the best chance of growing into healthy, responsible adults. In a home where all the family members are working to develop spiritual qualities, each member will receive support and strength from the others and will inspire them by his example. In such a family, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, the bonds of unity will be so strong that *"The injury of one shall be considered the injury of all; the comfort of each, the comfort of all; the honor of one, the honor of all."*<sup>6</sup>

### 3 Elimination of Prejudice

Making up one's mind about something before knowing all the facts is a form of prejudice. Refusing to change one's opinion when the facts show it is wrong is also prejudice. Such thinking is careless and unwise. Making decisions about people based only on their color, sex, nationality, religion, wealth, or poverty is a common form of prejudice and is completely against the spirit of the Faith. One must never think he is better than others, for Bahá'u'lláh writes, *"Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other."*<sup>7</sup>

Prejudice is often the result of fear and ignorance. Many people fear new or different people, ideas, or customs. They create walls of prejudice to protect themselves and to keep those things they fear at a distance. Unfortunately, these walls prevent them from experiencing much of the world's beauty and richness and often cause injustice and oppression.

Many types of prejudice are creating walls between people today. One of these walls is racial prejudice. While physical differences do add a pleasing variety to the world, they do not describe a person's spiritual qualities and talents. These are the attributes one needs to look for when choosing friends, fellow workers, or a marriage partner. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: *"In the sight of God there is no difference between the various races. Why should man invent such a prejudice?"*<sup>8</sup>

Another wall is prejudice based on religious differences. Bahá'u'lláh teaches that all the Founders of the world's great religions were sent by God and brought the same eternal truths. Since these Prophets all came to unite men in love and unity, Their followers should not make religion a cause of disunity and hatred. Bahá'u'lláh instructs His followers to *"Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship."*<sup>9</sup>

Yet another wall is prejudice based on nationalism. While it is natural to have a special love for one's own country, one must realize that every corner of the earth was made by the same God. Today man must broaden his

feelings of love and loyalty to include more than his own city or region or nation. He must learn to think of the entire world as his country. As Bahá'u'lláh writes, *"The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens."*<sup>10</sup> Emphasizing this larger loyalty He says, *"Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind. . . ."*<sup>11</sup>

In the Bahá'í Faith mankind is compared to a beautiful garden full of flowers of various colors, shapes, and sizes. Each flower has its own color and fragrance, but all the plants spring from the same earth, are warmed by the same sun, and are watered by rain from the same clouds. The beauty of the garden comes from the combination of these different flowers. When man understands this unity and beauty in diversity, he will know why 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that the differences in the human family should create harmony, *"as it is in music where many different notes blend together in the making of a perfect chord."*<sup>12</sup>

## 4 The Agreement of Science and Religion

Religion and science are the two most powerful forces in human life. Both are approaches to finding truth, and both are necessary for the progress of mankind. Bahá'u'lláh teaches that true religion and true science are in complete harmony. He explains that truth is one; therefore, science and religion cannot disagree. If they seem to disagree, it is because man does not yet understand them properly or because all the facts are not yet known. Bahá'u'lláh warns that if religion denies science and proven facts, it is superstition. Science, in turn, needs religion to provide moral guidance and direction. Science has made great discoveries and created many wonderful things, but if scientists are not guided by spiritual and moral values, they will use their knowledge to create larger and more destructive weapons. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that unless science and religion go hand in hand, mankind will never progress according to God's plan:

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*It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism.*<sup>13</sup>

Sometimes the laws of a Manifestation of God, when first given, seem strange or do not agree with the latest scientific findings. Some believers may feel confused and uncomfortable following laws they do not understand. At such times one must trust divine wisdom. As one accepts electricity, gravity, and many scientific discoveries without fully understanding them, so one's faith can help him act with confidence in spiritual matters he may not understand. God knows what is best for man, and His laws protect man from dangers of which he is often unaware. Moses, for example, told the Jews that pork was unclean and forbade them to eat it. The Jews obeyed this law, though they probably did not know the scientific reason behind it. Thousands of years later it was discovered that poorly cooked pork can carry a fatal disease. Modern science is only now discovering that drugs and alcohol are harmful, though Bahá'ú'lláh knew this and forbade their use more than one hundred years ago.

An important teaching of the Faith is that each man must investigate truth for himself. The scientific method of questioning and testing answers is a valuable tool in this search. When this method is combined with a firm faith in God, man will be able to solve many of the mysteries of the universe. By applying his knowledge correctly man can build an ever-advancing civilization.

## 5 World Peace

All the Prophets talked about a time in the future when there would be peace. Isaiah said that the day would come when men "shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any

more."<sup>14</sup> That day, longed for by all people, has now begun. Bahá'u'lláh has brought God's plan for building a peaceful world.

More than one hundred years ago Bahá'u'lláh sent Tablets to the rulers of the world. He warned them of the calamities that would occur if they did not follow His guidance. *"Be united, O kings of the earth,"* He advised, *"for thereby will the tempest of discord be stilled amongst you, and your peoples find rest. . . ."*<sup>15</sup> *"If ye pay no heed unto the counsels which . . . We have revealed . . . ,"* He warned, *"Divine chastisement shall assail you from every direction, and the sentence of His justice shall be pronounced against you."*<sup>16</sup> When the rulers ignored Bahá'u'lláh and His guidance, He turned to the common people of the world. Bahá'u'lláh assured them that if they accepted His message, tried to purify their lives, and worked to build a new society based on His laws and teachings, the Most Great Peace would surely be established. *"Soon,"* He wrote, *"will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead."*<sup>17</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh said that world peace will be achieved in two stages. First will come a period called the Lesser Peace. This will begin when the nations of the world decide to stop fighting and become unified politically. During the Lesser Peace the world will be like a body that is whole and unified but without life. When the Bahá'ís breathe the spirit of life—the love of Bahá'u'lláh—into this body, it will awake from its long sleep. This will mark the beginning of the Golden Age, the Most Great Peace. Isaiah spoke of this period as the time when *"the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea."*<sup>18</sup> During the Most Great Peace the world will be united politically, economically, and spiritually; and mankind will develop a wonderfully rich world culture.

Bahá'u'lláh's teachings about the need for peace and security in the world become more important every day. Nations grow more powerful, and their weapons become more dangerous. The results of another war are too horrible to imagine. Thoughtful people in every country are beginning to see the need for world cooperation. They know that modern communication and transportation

systems have made the world seem smaller and have brought nations and their problems closer together. Countries are now next-door neighbors in a small neighborhood. These enlightened people are trying to end war, and their efforts will lead to the Lesser Peace. Only Bahá'ís, however, can bring about the Most Great Peace.

Bahá'ís can work for world peace without becoming involved with political or social movements. By supporting their Spiritual Assemblies Bahá'ís help create a working model of a spiritual government that will attract the attention of open-minded seekers. Living the life by obeying Bahá'u'lláh's laws and practicing Bahá'í principles strengthens both individual believers and their communities. It also demonstrates the power of the Word of God to change lives and unite different peoples. When Bahá'ís develop themselves and their communities spiritually, they are helping to bring about the Most Great Peace.

## 6 Universal Education

Bahá'u'lláh places great importance on learning. He says that everyone—men and women, rich and poor—should receive an education. Universal education will enable each person to read the sacred writings and to search for truth without having to depend on what friends or neighbors say. It will also give each person the chance to learn skills that will help him earn a living and thus fulfill the Bahá'í obligation to work.

Schools can help one learn to read, learn the skills necessary to earn a living, and learn about arts and sciences. Such learning is an important kind of education, but there is another kind. Spiritual education—learning about one's self, about God, and about the purpose of one's life—is equally important because it gives direction and purpose to everything one does. *"The source of all learning,"* Bahá'u'lláh writes, *"is the knowledge of God, exalted be His Glory. . . ."*<sup>19</sup>

Parents are responsible for the education of their children. If they cannot afford to educate them, the

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community must. Great attention must be given to the spiritual education of children because the values and morals they receive will guide them the rest of their lives. Bahá'u'lláh commands that children be taught *"the principles of religion, so that the Promise and the Threat, recorded in the Books of God, may prevent them from the things forbidden. . . ."*<sup>20</sup> He describes reward and retribution, or punishment, as the *"two pillars"* that uphold justice and also as *"two fountains for the life of the people of the world."*<sup>21</sup> Children who understand the rewards of obedience to God and the punishments for disobedience are better prepared to face the challenges and tests of life. They have a moral compass to guide them. *"Train up a child in the way he should go,"* the Bible says, *"and when he is old, he will not depart from it."*<sup>22</sup> Children must also be taught that working to support themselves is an obligation, and they must be encouraged to learn a trade or profession.

With the continuing concern about the wise use of natural resources it is important to remember Bahá'u'lláh's statement that man himself is full of hidden talents and potential that only education can uncover: *"Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom."*<sup>23</sup>



## 7 The Equality of Men and Women

Throughout the animal and vegetable kingdoms one can find examples of the male and the female working together. *"In the world of humanity,"* 'Abdu'l-Bahá notes, *"we find a great difference; the female sex is treated as though inferior, and is not allowed equal rights and privileges. This condition is due not to nature, but to education."*<sup>24</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, the true Educator, has come to replace ignorance with knowledge. He teaches that men and women are equal in the sight of God. Both have the same rights and responsibilities. Both are required to obey the laws, to practice the principles of Bahá'u'lláh, and to develop themselves spiritually. Both must receive an education and learn useful skills so they can serve their families and society.

Why have women remained ignorant and undeveloped in comparison to men? 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that *"Woman's lack of progress and proficiency has been due to her need of equal education and opportunity."*<sup>25</sup> Lacking education and encouragement, women have had great difficulty developing and contributing their talents to the world, and human progress has suffered because of this. 'Abdu'l-Bahá compares humanity to a bird. One wing is man, and the other is woman. If one wing does not develop, the bird cannot fly. If women are not allowed to develop themselves and participate in the affairs of the world, humanity cannot progress.

In one way the education of women is more important than the education of men because the mother is the first trainer of children. *"If the mother is educated then her children will be well taught,"* 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains.<sup>26</sup> If she is spiritually awakened and developed, she can give her children moral guidance. *"It is clear therefore,"* 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, *"that the future generation depends on the mothers of today."*<sup>27</sup> *"Surely,"* He continues, *"God is not pleased that so important an instrument as woman should suffer from want of training in order to attain the perfections desirable and necessary for her great life's work!"*<sup>28</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá has placed a great challenge before women. He wrote: *"Women must endeavour . . . to attain*



*greater perfection, to be man's equal in every respect, to make progress in all in which she has been backward, so that man will be compelled to acknowledge her equality of capacity and attainment.*"<sup>29</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá has also promised that full equality for women will come about, for, He wrote, "*Bahá'u'lláh Hath Willed It so!*"<sup>30</sup> Men and women must remember that both sexes are needed to build the new world order: "*The happiness of mankind will be realized when women and men coordinate and advance equally, for each is the complement and helpmeet of the other.*"<sup>31</sup>

## 8 A Spiritual Solution to the Economic Problem

*"The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me,"* Bahá'u'lláh warns.<sup>32</sup> Is it just that some people are burdened with wealth while others are poorly clothed and hungry? Is it just that some men have several mansions while others are homeless? Is it just that some work very hard while others are idle? "*Is it possible,*" 'Abdu'l-Bahá asks, "*for one member of a family to be subjected to the utmost misery and to abject poverty and for the rest of the family to be comfortable?*"<sup>33</sup> Although these questions seem to be about economics, they deal with the spiritual principles of justice and the oneness of mankind.

The solution to the economic problems of the world is a spiritual solution. The hearts of men must be changed by the power of the Manifestation of God. Men must be taught to see all people as members of their family. They must hunger for justice and practice it in their personal, business, and community lives. They must learn to think of work in a new way—as a form of worship. These changes in attitude and the economic principles given by Bahá'u'lláh are the only solution to economic problems.

Bahá'u'lláh says that everyone must receive an education and have the opportunity to develop skills and talents. Then each person must "*engage in some one occupation, such as arts, trades, and the like.*"<sup>34</sup> Both idleness and begging are condemned. "*We have made this—your*

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*occupation—identical with the worship of God, the True One,"* He says.<sup>35</sup> When one thinks of his job as a form of worship, he will want to do his best. He will want to be fair and honest and will realize that earning money is only part of the reason for working.



Bahá'u'lláh teaches that the rights of both workers and managers or owners must be protected. With their new feelings about work, justice, and the oneness of mankind, labor and management will better be able to consult together on problems and to solve difficulties without strikes. Both groups will be looking for a just solution. Thus both workers and managers will want to cooperate in running the business because both will benefit when it is run well. In addition to their wages, Bahá'u'lláh says that workers must receive a share of the profits of the business.

Profit-sharing is one way to do away with the extremes of wealth and poverty. Another way is graduated income tax. The more one has left after his expenses have been taken care of, the higher the taxes he will pay. Those who cannot earn enough to buy the necessities of life will receive help, as will orphans, cripples, the blind, and the aged. In this way all will lead comfortable lives.

People will always choose different kinds of jobs, and some will always earn more than others. There is certainly nothing wrong with wealth. Absolute economic equality is not possible, and, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "*if its existence were possible, the whole order of the world would be destroyed.*"<sup>36</sup> Economic differences will not disappear. Only the extremes will vanish. All men will enjoy the necessities of life, and all will be respected regardless of the type of work they do. Thinking one is better than someone else because of his job or the amount he earns is another form of prejudice that Bahá'u'lláh condemns. All work, no matter how humble, is worship if it is done in a spirit of service to mankind.

International economic problems are basically the same as community economic problems. Again, selfishness, greed, and self-interest must be replaced by justice, cooperation, and a concern for all members of the human family. When all nations believe that the earth is one country, they will cooperate in developing and sharing natural resources. All nations will agree on trade laws that will be fair to all.

Economic problems cannot be solved simply by new laws or aid programs. Justice, unity, and the other spiritual qualities can appear in the world and bring about a lasting solution to economic problems only when they are reborn in the hearts of men.

## 9 Universal Language

One of the greatest means for bringing about unity and understanding would be a language that everyone could speak and understand. How lonely one feels when he cannot talk with and understand those around him. How many misunderstandings occur when people cannot speak the same language. Even if one learns two or three, or even ten, foreign languages, there are still people with whom he cannot talk. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said sadly that the thoughts of Eastern and Western peoples are locked away from each other in caskets. The lack of a common language prevents them from sharing their thoughts and ideas. A universal language is the master key that can open these caskets.<sup>37</sup>

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Bahá'u'lláh has made the use of a universal language one of His major social teachings. He says that one language must be invented or chosen from the existing languages and be taught in all the schools of the world. Each country will keep its own language, with all its wonderful poems, songs, and stories, but will learn the new universal language as well. By learning only these two languages, people will be able to travel anywhere in the world and still understand each other. Bahá'u'lláh says that when this universal language is used, *“to whatsoever city a man may journey, it shall be as if he were entering his own home.”*<sup>38</sup>

A universal language will lead to new understanding between nations as well as individuals. How can world unity be established unless nations and governments share their thoughts, hopes, and problems? The universal language will make consultation simpler and allow each nation to participate in the development of the new world civilization.

## Conclusion

The world is only now beginning to understand and feel the need for many of the social teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. The other Manifestations of God spoke very little, if at all, about principles that would unite the world because mankind was not yet ready to build the Kingdom of God on earth. This is the mission of Bahá'ís, guided and directed by Bahá'u'lláh. Each of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is a thread to be woven into the fabric of a new and beautiful social order. Each thread is needed to make a strong, close-knit fabric. A few of the teachings, such as the need for a universal language, cannot be fully practiced at this stage of the world's development. But Bahá'ís must weave these teachings into their personal and community life and begin to build the new World Order today.



# Bahá'í Laws

## Introduction

Bahá'u'lláh, the Manifestation of God for this age, has brought God's plan for world unity. This plan contains the laws and principles needed to build the Kingdom of God on earth. Many of these laws are familiar and are found in the other great religions of the world. Other laws are new and found only in the Bahá'í Faith. As social conditions change and mankind matures, new laws are needed to guide men and help them develop according to God's plan. Each Manifestation of God brings new laws. However, basic spiritual principles are eternal, such as the *"law of love, which, like a fountain, always flows and is never overtaken by change."*<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Submission to the Will of God

*"The source of all good is trust in God, submission unto His command, and contentment in His holy will and pleasure."*<sup>2</sup> God is All-Knowing. Thus He knows the needs of His servants. If one submits to the will of God and obeys His laws, he walks in the path that leads to health, happiness, and spiritual life.

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No man can fully understand his Creator, nor can he always recognize the divine wisdom behind the laws of God. Still he must accept and obey the laws given by the Manifestation of God. Obedience is a source of protection. One's own spiritual growth and the health of society are safeguarded by obedience to the laws of God.

Bahá'u'lláh says that true freedom comes from submission to His will. Submission and obedience free man from slavery to hatred, prejudice, selfishness, alcohol, drugs, and other snares of the world. They also preserve the dignity and nobility of his station.

## 2 Obligatory Prayer and Fasting

The commandments to pray daily and fast for one Bahá'í month a year are precious gifts from God because prayer and fasting refresh, purify, and strengthen the soul. Obedience to these commandments assures steady spiritual growth.

'Abdu'l-Bahá was asked why one should pray, since God knows the needs of all souls and arranges all matters in His great wisdom. He replied, "*The wisdom of prayer is this, that it causes a connection between the servant and the True One. . . .*"<sup>3</sup> "*Know thou, verily,*" He further explained, "*it is becoming of a weak one to supplicate to the strong One and it behoveth a seeker of bounty to beseech the glorious, bountiful One. When one supplicates to his Lord, turns to Him and seeks bounty from His ocean this supplication is by itself a light to his heart, an illumination to his sight, a life to his soul and an exaltation to his being.*"<sup>4</sup>

What attitude should one have when he prays? Certainly one must be thankful for all the blessings with which God has showered him. "*Thank thou the kind Father,*" 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "*. . . that the world of creation and the heart of the universe found comfort in His mercy.*"<sup>5</sup> More important, though, one must yearn to know and follow the will of God.

While one can pray as often as he wishes, Bahá'u'lláh commands Bahá'ís to pray at least once a day. He has revealed three obligatory prayers. Each believer is free to

choose one of these three prayers and use it according to the specific directions that accompany each prayer. The short prayer is said once a day between noon and sunset; the medium prayer is recited in the morning, at noon, and in the evening; the long prayer may be used anytime during the day or night.



When the disciples of Christ asked Him to teach them to pray, He gave the Lord's Prayer. This certainly is not the only prayer Christ ever used, but it is the only one that was written down and preserved in the Gospels. Bahá'ís are fortunate to have hundreds of beautiful prayers revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. One can, of course, make up his own prayers from the fullness of his heart; but

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the prayers of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have a special power. They also serve as an example, teaching man how to approach God and what to pray for:

*I render Thee thanks, O Thou Who hast lighted Thy fire within my soul, and cast the beams of Thy light into my heart, that Thou has taught Thy servants how to make mention of Thee, and revealed unto them the ways whereby they can supplicate Thee. . . .<sup>6</sup>*

The period of fasting is a time of cleansing and renewal. Turning away from food and drink reminds man that he is a spiritual as well as a physical being. The Bahá'í Fast lasts nineteen days, from 2 March through 20 March. During this time Bahá'ís do not eat or drink between sunrise and sunset.

The spirit in which one approaches the Fast is very important. It is not enough merely to abstain from food and drink. One should spend time in prayer and meditation and consider how he can improve and enrich his life. The Fast is a time when one should devote special attention to cleansing his heart of selfish desires, prejudices, lusts, and other impurities. This spiritual preparation helps one begin the new year, which starts immediately after the Fast, strengthened and refreshed.

The Fast is often a time of great closeness in Bahá'í families and communities. Many Bahá'ís enjoy gathering before dawn or after sunset to pray, eat, and share fellowship.

In some situations Bahá'u'lláh says one should not fast. Bahá'ís who are traveling, sick, pregnant, nursing a child, over seventy years old, or younger than fifteen are not required to fast. All other Bahá'ís should take advantage of the opportunities for spiritual growth and renewal that the Fast offers.

### 3 Teaching

One who has fallen in love with Bahá'u'lláh and been blessed with the guidance and inspiration found in His writings will naturally want to share this gift with others.



Teaching others about the Faith is both a privilege and a duty: *“Teach ye the Cause of God, O people of Bahá, for God hath prescribed unto every one the duty of proclaiming His Message, and regardeth it as the most meritorious of all deeds.”*<sup>7</sup>

In the past, ministers—who were often the only people able to read holy books—studied scriptures and did most of the teaching. Now there is a new way of spreading the knowledge of His Cause. Since most people around the world can learn to read and write and can think for themselves, ministers are no longer needed. Instead, each Bahá'í has the responsibility of studying the writings himself and teaching the Faith to others.



There are several ways of teaching. Each Bahá'í can try to live a life that reflects the Word of God given by Bahá'u'lláh. His deeds and actions will then testify to the spiritual power of the Faith. Each Bahá'í can invite his friends and neighbors to his home to hear about God's latest Messenger. Bahá'u'lláh says that guiding one's neighbors to the law of God excels all other acts. He also promises that all who arise to teach will be aided: *“Whoso openeth his lips in this Day and maketh mention of the name of his Lord, the hosts of Divine inspiration shall descend upon him from the heaven of My name, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.”*<sup>8</sup>

It is important to share the knowledge of Bahá'u'lláh with everyone. God has prepared every heart to receive this message. No Bahá'í can decide who is worthy of knowing about the Faith and who is not. One should teach

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for the sake of God alone. He should also accept whatever response his words may call forth from his hearer in this same spirit. Each individual must decide for himself whether to accept the message of Bahá'u'lláh. No one can force another to become a Bahá'í. After one has presented the teachings as clearly as possible, the decision must be left between the seeker and God.

### 4 Learning a Trade or a Profession

A basic Bahá'í law is the law of work. Each Bahá'í must learn a trade, art, or profession and must work to support himself. Bahá'u'lláh says, *"The best of men are they that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God, the Lord of all worlds."*<sup>9</sup> Any form of honest work is acceptable to God.

More important than the type of work one does is the attitude with which he works. When work is performed in the spirit of service to God and one's fellowmen, it is raised to the station of worship. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that even the man who makes a piece of notepaper is worshipping and giving praise to God if he does his work to the best of his ability and with an attitude of service.

The poor and the rich face a similar temptation. The poor may be content to beg while the rich may be content to live off their wealth. Both ways are unacceptable. The command to work applies to everyone. Begging is forbidden by Bahá'u'lláh, and idleness is strongly condemned. Bahá'u'lláh says, *"The most despised of men before God is he who sits and begs."*<sup>10</sup> He also states that the lowest of men are *"they that yield no fruit on earth. Such men are verily counted as among the dead, nay better are the dead in the sight of God than those idle and worthless souls."*<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes Bahá'ís feel that teaching the Faith is more important than working. Hence they want to devote all their time to teaching, and they expect others to take care of them. Such attitudes are also unacceptable, however pure the motive. Shoghi Effendi says that a "good Bahá'í . . . is the one who so arranges his life as to devote time both to his material needs and also to the service of the Cause."<sup>12</sup>

## 5 Chastity

God has created man to be a joyous and loving creature and has given him many ways to experience the richness of life. The sexual relationship between a husband and wife is, indeed, a gift from God. Its purpose is to help bring into being children who will glorify God and promote His Cause and to bind husband and wife more closely together. Sex is much like gasoline. If gasoline explodes as intended within the engine of a car, it is very useful. It helps move the car forward. However, if it ignites outside the engine, a fire starts that can cause great destruction. Likewise, Bahá'ís believe that sex, when it takes place within the institution of marriage, is healthy and constructive. But when it takes place outside of marriage, it causes harm and destruction. Chastity, therefore, is a requirement of Bahá'í life.

To live a chaste and holy life one must not have any sexual relations before marriage and must be loyal and faithful in marriage. He must also be clean-minded, modest, and pure. Chastity can be expressed in many areas of one's life—his dress, his language, his entertainment, his behavior toward members of the opposite sex.

Shoghi Effendi emphasizes that a "chaste and holy life must be made the controlling principle in the behavior and conduct of all Bahá'ís, both in their social relations with the members of their own community, and in their contact with the world at large."<sup>13</sup> By living a chaste and holy life one will become happier and healthier and will also attract the attention of others and demonstrate the power of the Bahá'í Faith.

## 6 Marriage and Divorce

Marriage is one of the eternal laws of God. Its purpose is to assist the married couple in their spiritual growth and to ensure proper care of children.

Marriage is a serious commitment that requires a couple considering marriage to investigate each other's character thoroughly. The couple's intentions should be

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love, unity, friendship, and respect. Their marriage must be based on both spiritual and physical bonds. Sometimes marriages are based on physical bonds alone. This type of union is only temporary, and separation will eventually occur. Permanent and everlasting union between husband and wife is based on spiritual and physical harmony in all areas of thought and life. When this type of union is the foundation of a marriage, the couple will be able to help each other in their spiritual growth and remain together in all the worlds of God.

After a couple have decided they would like to marry, they must receive the consent of all natural parents. Unity is the main goal of the Bahá'í Faith. Therefore, it is necessary to have unity in the family. Marriage is not only the union of two people but the union of two families as well. The family is the basic building block of society, and having the consent of all parents before marriage enables the marriage to develop in an atmosphere of security and unity. Such security and unity make society stronger.

A Bahá'í marriage ceremony is required of all Bahá'ís, even if one marries a non-Bahá'í. Non-Bahá'í couples, in most states, may also have Bahá'í weddings if they follow all Bahá'í marriage laws. The ceremony is simple and varies in style from culture to culture. The only requirement is that the bride and groom say the vow, "*We will all, verily, abide by the Will of God,*" in the presence of two witnesses approved by the Local Spiritual Assembly. In addition to this vow the couple may add any prayers, readings, or forms of music that they find meaningful and that contribute to the joyous, spiritual atmosphere. The Bahá'í vow is a reminder that when a couple marry, they establish a joint relationship with God, which is their point of unity and the basis of their values.

The Local Spiritual Assembly is responsible for seeing that Bahá'í marriage laws are obeyed. It receives the consent of the parents, and witnesses acting on its behalf hear the marriage vows recited. The Spiritual Assembly is also available for counseling and consultation both before and during a marriage if the partners feel the need to seek its guidance. If a Bahá'í who knows about the Bahá'í marriage laws marries without a Bahá'í ceremony and is

unable to correct the matter, either by divorce or by having a Bahá'í ceremony, he will lose his rights of membership in the Bahá'í community.

Sometimes serious problems arise in a marriage. To overcome these problems (which may be caused by selfishness or immaturity) a wife and husband should pray, turn to the writings, and have frank discussions. If the situation does not improve, they can seek help and guidance from the Local Spiritual Assembly.

Bahá'u'lláh condemned divorce in the strongest of terms. However, He permitted His followers to divorce in extreme cases, when aversion or antipathy develops between the partners. But before a couple divorce, Bahá'u'lláh requires that they live apart for one year. During this time they are encouraged to consult with their Local Spiritual Assembly, perhaps see a marriage counselor together, and do their best to reconcile their differences. This period is called a year of patience or waiting.

When a couple have separated with the intention of divorcing, they go to their Local Spiritual Assembly, either separately or together, explain their problem, and ask the Assembly to establish a year of waiting. They should also keep their minds open and free to accept whatever advice the Assembly may give them. If the Assembly finds that the couple's problems are so serious that they justify the establishment of a year of patience, the Assembly then sets a date for its beginning. If, after one year, the couple have been unable to solve their problems and save their marriage, they may take legal steps to obtain a divorce.

The National Spiritual Assembly acknowledges that the requirements for Bahá'í divorce have been met when both parties have completed the year of waiting and have obtained a civil divorce. Until a Bahá'í has fulfilled the requirements for a Bahá'í divorce, he or she is not permitted to remarry.

Divorce is a very serious matter. The foundation of the Kingdom of God is harmony, love, and union, not differences, especially between husband and wife. If either partner has been the cause of the divorce, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says he will have great difficulties and feel deep regret. If, however, both partners have sincerely tried to seek unity

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and have proceeded in obedience to the principles and spirit of Bahá'í law, no stigma can be attached to them. Divorced Bahá'ís are free to remarry.

## 7 Prohibitions

Bahá'u'lláh has brought laws for a new social order—the Kingdom of God on earth. By obeying Bahá'u'lláh's laws Bahá'ís are guided to the straight path and enjoy the true freedom that comes from submission to God.

*Alcohol and Drugs.* The use of alcohol and drugs is strictly forbidden by Bahá'u'lláh, and Bahá'ís must avoid all contact with them. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that drinking "*is the cause of chronic diseases, weakeneth the nerves, and consumeth the mind.*"<sup>14</sup> Not only are the mind and body damaged by these substances, but the soul suffers as well. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that in addition to killing the powers of reason and weakening one's intelligence, drugs can take possession of the soul and make a living man as dead. An individual who uses alcohol or drugs does things of which he is later ashamed. He may lose the respect of his family and friends and find his spiritual progress retarded. Obedience to the law against alcohol and drugs protects man and preserves the nobility of his station.

*Gambling.* Bahá'u'lláh instructs His followers not to gamble. Gambling is putting one's trust in chance rather than in God. The law against gambling does not mean that one cannot play games. Many games are both fun and harmless. But any game becomes harmful when it results in wasting money or time.

*Backbiting.* Bahá'ís are forbidden to gossip about others. 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls backbiting the most great sin. Gossip and backbiting hurt both the speaker and the person spoken about. They also slow the progress of the Faith because they lead to division and ill feeling, which must then be overcome before the goal of establishing unity and harmony can be won. Bahá'ís must be silent about the faults of others and speak only of their virtues. Bahá'u'lláh

cautions: "*Breathe not the sins of others so long as thou art thyself a sinner.*"<sup>15</sup>

Rumor and gossip must have a ready listener. Bahá'ís hearing gossip about people should refuse to listen and should tell the gossiper to take his information or suspicions to the Local Spiritual Assembly. This action will help stop the spread of gossip.

*Membership in Other Religious Organizations.* While Bahá'ís accept the truths brought by all of God's Manifestations, they do not show their belief in these Messengers by becoming or remaining members of churches or other non-Bahá'í religious institutions. Each Bahá'í must transfer his energy and devotion from these older institutions to the new institutions that Bahá'u'lláh has brought. For example, when a Christian recognizes Bahá'u'lláh, he does not give up his love for Christ but rather accepts Bahá'u'lláh as the One promised by Christ. It is necessary, however, for every Bahá'í to give up his church membership and become a strong, active member of the Bahá'í community. The Christian churches are still waiting for Christ to return in the Glory of the Lord. Bahá'ís know that He *has* returned, and they are busy working to build the Kingdom of God according to Bahá'u'lláh's divine plan.

*Clergy.* In the past priests and ministers were often the only people who could read. They studied the holy scriptures, told people what to believe, and took care of religious matters. Since most people now can learn to read and write and can think for themselves, Bahá'u'lláh says that priests and ministers are no longer needed. Each individual is responsible for studying the writings and learning to know and love God. No one should believe in something only because his parents, friends, or religious leaders believe. Each Bahá'í must believe as a result of his own study and prayer.

Instead of having clergy to manage the affairs of the community Bahá'ís elect a Spiritual Assembly of nine members. The Spiritual Assembly is responsible for handling marriages and burials, planning teaching activities, spending funds, and providing for the education of children.

## 8 Wills and Burial

Bahá'u'lláh has given several laws concerning wills and burials. Each Bahá'í must leave an official will. The will should say how one wants his money and property divided. It is also wise to state in one's will that one is a Bahá'í and wants to be buried according to Bahá'í laws. This is important because many Bahá'ís have non-Bahá'í relatives who are not aware of Bahá'í burial procedures.

Any Bahá'í can conduct a funeral service, though the Local Spiritual Assembly is responsible for seeing that the service is arranged properly. A Bahá'í funeral should be simple. Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have revealed beautiful prayers for the departed; these are often read, along with other prayers and selections from the writings. Non-Bahá'ís may have Bahá'í funerals if they wish.

Bahá'ís may not be cremated. Bodies must be buried, and the burial must be within one hour's journey from the place of death.

## 9 Loyalty to Government

Bahá'ís recognize that governments are a means of keeping harmony and order in society. They must therefore obey and be the well-wishers of the government of the country where they live. 'Abdu'l-Bahá stresses that disloyalty to one's rulers is disloyalty to God. Even "*wishing evil to the government,*" He says, is "*a transgression of the Cause of God.*"<sup>16</sup>

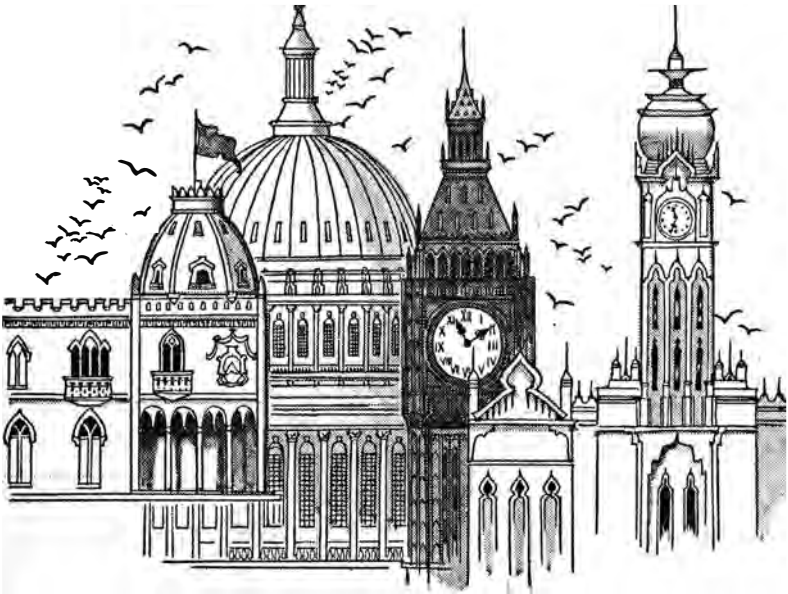
Bahá'ís must not become involved in partisan politics. Their job is to build the Kingdom of God on earth, and they cannot do this if they are caught up in the affairs of political parties and movements. The Bahá'í Faith is working to establish union and harmony. Hence Bahá'ís should not even discuss political matters, as this may lead to disunity and ill feeling.

Yet, since part of being a good citizen is taking one's duties seriously, Bahá'ís are encouraged to serve their country in ways that avoid partisanship. For example, they



are expected to vote if they can do so without having to register as members of political parties. Bahá'ís must vote for the person or issue, not merely for a party.

Bahá'ís can also serve their country by obeying the laws of the land and by sharing and living the teachings of the Faith. The sooner Bahá'u'lláh's healing message reaches the leaders and peoples of the world, the sooner unity, peace, and justice will be established. Bahá'ís know that the new Order brought by Bahá'u'lláh is the only system that can do this and that the old order will eventually collapse. Their task is not to tear down or repair the old system but rather to build the new Order of Bahá'u'lláh and offer it to the world when all else has failed.





# Bahá'í Administration

## Introduction

Imagine a river flowing through land that is otherwise dry and barren. How could water be brought to the fields so that crops could be grown? First several large canals could be dug to bring water to the whole area. Then smaller canals branching from the larger ones could be dug. These would bring water to each field.

The Bahá'í Administrative Order is like a system of canals that brings the spirit of God to Bahá'í communities everywhere. The Universal House of Justice is like the river. Bahá'u'lláh promised that His spirit would guide it and flow through it at all times. National Spiritual Assemblies are the large canals, and the Local Spiritual Assemblies are the smaller canals. Bahá'ís are the crops that grow in fields watered by the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh.

How do Bahá'ís know that Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order can bring spiritual water to the Bahá'í world? When and how did the Bahá'í Administrative Order develop? To answer these questions one must understand the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, His promise that His followers would never be left without divine guidance.

# 1 The Covenant

During the lifetime of a Manifestation man has a clear link with God because, when the Manifestation speaks, it is as if God Himself were speaking. To be sure of doing God's will, one simply obeys His Prophet. In the past, however, man's link with God became unclear after the Prophet's death. For example, in the Gospel it is not clearly stated who would lead and guide the believers after the passing of Jesus. As a result, Jesus' followers broke into many groups or sects, which sometimes fought and killed each other in His name.

Bahá'u'lláh has provided humanity with a clear and permanent link with God through His Covenant. He has said that the Covenant is like a cord that connects man to God. After Bahá'u'lláh's death 'Abdu'l-Bahá became the Center of the Covenant. In several Tablets Bahá'u'lláh directed the believers to "*turn, one and all, unto the Most Great Branch ('Abdu'l-Bahá).*"<sup>1</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá in turn appointed Shoghi Effendi the Guardian of the Cause. He wrote in His Will and Testament that "*After the passing away of this wronged one, [the believers must] . . . turn unto Shoghi Effendi . . . as he is the sign of God. . . .*"<sup>2</sup> During his ministry Shoghi Effendi helped bring into being the Administrative Order outlined by Bahá'u'lláh. He guided the development of the Local and National Spiritual Assemblies to the point that six years after his death the first Universal House of Justice could be elected. Bahá'u'lláh Himself had said that The Universal House of Justice was to be the supreme body of the Faith. Today all Bahá'ís live under its authority and protection. The decisions of The Universal House of Justice, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, are "*verily the truth and the purpose of God Himself.*"<sup>3</sup> Obedience to The Universal House of Justice is obedience to God, because the divine guidance promised by Bahá'u'lláh flows through it. This unbroken chain of authority and guidance is what is meant by the Covenant.

Without the Covenant the Bahá'í Faith would have no power to unite the world. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that without the Covenant the Bahá'í community would, in one day, break into "*a thousand different sects as was the case in former*

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ages.”<sup>4</sup> How, then, could the Bahá'í Faith unite mankind if its members were not united among themselves? For this reason 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that “*the pivot of the oneness of mankind is nothing else but the power of the Covenant.*”<sup>5</sup>

What is the relationship of the individual Bahá'í to the Covenant? How can he be connected with God? To answer these questions one must know about the Administrative Order.

## 2 The Universal House of Justice

Isaiah, speaking of the coming of Bahá'u'lláh, said “and the government shall be upon his shoulder. . . .”<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to understand how the government of the world would rest on Bahá'u'lláh's shoulder, because never before in religious history has a Manifestation taken this task as part of His mission. Jesus, for example, declared, “My kingdom is not of this world. . . .”<sup>7</sup>

One way in which Bahá'u'lláh has taken the government on His shoulder is by giving mankind the blueprint of the Administrative Order, God's divine government. Never before have followers of a religion been told how to channel the spirit of their Faith into an administrative order. Faithful believers in the past had to create administrative orders based on their own guesses of what would be pleasing to God. Bahá'ís, however, have been told by the Manifestation Himself what institutions God wants to govern His people. They have been given specific instructions about how these Spiritual Assemblies should be built and what their powers and responsibilities are. The Bahá'í Administrative Order is truly a government created by God.

The government of the world also rests upon Bahá'u'lláh's shoulder in another way because The Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Faith, is “*under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty. . . .*”<sup>8</sup> Its decisions are divinely inspired, and it is “*freed from all error.*”<sup>9</sup> Even after His passing Bahá'u'lláh is able to guide His followers through the supreme body of His Administrative Order.

One of the most important responsibilities of The Universal House of Justice is to make laws. The House of Justice cannot change any of the laws given by Bahá'u'lláh, but it can make new laws to cover situations Bahá'u'lláh did not mention. Because the laws made by The Universal House of Justice are not part of the Divine Text, the House of Justice has the power to repeal the laws it has made. Thus The Universal House of Justice can change its own laws as the conditions of the world change.

The Universal House of Justice has many other duties in addition to making laws. It creates teaching plans and sets goals to guide the growth of the Bahá'í community. It supervises the translation of the Bahá'í writings. It is responsible for the development of the World Center, including the protection and beautification of the Shrines. The Universal House of Justice advises National Spiritual Assemblies. It answers difficult questions and settles disputes. In short, it coordinates all the affairs of the Cause, protecting, guiding, encouraging, and promoting unity throughout the Bahá'í world.

### 3 The National Spiritual Assembly

Shoghi Effendi often compared the Administrative Order to a building. The foundations of the building are the Local Spiritual Assemblies, the pillars or walls are the National Spiritual Assemblies, and the dome or roof that shelters all is The Universal House. Not until the foundations and pillars are firmly established can the roof be put in place. Since The Universal House of Justice can only be elected by the members of the National Spiritual Assemblies, Shoghi Effendi emphasized the importance of developing the Administrative Order in each country to the point where a National Spiritual Assembly could be established.

The National Spiritual Assembly is responsible for coordinating and directing the activities of the Bahá'í communities in its country or region. In the future it will be called the National House of Justice. The National Spiritual Assembly, like the Local Spiritual Assembly, is divinely

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guided when its members consult in unity and harmony. When it has questions, it turns to The Universal House of Justice.

All issues affecting the Faith in a country or region are the responsibility of the National Spiritual Assembly. It supervises the publication and distribution of Bahá'í literature, takes care of the House of Worship and other national properties, and handles the Fund. It guides the teaching work and sets goals for the community. The National Spiritual Assembly also encourages the believers to deepen, individually or in groups, and arranges for institutes and Bahá'í schools to be held. It settles disagreements or misunderstandings between Bahá'í communities and promotes unity in every way possible.

The National Spiritual Assembly is elected once a year by delegates from every part of the country. The election takes place at the annual convention held during Riḍván. During the convention the delegates consult on issues affecting the community and make recommendations to the new National Spiritual Assembly. This election, as all other Bahá'í elections, occurs in a prayerful atmosphere without nominations or campaigning. Each delegate prays for guidance and votes without prejudice for those who he feels are best qualified to serve.

## 4 The Local Spiritual Assembly

The institution with which Bahá'ís are in closest contact is the Local Spiritual Assembly. It is the direct link between the mass of believers and the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh flowing through the Administrative Order. Because of this relationship the importance of the Local Spiritual Assemblies cannot be overemphasized. *“From them the spirit of life streameth in every direction,”* ‘Abdu'l-Bahá says. *“They, indeed, are the potent sources of the progress of man, at all times and under all conditions.”*<sup>10</sup>

Some of the duties of a Local Spiritual Assembly are similar to those of a National Spiritual Assembly. The Local Spiritual Assembly is responsible for the growth of the



Faith in its area and for the spiritual health of its community. It must develop teaching plans to carry the message of Bahá'u'lláh to every group in the community and encourage the believers to become active teachers. It must help the friends deepen and see that children receive spiritual education. The Local Spiritual Assembly must promote unity among the believers by planning gatherings such as Feasts, holy day celebrations, and social meetings. It must also settle differences among the believers.

The relationship between the Local Spiritual Assembly and the community should be one of love, respect, cooperation, and support. Spiritual Assemblies must, Shoghi Effendi says, try to "win by every means in their power the confidence and affection of those whom it is their privilege to serve."<sup>11</sup> The Assembly should consult frankly and lovingly with the community. As far as possible it should share its plans and concerns with the believers and seek advice and suggestions from them. The friends, in turn, should feel free to make recommendations to the Assembly and should never hesitate to ask for help or advice. "These bodies," Shoghi Effendi explained, "have the sacred obligation to help, advise, protect and guide the believers in every way within their power when appealed to. . . ."<sup>12</sup> He advised a believer to go to his Local Spiritual Assembly "as a child would to its parents. . . ."<sup>13</sup>

## 5 The Hands of the Cause of God and the Continental Boards of Counselors

In past religions those believers who were the most learned usually became the rulers. Too often these rulers became filled with pride and ego and abused their power. Bahá'u'lláh has protected the Faith from this unfortunate situation by giving authority and power only to groups. The Spiritual Assemblies as bodies are the rulers of the Faith. Individual members serving on Assemblies and other learned believers have no decision-making power. Bahá'u'lláh knew, however, that there are always certain believers who have an outstanding knowledge of their Faith. When these learned ones share their wisdom with the other friends, all become deepened and inspired.

So that His followers could benefit from the knowledge of these learned believers, Bahá'u'lláh created the institution of the Hands of the Cause of God. He, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi after Him, appointed a number of believers who were known for their devotion, obedience, and wisdom to serve the Faith as Hands of the Cause. Their tasks are to protect the Faith and to encourage, teach, and inspire the believers. They have no decision-making power and cannot serve on Assemblies. They are, however, often asked to consult with National Spiritual Assemblies and The Universal House of Justice, and their advice and counsel are greatly valued.

Shoghi Effendi was the last person who had the authority to appoint Hands of the Cause. No more could be appointed after his death in 1957. The Universal House of Justice did not want the important work of the Hands to stop with the death of the few remaining Hands. To prevent this from happening, The House of Justice consulted with the Hands of the Cause and, in 1968, created the institution of the Continental Boards of Counselors. The Counselors have the same duties as the Hands of the Cause. Since its establishment in 1974, several Counselors have served with the Hands of the Cause in the Holy Land as members of the International Teaching Center.



The Continental Boards of Counselors are assisted in their work by members of the Auxiliary Boards. Some Auxiliary Board members concentrate on teaching, while others work primarily to protect the Faith. They help the Counselors reach out to more of the friends with their wisdom and guidance.

## 6 Obedience to Elected Institutions

Bahá'u'lláh has brought the blueprint for the new World Order. But no matter how perfect and detailed the blueprint is, this Order cannot be built without coordinated effort. When a new house is being built, the workers do not look at the blueprint and then go off on their own, one laying bricks, one raising beams, and one putting tiles on the roof. Instead, they consult with the foreman, who directs their work and decides what needs to be done first. Bahá'ís must build the new World Order in this same coordinated way. They must turn to the foremen—the elected institutions of the Faith—for guidance and must obey their decisions. If each Bahá'í decides to obey some decisions and to disobey others, the disorder that results will prevent the World Order from ever being built.

No Bahá'í is above the Spiritual Assembly, and no one has an excuse for disobeying the decision of an Assembly. If one sincerely feels that the Local Spiritual Assembly has made a mistake, he may ask it either to explain its decision or to reconsider it. If he still is not satisfied, he may ask the National Spiritual Assembly to review the matter and may even appeal to The Universal House of Justice. Throughout this process of appeal, however, he must be obedient and cheerfully carry out the instructions of the Local Spiritual Assembly. Assemblies can make mistakes, but 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi have said that if communities or individuals refuse to obey the decisions of an Assembly, more damage is done to the Faith through disunity and disobedience than would be done by the original mistake. Bahá'ís are promised that if they are obedient to the Spiritual Assembly, "God will right any wrongs done."<sup>14</sup>

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The whole purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's coming is to unite mankind. He has given the plans for a new World Order and has chosen His divinely created administrative institutions as the channels through which the guidance to build the new Order will flow. Only by obedience to these institutions can Bahá'ís receive this guidance and, working as a team, build the new Order that will bring unity and peace to the world.

### 7 The Nineteen Day Feast

The Nineteen Day Feast is an institution founded by Bahá'u'lláh and is another source of spiritual nourishment. 'Abdu'l-Bahá compares this gathering to the Lord's Supper and says that when a community meets in love and unity, *"that Feast is the Heavenly Food. . . . I am the Servant of that gathering."*<sup>15</sup>



How is the community nourished by attending the Feast? One way is by turning their hearts to God during the devotional part of the Feast when prayers and selections from the Bahá'í writings are read. Another way is by sharing fellowship with the members of the community during the social period at the end of the Feast. These two ways of experiencing the joy of unity are familiar because they form part of the worship services of many religions. But Bahá'u'lláh has created another way for Bahá'ís to receive the *"Heavenly Food"* of divine confirmations.

One aspect of the Nineteen Day Feast not found in the worship services of other religions is the time set aside for

consultation. During this part of the Feast the entire community, children and youth as well as adults, has an opportunity to participate in the Administrative Order by consulting with the Local Spiritual Assembly. The Spiritual Assembly usually opens this period by sharing letters and announcements of general interest, especially messages from The Universal House of Justice and the National Spiritual Assembly. The Assembly then reports to the community on the Fund and on its recent decisions and activities. This consultative period also gives the Spiritual Assembly the opportunity to share its concerns and plans with the community and to seek suggestions from the friends. Community members may have ideas for teaching projects or Holy Day celebrations. Some may have questions about children's classes or the Fund. Others may have suggestions about how to create a warmer, more closely knit community. The consultative portion of the Feast is the proper time for individuals to share questions, ideas, and recommendations with the community and the Local Spiritual Assembly. Suggestions for the National Spiritual Assembly may be channeled through the Local Spiritual Assembly. It is also a time for the Spiritual Assembly to share its guidance and love with the believers.

Attending a Feast held in an atmosphere of unity and devotion to God strengthens both the individual and the Local Spiritual Assembly. Individuals experience the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh through the love of their fellow believers and through the local channel of Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order. The Assembly receives a new flow of suggestions and evidences of the love, confidence, and support of the community. All are refreshed and better prepared to undertake the work of building God's kingdom on earth.

## **8 The Bahá'í Fund**

Three things are needed to build the new World Order: guidance, effort, and resources. Bahá'u'lláh has provided the guidance, both directly by giving the blueprint for the new Order and indirectly through the institutions of the Faith. Bahá'ís working together in obedience to these

institutions can provide the effort. But to carry on the activities of the Faith, resources are also needed. Books must be printed, teaching and deepening materials must be developed, Houses of Worship must be built, schools and institutes must be established, and pioneers and traveling teachers must be supported. How can all of these goals be met without resources?

Only Bahá'ís can provide the resources needed to build the new World Order. They alone have the privilege and responsibility of building the Kingdom of God on earth. It is the duty of each Bahá'í to contribute to the growth of the Faith in every way he can: by teaching, praying, supporting the Administrative Order, purifying his life, and giving to the Bahá'í Fund.

If the Faith is to grow smoothly and rapidly, both effort and resources must be provided regularly. Local, national, and international plans help the teaching work go forward step by step in an organized way. The National Spiritual Assembly suggests that Bahá'ís contribute to the Fund once a Bahá'í month so that the flow of resources will also be regular. Many Bahá'ís form the habit of giving at the Feast.

"It is the sacred obligation of every conscientious and faithful servant of Bahá'u'lláh who desires to see His Cause advance," said Shoghi Effendi, "to contribute freely and generously for the increase of [the] . . . Fund."<sup>16</sup>

Contributions are strictly on a voluntary basis, and the amount one gives is a private decision, but even a small amount, if the giving involves self-sacrifice, is acceptable in the sight of God. Each contribution is like a drop of water. A single drop can do little by itself, but when the drops are combined, they become a mighty river that can carry on the work of the Cause.

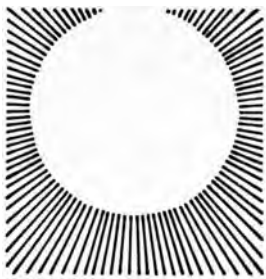
## 9 Universal Participation

The importance of universal participation can easily be understood when one considers the Fund, but this is not the only area of Bahá'í life in which universal participation is essential. Speaking of the work of the Cause as a whole, The Universal House of Justice says that "the participation

of every believer is of the utmost importance, and is a source of power and vitality as yet unknown to us."<sup>17</sup> The Universal House of Justice goes on to say that if each believer carries out the sacred duties of the Faith—teaching, purifying one's inner life, praying, and contributing to the Fund—the Bahá'í world will be astonished by the power that will be released by this activity.<sup>18</sup>

The Bahá'í community can be compared with a human body, which has many different parts. An eye cannot do the work of a hand, a hand cannot do the work of a heart, and a heart cannot do the work of a stomach. Each has a different part to play in the life of the body. When all work together, the body becomes strong and healthy. Likewise, the members of the Bahá'í community have different talents and capacities, and each has something unique to offer the Faith. Some Bahá'ís can give public talks. Others are good organizers and like to work behind the scenes. Some are chosen to serve on Spiritual Assemblies. Some have a sympathetic ear and can comfort those who are troubled or in pain. All can pray and live the life, and all can contribute to the growth and strengthening of the Faith.

Bahá'u'lláh says that one of the purposes of God in sending His Manifestations is "*to liberate the children of men from the darkness of ignorance. . . .*"<sup>19</sup> He, therefore, tells His followers to "*Be as a lamp unto them that walk in darkness. . . .*"<sup>20</sup> One lamp gives off only a small amount of light, but many lamps burning together produce a blaze of light. The Universal House of Justice says the secret of universal participation "*lies in the Master's oft-expressed wish that the friends should love each other, constantly encourage each other, work together, [and] be as one soul in one body. . . .*"<sup>21</sup> Through the power of universal participation Bahá'ís around the world will become a radiant light that banishes the darkness of ignorance from the earth.



# The Local Spiritual Assembly

## Introduction

Bahá'u'lláh, the Manifestation of God for this day, brought a plan to unite mankind. This plan is the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. The Bahá'í writings call the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh "the Ark of human salvation."<sup>1</sup>

The Old Testament says that God commanded Noah to build an ark. He gave Noah clear instructions about how the ark was to be built and what He and His family were to do. God provided the plan for saving the human race and for making the world a better place in which to live.

Bahá'u'lláh's "Ark of human salvation" is a plan for a divine system that will bring world unity. It is the only system that can save the human race. Bahá'ís have the duty and joy of following God's plan for this day by helping to build Bahá'u'lláh's system.

Bahá'u'lláh's plans for the new World Order has two important parts. One part tells the individual Bahá'í how he should live his life. Bahá'u'lláh gave laws to be obeyed, such as the law of prayer, and brought principles to live by, such as abandoning prejudices against one's fellowman.

The second part of Bahá'u'lláh's plan for world order

tells Bahá'ís how to work together in groups and provides for elected institutions and appointed institutions. Spiritual Assemblies are elected to guide community affairs according to the teachings. They will help organize and govern a society based on justice and love:

This Cause. . . is designed to benefit the entire human race, and the only way it can do this is to re-form the community life of mankind, as well as seeking to regenerate the individual. The Bahá'í administration is only the first shaping of what in future will come to be the social life and laws of community living.<sup>2</sup>

Since their authority comes from God, all Bahá'ís must follow the guidance of the Spiritual Assemblies and obey them. When Bahá'ís live together in unity, obedient to the laws of Bahá'u'lláh and guided by the Spiritual Assembly, they help to build the Kingdom of God on earth.

Local Spiritual Assemblies, National Spiritual Assemblies, and The Universal House of Justice are the legislative, executive, and judicial institutions that form Bahá'u'lláh's divine system. Local Spiritual Assemblies guide Bahá'ís in cities, towns, and other administrative districts all over the world. National Spiritual Assemblies coordinate the affairs of the Cause within a country or region. The Universal House of Justice, the supreme body of the Faith, directs the worldwide activities of the Faith.

The Local Spiritual Assembly is the foundation of this divine system. Since the foundation of any structure must be solid, it is important to understand the station of the Local Spiritual Assembly, its duties, the way in which it functions, and how it will help bring justice and order to the world.

## 1 Station

The Local Spiritual Assembly is a divine institution established by Bahá'u'lláh in His Most Holy Book, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas:

*The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counsellors to the number of Bahá (9) . . . It behooveth them to be the trusted ones of the Merciful among men and to regard themselves as the guardians appointed of God for all that dwell on earth.*<sup>3</sup>

Here "a House of Justice" refers to the Local Spiritual Assembly. No other religion has a similar institution established by the Manifestation Himself. Although there are many religious administrative organizations in the world, they are all man-made. Jesus, for example, never left instructions establishing Christian organizations. Only in the Bahá'í Faith are there God-given administrative bodies.

The Spiritual Assembly acts as a channel for the life-giving spiritual power that Bahá'u'lláh has brought to the world. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains: "*These Spiritual Assemblies are shining lamps and heavenly gardens, from which the fragrances of holiness are diffused over all regions, and the lights of knowledge are shed abroad over all created things. From them the spirit of life streameth in every direction.*"<sup>4</sup>

## 2 The Duty of Teaching

The Bahá'í writings explain the duties, powers, and responsibilities of the Local Spiritual Assembly. Shoghi Effendi says "all matters . . . regarding the interests of the Cause in . . . (a) locality, individually or collectively, should be referred exclusively to the Spiritual Assembly in that locality. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

A major duty of the Spiritual Assembly is teaching the Faith: "The whole object in Bahá'í administration is not only to manage the affairs of the Cause, but to stimulate the believers to work for it and to teach it to the masses."<sup>6</sup> A community that is actively teaching is like a stream of running water that purifies itself as it flows. When the believers teach the Faith, they become united, deepened in the Faith, and happy. By organizing and starting teaching projects the Spiritual Assembly fosters the spiritual health of the believers.



The Local Spiritual Assembly receives letters of guidance from the National Spiritual Assembly to help direct the teaching work. Such letters are carefully studied and acted on. Every Local Spiritual Assembly should be ready to support the plans of the National Spiritual Assembly in any way it can, such as sending contributions to the Fund or encouraging Bahá'ís to pioneer or travel to other communities to teach the Faith.

A Local Spiritual Assembly also sets goals and develops a teaching plan for its own community. It may decide to hold at least one fireside a week, to plan two large public meetings, to do three radio programs, or to enroll at least ten new believers in the Faith. Specific goals such as these give teaching efforts more direction, and one can more easily see what progress is being made. Plans also help the Spiritual Assembly to make better use of the services and abilities of the Bahá'ís. Shoghi Effendi writes: "The first quality for leadership both among individuals and Assemblies is the capacity to use the energy and competence that exists in the rank and file of its followers."<sup>7</sup>

The Assembly can help individuals find ways to give their talents to the Cause. Each believer, young or old, poor or rich, educated or uneducated, can help spread the message of God. Each one has a part to play. Some can offer their homes for firesides and act as hosts; others are good as speakers; still others work quietly behind the scenes to get things done. The Assembly must consider both the needs of the Cause and the abilities of the friends and discover ways of using all available talents to carry on the teaching work.

In directing the teaching efforts the Spiritual Assembly must see that the dignity and good name of the Faith are protected. All teaching plans involving newspapers, radio, television, or public meetings must first receive the approval of the Local Spiritual Assembly.

Deepening and teaching go hand in hand because as the believers grow in the knowledge and love of the Faith they become better teachers of the Faith. Therefore, the Spiritual Assembly must arrange study classes and conferences and use every opportunity to deepen the Bahá'ís and involve them in the teaching work.

### 3 Other Duties

In addition to organizing the teaching work, the Local Spiritual Assembly has the obligation of guiding and encouraging the believers. Since Spiritual Assemblies are under the guidance and protection of God, Bahá'ís can confidently turn to the Assembly for assistance in all matters. Shoghi Effendi advises: "You should turn to your local Assembly, in the strictest confidence, and seek their aid and advice. These bodies have the sacred obligation to help, advise, protect and guide the believers in every way within their power when appealed to. . . ."8 The well-being of the poor, the sick, the orphans, and widows is a special concern of the Spiritual Assembly. Each Assembly should be aware of the social services—medical agencies, legal aid centers, etc.—available in its area so that it can advise or arrange help for those in need.

Protection of the Faith is another responsibility that Bahá'u'lláh places on the Spiritual Assembly. The Universal House of Justice explains: "It protects the Cause of God; it acts as the loving shepherd of the Bahá'í flock."<sup>9</sup> The Spiritual Assembly must be watchful so that no one may misrepresent the Faith or harm it in any way. For example, the Assembly must supervise all Bahá'í publications produced locally so that the Bahá'í teachings are presented with accuracy and dignity. The Spiritual Assembly must also protect the Faith from damage that might result from improper conduct by a believer. When the Assembly learns of such conduct, it meets with the believer and lovingly but firmly explains the damage that is done to the Faith through his actions. The Assembly also tries to help the believer understand that he is hurting himself as well as the community and encourages him to change his behavior. The Assembly may set up special deepenings for this believer, ask him to meet regularly with the Assembly, or try to involve him more deeply in the work of the Cause. If the unacceptable behavior continues, the Assembly may need to discipline the believer, for the Assembly must act with justice and put the interests of the

Cause first. When the Assembly acts justly and lovingly, the community will come to love and respect the institution.

The Spiritual Assembly must promote unity within the community. Through teaching projects, social activities, or service work the Local Assembly tries to bring Bahá'ís together so that the spirit of love and fellowship among them grows. Unity among the believers is necessary for the progress of the Cause. Without it, nothing can be achieved. The power of unity is like the heat of the sun. It touches everyone and gives life and energy to all efforts. When disunity occurs among Bahá'ís, the Assembly immediately seeks to discover and remove the cause of disunity and to heal the situation.

It is the duty of the Local Spiritual Assembly to make arrangements for holding the Nineteen Day Feasts, the gathering at which the entire community comes together to worship and to consult on the affairs of the Cause. The Assembly also arranges for holy day celebrations.

The Local Spiritual Assembly is responsible for educating children in a Bahá'í community in the love of God and an understanding of the Bahá'í teachings because children will lead the Bahá'í world of the future. To give them this religious training children's classes should be organized.

The Spiritual Assembly sees that Bahá'í marriage laws are obeyed. It receives the consent of parents and appoints witnesses for the Bahá'í marriage ceremony.

## 4 Qualifications of Members

All members of a Spiritual Assembly must be adult believers—that is, twenty-one years or older. Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Cause, lists the qualities one should look for when voting for members of the Assembly. These include loyalty, unselfish devotion, a well-trained mind, ability, and mature experience. When Bahá'ís vote, they must not be influenced by someone's financial situation, race, schooling, or friendship. Instead, they must

consider the character and spiritual qualities of the men and women in the community and pray for guidance in choosing the right people for the Assembly.

Since the Spiritual Assembly is elected once a year, the community has a regular opportunity to improve the quality of its membership. By working and worshipping with his fellow believers one can get to know those who are best suited for membership on the Assembly. Bahá'ís never discuss among themselves who should or should not be elected as this is against the spirit of Bahá'í elections. Shoghi Effendi states: “. . . the elector . . . is called upon to vote for none but those whom prayer and reflection have inspired him to uphold.”<sup>10</sup>

## 5 Elections

Can you imagine an election without nominations and without campaign speeches in which candidates try to influence one's vote and to convince one that he or she is best for the job? What kind of election could be held in this way? The answer is an election for members of Bahá'í administrative institutions. These elections are spiritual in nature. There are no nominations, and no Bahá'í is allowed to discuss the people for whom he should vote or why one person is better than another. Voting is a sacred responsibility, and no one must do anything to influence another person. The election is by secret ballot.

When nine or more adult Bahá'ís live in a community, Bahá'u'lláh states that a Local Spiritual Assembly must be formed. On 21 April each year, during Ridván, Bahá'ís all over the world elect their Assemblies. Bahá'ís celebrate the Ridván Festival, the time when Bahá'u'lláh declared His divine mission, by coming forward to build His World Order.

Only one Local Spiritual Assembly can be elected in a civil area, such as an incorporated city, town, or village. Each Local Spiritual Assembly has a definite area of responsibility. Bahá'ís who live outside an incorporated area, however, can form Assemblies in counties, townships, or judicial districts.

During the election meeting ballots are handed out to all voting members of the Bahá'í community. After prayers each voter writes out nine different names, no more and no less. If a person cannot write, the Spiritual Assembly will make arrangements for a trustworthy person to write for him. After all have voted, the ballots are counted. The nine believers receiving the highest number of votes are elected. They need not receive a majority of the votes cast. If two or more persons receive the same number of votes for the ninth place, the believers present will vote again to decide which one of the two who are tied shall be elected. If one of the members in a tie vote belongs to a minority, he or she is automatically elected. This spiritual principle shows that diversity is welcomed in the Bahá'í community.



If a Bahá'í is unable to be present at the election meeting, he may mail his ballot to the secretary of the Assembly or ask another believer to carry his ballot in a sealed envelope to the election meeting.

## 6 Organization

When the nine members of the Local Spiritual Assembly are elected, they must hold a meeting to elect their officers—chairman, secretary, and treasurer. All nine members should be given an opportunity to vote for the officers. If this is not immediately possible, temporary officers can be elected. To be elected an officer of the Local Spiritual Assembly, a member must receive at least five votes.

What are the functions of Assembly officers? The *chairman* is responsible for conducting the meetings of the Assembly. Often he or she also guides the consultation during Nineteen Day Feasts. A good chairman encourages everyone to participate and keeps order, facilitating smooth and loving consultation. A *vice-chairman* shall also be elected. When the chairman is not present, the vice-chairman acts as chairman.

The *secretary* is the Assembly's link with the community. He or she receives letters and other correspondence to the Assembly and replies on its behalf. He or she brings various letters, requests, and other matters addressed to the Spiritual Assembly to the Assembly meetings. Usually the Spiritual Assembly acts through the secretary to make announcements and to answer the various questions brought to it. After helping the chairman set up an agenda for a meeting of the Assembly, the secretary records the minutes of the meeting. The secretary also keeps all the records of the Assembly, such as letters received, new enrollments, marriage certificates, national Bahá'í policies, and copies of all outgoing correspondence. The position of the secretary is a demanding one and very important for the proper functioning of the Assembly. The Assembly may wish to divide the duties of this position by electing a *recording secretary*, who writes down the minutes of meetings.

The *treasurer* acts on behalf of the Spiritual Assembly to make Bahá'ís aware of the needs of the Bahá'í Fund and to encourage them to support it. He or she not only informs the community about the condition of the Fund but also

inspires the believers to higher levels of sacrifice. The treasurer receives all contributions to the local Bahá'í Fund and forwards contributions to the National Bahá'í Fund according to the Assembly's direction. It is important that the treasurer keep good financial records for the community.



The Spiritual Assembly can appoint committees to carry out specific tasks. These committees are like the arms of the Spiritual Assembly. Their authority to draw up plans comes from the Assembly, and the Assembly, in turn, reviews and approves their work. There are many kinds of

committees that can help with the work of the community. An Assembly might appoint a teaching committee to assist in planning proclamations, public meetings, firesides, and other teaching activities. Other committees might be set up to help organize deepening sessions, Feasts, holy days, and children's classes.

### 7 Decision-Making through Consultation

The Bahá'í Faith has no priests or clergy, and no individual has the authority to direct other Bahá'ís. Decisions and plans for community activities are made by the Spiritual Assembly. It may seem much easier for a single leader to decide what others should do than for a group of nine people to agree on a course of action. Yet because each Bahá'í has had different experiences and may have a somewhat different understanding of the Bahá'í teachings, the solution reached by a group can be far richer and wiser than if one person alone had made the decision. The challenge for the Assembly is to learn how to bring out that wisdom when making decisions. The Bahá'í method for making decisions is called consultation.

Consultation requires that Assembly members work together for the good of the Cause, and share their ideas and their understandings of the Bahá'í teachings in an effort to make wise decisions. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes consultation as "*a spiritual conference.*"<sup>11</sup> He points out that the goal of consultation is the investigation of truth. Each member of the Assembly must be committed to this goal. Commitment requires giving up some of one's likes and dislikes. For example, when the Assembly is deciding who should speak at a public meeting, one may wish that his good friend could be chosen. He must not, however, let his friendship blind him to the truth. His friend may be very good at planning a holy day program, but someone else may be a better speaker.

When consulting on a problem the Local Spiritual Assembly goes through four steps:



1. It gets all the relevant facts, and the Assembly members agree on the facts.
2. It then decides which spiritual and administrative teachings of the Faith relate to the problem.
3. The Spiritual Assembly has a full and frank discussion of the matter. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá notes, *"The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions."*<sup>12</sup>
4. After full discussion of what action to take or advice to give the Assembly votes on the decision. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that it is well and good if all nine members of the Assembly agree. If they do not, a majority vote prevails.

The Spiritual Assembly can best reach wise decisions if all of its members feel free to say what they honestly think. Such freedom requires an atmosphere of love and harmony. Every idea that is shared must be received courteously by the group. If Assembly members make fun of someone's thought, that person may be afraid to offer another idea later in the meeting. If a member says something in a very sharp, forceful way, others in the group may hesitate to say anything at all. Assembly members must try not to hurt the feelings of others; but, at the same time, they must be frank and honest.

Prayer helps Assembly members act in the right spirit during consultation. For this reason all Local Spiritual Assembly meetings begin with prayer. The prayer for the Spiritual Assembly states: *"We have gathered in this spiritual assembly, united in our views and thoughts, with our purposes harmonized to exalt Thy Word amidst mankind."*<sup>13</sup> This prayer reminds Assembly members that the purpose of their meeting is to cooperate in working for the Cause of God.

The second step in the process of consultation—finding the principles of the Faith that apply to the matter being discussed—also helps Assembly members keep a spiritual outlook during consultation. By referring to the writings the Assembly is able to reach decisions based on the guidance Bahá'u'lláh has given as well as on the ideas of its individual members.

If Local Spiritual Assembly members consult in unity

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and harmony, each giving his honest opinion and thoughtfully considering all ideas presented, none stubbornly holding to his own opinion, the Assembly will be guided to make wise decisions. Shoghi Effendi says that "Bahá'u'lláh has given the promise that in every Assembly where unity and harmony prevail, there His glorious spirit will not only be present, but will animate, sustain and guide all the friends in all their deliberations."<sup>14</sup>

It is desirable that all the members agree on a solution, but if this is not possible, a majority vote must prevail. After the vote has been taken, every member must support the decision, even if he or she did not vote in favor of it. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that if the decision is wrong but all the members try their best to support it, the group will soon discover the error. If the decision is right but some members do not support it, the decision will never have a real chance to show its worth. No one will know whether the decision failed because it was a bad idea or because it was not wholeheartedly supported.

## 8 Relationship with the Believers

Even though the Spiritual Assembly must have the full support and respect of the believers, Assembly members should not feel they are superior to their fellow believers. An important difference exists between the Local Spiritual Assembly, which is a divine institution, and the members who are elected to it. When the Assembly is not meeting, the individual members have no special authority or position in the community.

The relationship between the Spiritual Assembly and individual Bahá'ís should be one of love, trust, and respect. Shoghi Effendi counseled the believers to "go to them [Spiritual Assemblies] as a child would to its parents . . ." <sup>15</sup> Just as a child turns to his parents with complete trust when he is troubled or does not know what to do, Bahá'ís must learn to turn to the Spiritual Assembly. The Assembly can give encouragement, love, advice, and guidance.

The Spiritual Assembly can be trusted with any important personal problem because all its consultations



are completely confidential. After the Assembly meeting is over, the members never discuss, even among themselves, the personal matters that individual believers bring to the Assembly.

Bahá'ís must be obedient to the Spiritual Assembly. In order for an army to carry out its mission it must obey its general. The soldiers in Bahá'u'lláh's army of light will never accomplish their mission of world unity if they do not obey their leaders, the divinely established institutions of the Faith. This principle of obedience to Spiritual Assemblies is important not only for the expansion of the Cause of God but also for the protection of the Bahá'í communities from disunity and unhappiness.

The Spiritual Assembly does not stay apart or aloof from the community. It regularly makes reports and shares its plans with the community. At the Nineteen Day Feast the Assembly seeks suggestions and advice from the community members. For example, one Bahá'í may have an idea about a new teaching activity. Another believer may be concerned because no deepening meetings are being held, and someone else may have suggestions about how to improve the children's classes. The Assembly carefully considers these ideas and recommendations at its next meeting.

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The Spiritual Assembly exists to serve the Bahá'í community. It must avoid giving the feeling that it is the "boss" of the community. The spirit of Bahá'í administration is one of mutual cooperation and loving consultation. When the Assembly and the believers work together—teaching, planning special programs, and handling problems—they will come to understand better why the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh needs institutions as well as the help of every individual Bahá'í.

### 9 The Bahá'í Fund

Shoghi Effendi called the Bahá'í Fund the lifeblood of the Cause of God. In the human body blood travels to all parts giving the power for growth and movement. In the same way the Fund enables the Faith to grow in all regions; without it Bahá'í activities would come to a stop. While the amount one contributes is a personal decision, giving to the Bahá'í Fund is a spiritual obligation and a duty to God. It is also a special privilege of believers; non-Bahá'ís may not contribute to the Fund. Bahá'u'lláh wants His Faith to be built through the sacrifice of Bahá'ís alone.

One of the principles of giving to the Fund is regularity. Giving should be a regular habit, just as saying daily prayers is. The National Spiritual Assembly suggests that Bahá'ís give to the Fund once a Bahá'í month—that is, once every nineteen days. Many Bahá'ís choose to contribute at the Nineteen Day Feast. Another principle in giving to the Bahá'í Fund is that one should sacrifice. When one sacrifices, his faith grows stronger because he shows that he is willing to put the needs of the Cause first.

By giving to the Fund, each Bahá'í can participate in spreading the Faith around the world. Bahá'u'lláh says that if a believer cannot go pioneering himself, he should send someone in his stead. Supporting the Fund provides one means for a believer to help someone else go pioneering in his place.

The Local Spiritual Assembly has the duty of educating the believers in the importance of giving to the Bahá'í Fund. There are local, national, continental, and international

Funds. These Funds support the teaching and proclamation activities of the Faith, as well as summer schools, deepening institutes, and conferences. Bahá'ís may contribute to the national, continental, and international Funds directly or through the treasurer of the Local Spiritual Assembly.

### Conclusion

The Local Spiritual Assembly is a gift of God, a divine institution brought by Bahá'u'lláh. The believers are called upon to support the Assembly wholeheartedly. One can show his love and support for the Assembly in many ways: by voting in the election of Assembly members, working to carry out the Assembly's decisions and teaching plans, turning to it in times of trouble or difficulty, praying for its success, and watching with true joy as he sees the Assembly become a strong institution of Bahá'u'lláh's new World Order.



# Bahá'í Community Life

## Introduction

One of the most rewarding aspects of being a Bahá'í is living in a community with other Bahá'ís. Living near other Bahá'ís, however, does not guarantee the development of a sense of community. "A firmly-founded, busy and happy community life" develops only when Bahá'ís work together to become the leaves of one branch and the waves of one sea.<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Nineteen Day Feast

In every community Bahá'ís gather at specific times for prayers, consultation, and fellowship. These gatherings are called Nineteen Day Feasts because they are held once every nineteen days. Each Bahá'í month is nineteen days long, and the Feast is usually held on the first day of the month. Since the Bahá'í day begins at sunset, the Feast may be observed anytime after sunset. For example, a Feast being held on the calendar day of 16 October may be observed anytime between sunset 15 October and sunset 16 October.

The Feast is the heart of Bahá'í community life. It is a time when Bahá'ís come together to pray and read from the writings; to discuss their plans, activities, and problems; and to enjoy each other's company.

The Feast has three parts. The first consists of prayer and meditation. During this section Bahá'í prayers and passages from the Bahá'í writings are read. The writings may also be set to music. One may sing a prayer instead of reading it. Other reverent music may also be played during this portion of the Feast. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says Bahá'ís should *"invoke God with perfect joy and fragrance, [and] sing the verses, glorifications and praises of the Self-subsistent Lord. . . ."*<sup>2</sup>

The second part of the Feast consists of consultation on the affairs of the community. Consultation may come about in a number of ways. One is through reports from the Local Spiritual Assembly. During the consultative part of the Feast the Local Spiritual Assembly must report on its activities, and individuals may want to ask questions or make suggestions and recommendations to the Assembly. For example, the community may want to begin holding children's classes or plan a public meeting. This is the proper time for community members to express their ideas on the subject and to make recommendations to the Spiritual Assembly. Consultation may also begin through the sharing of letters from The Universal House of Justice or the National Spiritual Assembly. The Local Spiritual Assembly may read these letters and ask the community for comments and suggestions. Yet another source of items for consultation is the teaching work. Reports may be given, and again the friends have the opportunity to share ideas or, perhaps, to tell about a successful fireside. News and letters from Bahá'ís in other places may also be shared. Since community affairs are freely discussed, only Bahá'ís may attend the Feasts. Every member of the Bahá'í family is thus free to express himself openly, without being concerned about the impression his comments might make on non-Bahá'ís.

The last part of the Feast is social. Refreshments are served, and the Bahá'ís enjoy fellowship. Fellowship enables the Bahá'ís to get to know each other better and to grow into a loving Bahá'í family. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says the

believers must “associate with each other in the utmost love, joy and fragrance.”<sup>3</sup> Such association and fellowship, He says, should make the hearts “become perfectly united.”<sup>4</sup>

Every Bahá'í should attend the Feasts regularly, unless he is ill or out of town. Because attendance at the Feasts is so important, everyone should make plans ahead of time not to miss them. By sharing ideas during the consultation and contributing to the loving atmosphere, one helps his community grow. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said that, when an atmosphere of fellowship, love, and unity exists, the Feast is like the Lord's Supper. Who would want to miss such a meeting?

One person or a group of Bahá'ís may be asked to make the arrangements for the Feast. This means choosing the writings to be read during the devotional portion of the Feast, providing some refreshments, and finding a place to meet. The Feast may be held in a home, a Bahá'í center, or some other convenient place.

## 2 Individual Devotion

A very important contribution to healthy Bahá'í community life is each individual's devotion to God. Bahá'u'lláh says that man's basic purpose in life is to know and to love God. One of the obligatory prayers states, “I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee.”<sup>5</sup> All men depend on God for spiritual life. Man's soul longs for nearness to God. One cannot be happy until he recognizes his need for God and begins to reach out toward Him. Bahá'u'lláh warns that God's love cannot reach man and change him until he begins to love God: “O Son of Being! Love Me, that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee. Know this, O servant.”<sup>6</sup>

Man's natural love for God increases when he remembers that God has sent Bahá'u'lláh. God has promised always to give His guidance to mankind and never to leave man alone. He has sent many great Teachers: Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. A little over a hundred years ago God sent Bahá'u'lláh.



One's love for God should grow to embrace all of God's creatures because in each person one sees reflections of God's nature. When one sees a loving person, he is reminded of God's great love and is attracted to that person. If he knows someone who is just, he likes to be near him because he remembers God's justice to all people. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the believers in this way: *"Each sees in the other the Beauty of God reflected in the soul, and finding this point of similarity, they are attracted to one another in love."*<sup>7</sup> Such love for each other enriches Bahá'í community life.

When a Bahá'í is devoted to God, he will support his Bahá'í community in every way possible: giving firesides, teaching children's classes, bringing refreshments for meetings, hosting Feasts, giving rides to people who have no cars, working on committees. If each believer tries to do his part in the work of the Faith, the community as a whole will be strong and healthy. But if no one contributes much time, love, or energy, the community will be weakened. An individual may have a talent no one else in his community has, such as playing a musical instrument. If he does not contribute this talent, the community is deprived of his gift. Even if one is unable to do more, he can pray. Prayers are a great assistance to the growth of the Faith. A healthy Bahá'í community needs the support of each individual's devotion to God.

### 3 Universal Participation

It is important that every Bahá'í participate in the life of the Bahá'í community. The work of building God's kingdom on earth will go much faster if each does his part. The Bahá'í community is like a body. Each muscle and bone has a job to do. If any muscle is crippled, the whole body is affected. It cannot perform as well as it could if all the muscles were working together. The Universal House of Justice reminds us of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's wish that Bahá'ís *"work together, be as one soul in one body, and in so doing become a true, organic, healthy body animated and illumined by the spirit."*<sup>8</sup>

Every Bahá'í should perform certain tasks to help the Faith grow. Every believer must teach. Since there are no paid ministers in the Bahá'í Faith, every Bahá'í must spread the message of Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'ís have wonderful news to share with all people. Bahá'u'lláh, the Promised One of all Ages, has come. His teachings are the remedy for a sick world. It is the duty of every Bahá'í to share this message with friends and strangers. Each person can teach in his own way. Some people teach best when they are talking with one person at a time or with a small group of friends. Others speak well to large groups and can give talks at public meetings. Each believer also teaches by the way he lives the Bahá'í life. Other people watch to see how the Bahá'í teachings affect one's behavior. Teaching the Faith is one of the most important parts of Bahá'í life. Bahá'u'lláh has instructed us: *"Teach ye the Cause of God, O people of Baha; for God hath prescribed unto every one the duty of proclaiming His Message, and regardeth it as the most meritorious of all deeds."*<sup>9</sup>

Bahá'ís must also deepen their understanding of their Faith. The Word of God is so powerful and so deep that its full meaning cannot be grasped quickly. One must study and meditate upon it. As one reads the words of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá again and again, he begins to have a clearer understanding of what these writings mean. Learning more about the Faith helps one live a better Bahá'í life. *"Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words,"* Bahá'u'lláh writes, *"that ye may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths."*<sup>10</sup>

Every Bahá'í must pray. Prayer is the food of the soul. Without it the soul is weakened, and man cannot commune with God. In prayer one turns to God and receives strength to continue His work.

In addition to praying, each believer must strive to live the life of a true Bahá'í. All Bahá'ís have spiritual battles to fight and weaknesses to overcome. Through prayer and meditation on the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Perfect Exemplar, one can gradually correct his faults.

'Abdu'l-Bahá has written: *"The most vital duty, in this day, is to purify your characters, to correct your manners, and improve your conduct."*<sup>11</sup>

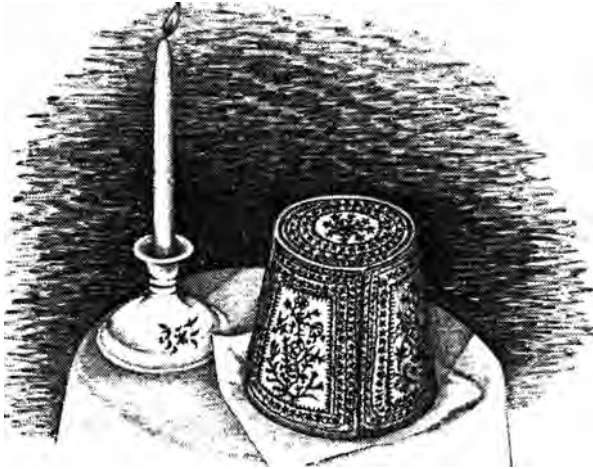
Every Bahá'í must give to the Fund. Shoghi Effendi called the Fund the lifeblood of the Cause and said, "It is the sacred obligation of every conscientious and faithful servant of Bahá'u'lláh who desires to see His Cause advance, to contribute freely and generously for the increase of that Fund."<sup>12</sup> A body needs a steady flow of blood to grow and develop properly. Otherwise, it will remain weak and tired and may die. Regular contributions to the Fund assure the health and growth of the Cause of God.

Supporting the Fund is a privilege only those who have recognized Bahá'u'lláh can enjoy; non-Bahá'ís may not contribute. Each Bahá'í should contribute regularly, perhaps every Bahá'í month. The amount given is confidential. It is a matter between the individual and God. A contribution is especially precious when sacrifice is involved. One way of showing one's love for Bahá'u'lláh is to sacrifice something important in order to give to the Fund.

The Universal House of Justice has said that not all Bahá'ís can give public talks or serve on Spiritual Assemblies. But all can participate in Bahá'í community life by teaching, deepening, fighting their own spiritual battles, praying, and giving to the Fund.



teachings from God and telling people to turn toward justice. Another solemn holy day is 29 May, the anniversary of Bahá'u'lláh's passing.



Holy days can be observed in many ways. It is a duty of the Local Spiritual Assembly to see that some activity is planned for the believers. On the joyous holy days the community may arrange for prayers and a picnic or a public meeting, or for a service project or a children's party. The community should remember solemn holy days with a quiet observance, including prayers and meditations.

In some ways the Bahá'í holy days are like the holy days in other religions. For example, Christians celebrate the birth of Christ at Christmas and remember His death at Easter. They usually do not work on those two days. In a similar manner Bahá'ís remember the important events in the lives of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and mark other special occasions; and they do not work on those days. Parties and gift-giving occur during Intercalary Days, which last from 26 February to 1 March. These days are devoted to hospitality, charity, and the giving of presents. Naw-Rúz, too, is a time for festive parties and for some a time of gift-giving.

## 5 Spiritual Education (Deepening)

In each great religion of the past there has always been a Holy Book that the followers of the religion studied and used as a guide for their lives. Each Holy Book contained the words of the Prophet Who founded the religion. For example, Christianity has the Bible, and Islám has the Qur'án. The Bahá'í Faith also has Holy Scriptures. It has not one Holy Book but many books that contain the writings of Bahá'u'lláh. In past religions the teachings of the Prophet were usually passed on by word of mouth and written down many years later by someone else. The Prophet's teachings may have been changed or misunderstood by those writing them down. Today Bahá'ís have the Word of God with Bahá'u'lláh's own signature or seal. Many of His books and letters have been translated into English and other languages and are available for Bahá'ís to study.

Bahá'u'lláh's writings contain the remedy that will heal a sick world and establish unity. It is very important for each Bahá'í to study His writings because each must contribute to the building of God's kingdom on earth. Bahá'u'lláh's writings are so vast and so full of wisdom that one needs to study them again and again. The Universal House of Justice says, "Let the friends immerse themselves in this ocean. . . ." <sup>14</sup> There is always more to learn, no matter how long a person has been a Bahá'í.

In addition to studying the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, one must also study the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, appointed by Bahá'u'lláh the Center of His Covenant, and the writings of Shoghi Effendi, appointed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá the Guardian of the Cause of God. The messages from The Universal House of Justice, the supreme and infallible governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, are also an important part of one's study. The Universal House of Justice has given four questions to think about when one studies or deepens in the Faith: What is Bahá'u'lláh's purpose for the human race? Why did He submit to great suffering? What does Bahá'u'lláh mean by "a new race of men"? What important changes will He bring about? <sup>15</sup>

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If one continually deepens himself, he will be better able to teach the Cause to his friends and to proclaim Bahá'u'lláh's message. Bahá'u'lláh has written, "*Whoso ariseth among you to teach the Cause of his Lord, let him, before all else, teach his own self, that his speech may attract the hearts of them that hear him. Unless he teacheth his own self, the words of his mouth will not influence the heart of the seeker.*"<sup>16</sup> One must know the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and strive to reflect them in his daily life, or people will not be interested in listening to him.

Every Bahá'í is responsible for deepening himself and should pray and read the writings daily. If one studies a little each day, gradually he will understand more and more of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Physical exercise may seem difficult at first, but if one does a few exercises each day, his muscles slowly grow stronger. The spiritual exercises of prayer and study may also be difficult in the beginning, but they will develop and strengthen the soul.

The believers in each community may also gather together for study classes. Sometimes it is helpful to discuss the writings with other Bahá'ís. Listening to other people's comments often helps increase one's own understanding.

## 6 Spiritual Education of Children and Youth

The spiritual education of children and youth is very important. Young people will one day be responsible for the progress of the Cause. They must be given spiritual training that will enable them to do their part in building the Kingdom of God on earth. Children are like young trees, that grow according to the way they are trained. 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that "*The hearts of all children are of the utmost purity. They are mirrors upon which no dust has fallen. . . . Train these children with divine exhortations. From their childhood instill in their hearts the love of God. . . .*"<sup>17</sup>

The spiritual education of children should develop and increase their spiritual capacity, acquaint them with Bahá'í history and teachings, and give them Bahá'í values.

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Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have written prayers for children, and many materials are available to parents and teachers to help them educate children.





The spiritual education of youth should build upon the education of their earlier years and, in addition, prepare them for active service in the community. Bahá'ís between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one are considered youth. When a child reaches the age of fifteen, he has reached the age of spiritual maturity. He can then decide for himself whether he wants to remain a Bahá'í and can make his declaration of faith in Bahá'u'lláh. The youth in a community need to continue deepening their knowledge of the Faith. The adults should make sure there are opportunities for them to do so. Youth can be included in nearly all Bahá'í activities and in this way learn to be responsible members of the community. They can attend the Feasts, serve on committees, give firesides and public talks, and help teach children's classes. They cannot, however, serve on a Spiritual Assembly or vote for its members until they are twenty-one.

Parents are responsible for the spiritual as well as intellectual education of their children. The whole community, however, may share in carrying out this responsibility. The Local Spiritual Assembly will usually organize children's classes and may ask several believers to teach the classes. Thus children can be brought together to learn from each other and from other adults and youth. Young people watch and imitate the actions of those around them. If they see kindness and justice, they will become kind and just themselves. Bahá'ís teach by their actions all the time.

## 7 Living the Life

The Bahá'í Faith is an entire way of life, not merely something one practices on a certain day of the week or in a particular place. Being a Bahá'í means trying to follow Bahá'u'lláh's teachings every minute of one's life, no matter where, or with whom, he may be. If someone says he believes in Bahá'u'lláh but does not live a Bahá'í life, his faith is not alive. His deeds must match his words. When one studies the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, he begins to understand what a true Bahá'í life is. 'Abdu'l-Bahá is the

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Perfect Exemplar. His life and teachings show each Bahá'í how to become more spiritual.

There are many good qualities each Bahá'í can strive to gain. Some of these qualities are:

*Courtesy:* Bahá'ís must try not to offend or hurt anyone.

*Truthfulness:* Bahá'ís should always speak the truth.

*Reverence:* Bahá'ís should show humility before God and His Messengers.

*Obedience:* Bahá'ís must obey the laws of God for this day.

*Cleanliness:* Bahá'ís must be clean, as one's outward appearance affects his inner life.

*Justice:* Bahá'ís must be fair and just in their dealings with all people.

*Mercy:* Bahá'ís must show compassion to both friends and strangers.

*Patience:* Bahá'ís must be patient with others and with themselves.

*Love:* Bahá'ís must love God, His Messengers, and all mankind.

*Fellowship:* Bahá'ís must show love and friendliness to each other and be united at all times.

As one begins to show forth these qualities in his daily life, he will attract others to the Faith. When one becomes a Bahá'í, his life should begin to change. As he understands more of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, he tries more and more to follow them. He tries to be loving, just, and kind, and to have more patience with others. As he prays and deepens, his life does change—he becomes the spiritual being he was created to be. His friends can see the change, and they realize that it is the Bahá'í Faith that is having such an effect on him. The change in one's character will attract others to the Faith. They will see that the Bahá'í Faith has the power to change human weaknesses into spiritual strengths.

'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "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. . . ."18

People everywhere are looking for a force that can

change the world and make it a better place in which to live. If one is living the Bahá'í life, his conduct can become a guide and example to the rest of humanity.

## 8 Service to the Community

One demonstrates his love for God by the way he treats others. Serving others is an important part of Bahá'í life. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains: "*This is worship: to serve mankind and to minister to the needs of the people.*"<sup>19</sup> Bahá'ís need not wait to go to an established place at a certain time to worship. One's daily life is worship if he serves others.

'Abdu'l-Bahá was the perfect example of a life of service to humanity. He spent much of His time visiting the sick and was a welcome visitor in the homes of the poor. The needy often came to Him for assistance. He always had a kind word and a warm smile to lighten their burdens. Once when 'Abdu'l-Bahá's entire family was sick, He cared for them, washed them, and fed them, taking no rest until He finally fell ill Himself. During the First World War He instructed the Bahá'ís to grow extra crops, which He distributed to hundreds of people who otherwise would have starved. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's whole life was devoted to serving mankind.

Each individual must try to serve others, and the Bahá'í community as a whole must become known for its generosity and concern for all people. The Local Spiritual Assembly should try to become aware of the problems and needs of the people in its town. It can then organize the believers to fill some of those needs. The Bahá'ís can visit shut-ins and people in nursing homes with no family of their own. If there are needy families in town, the Bahá'ís might organize a food or clothing drive in which the whole town could participate. If one section of town is badly in need of a cleanup, the Bahá'ís and other citizens could organize a project to clean that area. Transportation is often a problem for some people. Bahá'ís with cars could offer to take these people shopping or to the doctor.

Offering religious classes for the children of a community is an important service Bahá'ís can perform.

Such classes teach children the basic truths of all the world's great religions. A Bahá'í community may want to provide social functions for local youth. Many parents would be glad to have their children at events sponsored by the Bahá'ís instead of wandering about with nothing to do.

In each community there are many needs with which Bahá'ís can help and thus become known for their service to all people.

## 9 Participation of Women

Bahá'u'lláh teaches that men and women are equal in the sight of God. Both have something to contribute to Bahá'í community life and to the progress of the world. Both must be included in the work of the Faith.

In the past women were not treated as the equals of men and did not have the chance to develop their abilities. They were thought to be inferior. But today women must be educated and must contribute to the progress of society. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "*women must advance and fulfill their mission in all departments of life, becoming equal to men.*" He also says that "*The happiness of mankind will be realized when women and men coordinate and advance equally, for each is the complement and helpmeet of the other.*"<sup>20</sup>

Women and men must enjoy equal rights in the Bahá'í community and in the world. Each one, however, has special talents to contribute.

Women are called upon to play an important role in community life by educating the children in their earliest years. A father contributes much to his child's education, but a mother is her child's first teacher. The child's early education is so important that each woman who plans to be a mother must take great care to prepare herself for this role. Women must be educated physically, mentally, and spiritually to carry out such a great responsibility.

Men and women should both participate fully in Bahá'í community life. Both vote in elections. Both serve on Local and National Spiritual Assemblies. Both serve on committees. Either a woman or a man can be the chairman or the secretary of the Assembly. The important thing in

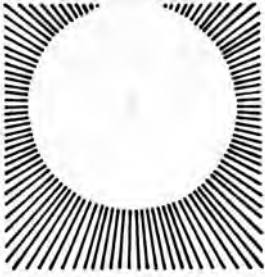
choosing someone for office is that person's individual qualifications, not his or her sex.

Since the beginning of the Bahá'í Era, women have played a major role in the growth and spread of the Faith. Many of the courageous teachers who traveled thousands of miles through various countries were women. Women as well as men have been appointed by Shoghi Effendi to serve as Hands of the Cause of God. The National Spiritual Assemblies of the world have many women serving on them. Indeed, women have given great service to the Cause in the past and will continue to do so.

'Abdu'l-Bahá has written that "*Humanity is like a bird with its two wings—the one is male, the other female. Unless both wings are strong . . . the bird cannot fly heavenwards.*"<sup>21</sup> Thus every Bahá'í community needs the involvement of women, as well as of men, in all its activities.

## Conclusion

It is a great adventure and privilege to be a Bahá'í and to work for the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. When a Bahá'í contributes his talents, prayers, love, and support to his Bahá'í community, he helps bring about "a firmly-founded, busy and happy community life."<sup>22</sup> Bahá'í communities, Shoghi Effendi says, are the pattern for a future civilization. Thus it is through building Bahá'í communities around the world that the true unity of mankind will one day be achieved.



# Progressive Revelation

## 1 Religion—God's Remedy for Mankind

In the world around us people are divided by differences of all kinds. One person hates or fears another because his skin is a different color, because he comes from a different country, because he is rich, because he is poor. In some parts of the world, wars are fought in the name of religion. Sometimes it seems that there is no end to disunity. Brother turns against brother. Parents and children cannot talk to one another. Husbands and wives cannot live together.

In the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, we learn to understand what is happening in the world today. The divisions and hatred are the darkness that must come before a new day. Mankind's sufferings are the birth pains of a new world order. Bahá'ís can climb to the mountaintop to catch the first rays of the sun. They can ease humanity's pain by leading the way out of fear and ignorance. Then all will see what a wonderful time they live in—the beginning of a new age of peace and unity for the human race.

Many people, though, have become used to living in

the dark. They think that there will always be war, hunger, ignorance, and prejudice in the world. Others know that society is sick. They offer many different cures, but because they do not understand mankind's disease, none of their cures is working. Only God knows what is troubling mankind. The Bahá'í writings say: "*The vitality of men's belief in God is dying out in every land; nothing short of His wholesome medicine can ever restore it.*"<sup>1</sup> Only a doctor sent by God, a Divine Physician, can cure mankind. Bahá'u'lláh is that Divine Physician, and He says that God's remedy is "*the union of all its [the world's] peoples in one universal Cause, one common Faith.*"<sup>2</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh has come to bring a religion that will unite mankind. It may be hard to understand at first how this can happen. Today religion itself seems to be a source of disunity. Members of many religions believe that only their way is right, and only they will be saved. They may even hate people of other faiths. But any religion that causes men to hate goes against the will of God. The Bahá'í writings state that religion should be the cause of love. "*Religion should unite all hearts and cause wars and disputes to vanish from the face of the earth,*" 'Abdu'l-Bahá says. "*Any religion which is not a cause of love and unity is no religion.*"<sup>3</sup>

The Bahá'í Faith shows man a new way to look at religion. Bahá'u'lláh teaches that there is only one God, one mankind, and one religion. God has never left mankind without guidance. Thus there have been many Prophets or Messengers of God. They are known by different names: Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad. They lived in different times and among different peoples, but all were inspired by God. All gave the message of God for Their times. Religious prejudices exist today because of man's lack of understanding. Separations among religions come from the narrow mind of man, not from the will of God.

The Prophets or Messengers are all part of God's plan for the education of mankind. The Bahá'í writings call this plan *progressive revelation*. Progressive revelation means that God has unfolded divine truth bit by bit and step by step through the whole history of mankind. It means that religion is evolutionary—that is, it develops and progresses over the ages.

Progressive revelation is one of the most important of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. It can be described in a few words, but it is such a deep subject that Bahá'u'lláh wrote an entire book about it called *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, or the Book of Certitude. When 'Abdu'l-Bahá traveled to Europe and America to spread His Father's Cause, He gave many talks on progressive revelation. Therefore, Bahá'ís need to go beyond a simple explanation to explore the meaning of this principle. The Bahá'í writings on progressive revelation are like a key that opens many doors. As one studies them, he will understand better the age in which he lives. He will have a clearer view of the road he must follow. Even though the present hour may seem very dark, he can be happy and confident about the future because Bahá'u'lláh shows man how God's plan is working in the world.

## 2 God's Purpose for Man

To understand progressive revelation one must first consider why God reveals Himself to mankind. Bahá'u'lláh says that God created man because He loved him. Out of all creation man was given the ability to reflect every quality of God. This is what it means to be created in the image of God. But man is not literally like God. The Creator of the universe does not need eyes to see or hands to build. But one can have godlike spiritual qualities such as love, justice, and mercy. These qualities or attributes are the true image of God.

One can reflect God's qualities, however, only if he seeks to know Him and love Him. Otherwise, he is no more than a rock or an animal. In fact, he has less value because he is not living up to his true nature. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "*Man has the power both to do good and to do evil. . . . But if . . . he rejects the things of God and allows his evil passions to conquer him, then he is no better than a mere animal.*"<sup>4</sup>

The noonday prayer says, "*I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee.*"<sup>5</sup> With these words Bahá'u'lláh reminds man every day of his real purpose.



### 3 God and His Prophets

It is impossible for us to know God, the Creator, directly. The creation cannot know the Creator any more than the painting can know the painter. God is *"the unknowable Essence."*<sup>6</sup> His existence will always be a mystery to His creatures. For this reason God sends His Prophets to the world. They are called Manifestations of God because They show or *manifest* as much as man can understand about God. They are perfect Mirrors of the qualities or attributes of God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, *"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>7</sup>

Because the Prophets are perfect Mirrors of God's light, one may think that They are God. This is not true. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that *"The sun does not leave his place in the heavens and descend into the mirror. . . ."*<sup>8</sup> God does not come to the earth as a man. Instead, the Prophet, the polished Mirror, simply shows God's qualities to man in an understandable way.

Only a unique Being can reflect God's light perfectly. He cannot be like any other person of His time. Bahá'u'lláh describes the Manifestations in this way: *"These ancient Beings, though delivered from the womb of their mother, have in reality descended from the heaven of the will of God."*<sup>9</sup> He explains that the Manifestation has a two-fold nature: a physical nature, like that of any other man, and a spiritual nature *"which is born of the substance of God Himself."*<sup>10</sup>

Because of His two-fold nature the Manifestation speaks with two voices. One is the voice of the man. The other is *"the voice of God Himself."*<sup>11</sup> Moses said, "Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?"<sup>12</sup> But with divine authority He told His people, "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you."<sup>13</sup> The human voice of Jesus of Nazareth said, "Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God. . . ." <sup>14</sup> But the divine voice of the Christ said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away,

but my words shall not pass away."<sup>15</sup> When the Prophet speaks as a man, He reveals complete humility. When He is the channel for the voice of God, He reveals a divine power. This is because He is both a human being and a divine Being.

God sends divine Manifestations to educate man. He has given man the power to understand Their teachings, but each man must progress by his own efforts. Bahá'u'lláh says, "*Success or failure, gain or loss, must . . . depend upon man's own exertions. The more he striveth, the greater will be his progress.*"<sup>16</sup>

One can choose to remain like the animals or to use the gift of understanding. One can follow the path of his own desires or the path lighted by God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls these "*the pathway of nature*" and the pathway of "*religion.*"<sup>17</sup> The pathway of religion is "*the road of the holy Manifestations of God.*"<sup>18</sup> As one travels it, he learns how to become the being he was created to be. Human society also comes to reflect divine qualities. The world becomes a better and happier place.

The Manifestation speaks with the powerful voice of God. He shows man all the perfections of God. He is as much as man can ever know of his Creator. He leads man along the pathway of religion. But one must not let his love for one Messenger blind him to the light of another Prophet of God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "*Attachment to the lantern is not loving the light.*"<sup>19</sup> One must love the light, from wherever it comes. "*We are lovers of illumination and not of lamps and candles.*"<sup>20</sup> All the Prophets have illumined the world with the Word of God.

## 4 The Unity of God's Manifestations

The world today is filled with lovers of lamps and candles. These are the people whose religious beliefs keep them from recognizing the light of unity. For example, some Christians deny the truth of other faiths. Jesus, they say, taught: "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."<sup>21</sup> While Bahá'ís

believe these words of Christ, they also accept these words of Bahá'u'lláh: *"Know thou assuredly that the essence of all the Prophets of God is one and the same. Their unity is absolute."*<sup>22</sup> They are, He says, *"as one soul and the same person."*<sup>23</sup>

There is no conflict between the words of Bahá'u'lláh and those of Christ. Bahá'u'lláh shows how these two statements go hand in hand. He explains that the Prophet has two stations: essential unity or oneness, and distinction or difference. In the station of unity the Prophets speak with one voice (the voice of God) and shine with the same light (the light of God). When Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me," He spoke as the Prophet in the station of unity. In this station He is perfectly united with the other Prophets *"as one soul and the same person."* Therefore, Christ's words mean that the Manifestation of God is the way, the truth, and the life. No one knows God except through His Manifestations.

Bahá'u'lláh gives an example to help make clear the idea of the oneness of the Manifestations. The sun of today, He says, is the same that shone yesterday, but today is a different day than yesterday. Each day of the week has a different name, but the same sun is shining day after day. So it is with the Prophets. Each has His own name and character, but He brings the same light from God.

Another explanation of the station of unity is given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The coming of a Manifestation is like the coming of springtime to the world. Each spring has a different name according to the calendar—1982, 1983, and so on. But the most important thing about springtime never changes. From year to year it is the season of new life and growth. The Prophets, too, have Their own names and qualities, but the most important thing about the Manifestations never changes. They always bring new life and growth to the world.

If one remembers that all the Manifestations share a spiritual nature *"born of the substance of God Himself,"* he can easily see how They are united. Their divine power is a bond of oneness. It reaches across thousands of years and stands above all worldly differences. The Manifestations have all brought a new day, a new springtime. Some lived

so long ago that little is known about Them. But the light and warmth They brought to the world is remembered long after everything else about Them has been forgotten.

The Manifestation does not come to bring a different religion to the world. He comes instead to bring a new springtime by renewing the ageless religion of God. He is the return of all the Manifestations Who came before Him, and He always promises that another Prophet will renew His teachings in the future. Jesus Christ said, "For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?"<sup>24</sup> In the same chapter where He said "I am the way," Christ promised a new Messenger from God. "And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever. . . ."<sup>25</sup> Jesus also said, "I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you."<sup>26</sup> Now two thousand years later Bahá'u'lláh calls in the same divine voice: "*If ye be intent on crucifying once again Jesus, the Spirit of God, put Me to death, for He hath once more, in My person, been made manifest unto you.*"<sup>27</sup>

## 5 The Differences among the Manifestations

Every day the sun rises without fail. No one would deny today's sunrise or claim that the sun did not rise yesterday. But almost everyone denies the light of a new Manifestation when it first appears. The followers of one Prophet usually refuse to believe that the other Prophets were sent by God.

The light of God is much greater than that of the sun. God is the Creator of the sun and of all the universe. Why is it so difficult, then, for mankind to recognize the Prophets who bring God's light age after age? Bahá'u'lláh answers that most of the difficulties come from the second station of the Manifestations. This is the station of distinction or difference. Distinctions, He explains, belong to "*the world of creation and to the limitations thereof.*"<sup>28</sup> All created things are individual, separate, and different from one another. For the Manifestations, Bahá'u'lláh says, this means that "*Each*

*one of them is known by a different name, is characterized by a special attribute, fulfils a definite Mission, and is entrusted with a particular Revelation."*<sup>29</sup>

The history of religion shows that the Prophets have indeed been different one from another. Each has had His own name and life story. The Buddha, for example, was a prince, Jesus was a carpenter, Muḥammad was a camel driver, and the Báb was a merchant. Each Prophet has also lived among people of a different age and place. The Buddha lived in India about two thousand five hundred years ago, Jesus lived in the Holy Land almost two thousand years ago, Muḥammad lived in Arabia over thirteen hundred years ago, and the Báb lived in Persia over one hundred years ago.

The conditions of the world change. Society grows and faces new problems. Because of this no two Manifestations give exactly the same teachings in exactly the same way. Bahá'u'lláh says, *"every age requireth a fresh measure of the light of God. Every Divine Revelation hath been sent down in a manner that befitted the circumstances of the age in which it hath appeared."*<sup>30</sup> In other words, the special mission of each Prophet depends on the spiritual needs of the people of His day.

However, people usually do not expect differences. They turn away from a new Prophet because they do not understand the station of distinction. Bahá'u'lláh says that *"the changes brought about in every Dispensation"* are like *"dark clouds."*<sup>31</sup> These dark clouds hide the light of the new Day of God.

As part of His mission, every Prophet prepares the people to accept the changes that come with progressive revelation. One way He does this is by linking His mission to the missions of earlier Prophets. He shows the unity between that which is new and different and that which is familiar and well loved. Each Manifestation praises the Prophets of the past. Jesus spoke of Moses and His commandments several times. Muḥammad confirmed Those Who came before Him by saying: *"We believe in God, and in what hath been sent down . . . to Abraham, . . . and in what was given to Moses, and Jesus. . . . We make no difference between them."*<sup>32</sup>

Throughout His writings Bahá'u'lláh glorifies the Prophets and holy souls of former times.

The Manifestations also tell Their followers that another Prophet will come after Them, One filled with the same spirit. These prophecies are meant to guide the people and help them recognize the new Manifestation, but by the time He comes, even those who are waiting may not know Him. Too often people develop their own ideas of what He should be and do, and these ideas become veils that blind them to His light.

## 6 The Fulfillment of Prophecy

The purpose of prophecy is to prepare and also to test men. Often people remember the words of a prophecy but do not understand their meaning. Even if the prophecy comes to pass before their own eyes, they still do not see it. They expect it to be fulfilled according to their ideas. The Jews, for example, saw Jesus only as a humble man. They expected their Messiah to be a conquering king. Thus they turned away from Jesus, saying, "Is not this the carpenter's son?"<sup>33</sup> and "Shall Christ come out of Galilee?"<sup>34</sup> They did not see that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies by building a spiritual kingdom. *"The Christ Kingdom,"* 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, *"was everlasting, eternal in the heaven of the divine Will."*<sup>35</sup> Many nations and peoples came under Jesus Christ's rule. But the priests and the people of His time crucified Him.

Today many people are waiting for the return of Christ. They expect Him to fulfill prophecies word for word. But Jesus Himself did not come in this way. Prophecies always test mankind. If they came to pass word for word, no one would be able to use his spiritual sight. Bahá'u'lláh asks, *"Judge fairly: Were the prophecies recorded in the Gospel to be literally fulfilled; were Jesus, Son of Mary, accompanied by angels, to descend from the visible heaven upon the clouds; who would dare to disbelieve, who would dare to reject the truth . . . ?"*<sup>36</sup>

Instead, God sends His Messengers in human form. Each comes with His own name, His own work, and His

own way of fulfilling prophecy. It is not easy for mankind to recognize the Messenger. Most people cannot see beyond His human form. He does not fit their ideas of a Prophet or fulfill prophecy in the way they expect. He changes laws they have followed for hundreds or thousands of years, so they say that He destroys religion, though in truth He renews it. They say He is darkness and evil, though He is the light of the world. Only the pure in heart, the true lovers of the light, have spiritual eyes to see Him and spiritual ears to hear His call. Alerted by prophecies to His coming, they alone recognize and worship the Manifestation, and in so doing pass God's test.



## 7 Eternal Laws and Temporary Laws

All Prophets come, Bahá'u'lláh explains, to educate humanity and *"to ensure the peace and tranquillity of mankind."*<sup>37</sup> To achieve these goals each Prophet gives two kinds of laws and teachings. First, He renews the eternal truths of God. Second, He gives special laws and teachings designed for one time and culture. Because the second kind of laws are temporary, they may be changed by later Manifestations.

The eternal truths of God have been revealed by all of the Manifestations. The Golden Rule, for example, is in the

Holy Book of every religion. The words may not be exactly alike, but the meaning is the same. Other teachings may be explained in different ways to help the people of a specific age understand them. All the Messengers have talked about life after death in different terms. Muḥammad, for example, spoke of paradise as a beautiful garden with rivers and streams. This description had a special meaning to the desert people whom He taught. The other Prophets described life after death in ways that gave it meaning to Their people.

Sometimes the Manifestation puts a law of God in a new form to fit the new age or to test the hearts of the people. An example is the law of prayer. Only the form of this law has changed from age to age. Muḥammad taught His followers to pray five times a day. Bahá'u'lláh now tells man to pray at least once a day. This latest command is simply a renewal of the eternal law of prayer. The eternal laws of God do not change, only the words and forms.

*Progressive revelation*, however, means that even these eternal laws and teachings are given to man in stages. As mankind grows spiritually, he is able to receive more instruction. In school a child learns first how to count. Then he learns to add. After many years and many lessons he may go on to solve difficult problems of higher mathematics. Mankind's spiritual lessons go step by step in the same way. Bahá'u'lláh says that "*the light of Divine Revelation hath been vouchsafed unto men in direct proportion to their spiritual capacity.*"<sup>38</sup> That is, the Manifestation reveals only as much as the people can understand. Jesus gave an idea of progressive revelation when He said, "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth. . . ."<sup>39</sup>

The clearest differences between the religions come from the second kind of laws and teachings that the Prophet gives. These are the social laws designed for the needs and conditions of the people. They belong only to that particular age and dispensation. The Prophet brings these laws "*to ensure the peace and tranquillity of the world.*" Laws about family life, marriage, and divorce, for example, have changed through the ages. These laws are needed to



give order to human relationships, but they are not eternal laws. They are meant to guide society through a particular stage of its development.

Every age also has conditions and problems that never existed before. For this reason each Manifestation brings some completely new laws to meet these new needs. For instance, Bahá'u'lláh has given many specific laws that will establish world unity. In the time of Moses, Christ, or Muḥammad, people were not ready for such laws. In those days no one knew very much about the world. They could only go as fast as horses or sailing ships could take them. They thought the earth was flat. Today a child knows more about the planet than the wisest men five hundred years ago did. The special mission of the Manifestation of God for this day is to unite the world spiritually.

Change is a necessary part of progressive revelation. Speaking of the changes He brought, Christ said, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil."<sup>40</sup> This statement is true of all Manifestations. Each comes with His own mission and His own Revelation. He changes the laws and the ideas of men. Most of all He changes their hearts. Through the Manifestation, Bahá'u'lláh says, "*the world is made new.*"<sup>41</sup> Change according to the plan of God is fulfillment, not destruction. If religious teaching did not change and progress, mankind would not grow spiritually.

## 8 Cycles of Revelation

If God's guidance ever stopped, mankind would wither and die like a plant without rain. But God has given man eternal life. Bahá'u'lláh says, "*Not for a moment hath His grace been withheld, nor have the showers of His loving-kindness ceased to rain upon mankind.*"<sup>42</sup> This is God's covenant with man: He has promised never to leave mankind without guidance.

Today science is proving that man has existed for millions of years. Prophets surely came to the world in those early times. Bahá'u'lláh states that the Manifestations "*have been sent down from time immemorial. . . .*"<sup>43</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, *"Thus there have been many holy Manifestations of God. One thousand years ago, two hundred thousand years ago, one million years ago, the bounty of God was flowing, the radiance of God was shining, the dominion of God was existing."*<sup>44</sup> No one remembers all of the Prophets Who came in mankind's infancy. Time and change have swept away all records of Them.

Through the ages the revelation of God has come to mankind in cycles. The cycles of religion are like nature's cycles. The earth revolves completely every twenty-four hours. The cycle of the day includes the light and warmth of the sun and the darkness and cold of night. Another cycle is the seasons of the year. As the earth moves around the sun, the seasons change from spring to summer and then to fall and winter. Then the cycle begins again.

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that, *"Each of the Divine Manifestations has likewise a cycle, and during the cycle His laws and commandments prevail and are performed."*<sup>45</sup> The Manifestation brings a renewal or a spiritual springtime. Through each Prophet *"the world is made new."* The Manifestation brings the eternal truths of God to man and gives special laws and teachings for the age.

In the beginning few people follow the Prophet. Most of mankind is sleeping when the first rays of light appear. But God's light grows stronger, until more and more people wake up. Through the teachings of the Manifestation mankind grows spiritually. Civilization also progresses, and arts and sciences develop.

Then the light begins to fade. This happens because mankind forgets the teachings of the Manifestation. In their place the people follow rituals, dogmas, and man-made ideas. Religion becomes the cause of disunity where before it had been a cause of love. The corruption of religion makes people turn from it and follow the path of nature. People no longer believe in God. In this spiritual darkness even people looking for guidance do not know where to turn. It is the end of a cycle. This time of darkness, Bahá'u'lláh says, exists in every dispensation. *"Unless it cometh to pass, the Sun of Truth will not be made manifest. For the break of the morn of divine guidance must needs follow the darkness of the night of error."*<sup>46</sup> The time of darkness is the time when a new

Manifestation appears in the world. *"In this way,"* says 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *"cycles begin, end and are renewed. . . ."*<sup>47</sup>

Today mankind stands at the beginning of the cycle of Bahá'u'lláh. He brings the light of a new Day of God. But Bahá'u'lláh says this Day is not like any other. All the Messengers of God have prophesied the coming of a great Teacher and an age of world peace. These Manifestations were all part of a larger cycle, the prophetic cycle. They led mankind toward maturity.

Now mankind is entering the cycle of fulfillment. Bahá'u'lláh announces: *"The time foreordained unto the peoples and kindreds of the earth is now come. The promises of God, as recorded in the holy Scriptures, have all been fulfilled. Out of Zion hath gone forth the Law of God, and Jerusalem, and the hills and land thereof, are filled with the glory of His Revelation."*<sup>48</sup> The mission of Bahá'u'lláh is to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. His followers all over the world are working for the unity of mankind. Bahá'u'lláh assures them that *"Soon will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead."*<sup>49</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh's station is so great that no one can understand it. In time man will appreciate its importance more completely. Bahá'u'lláh reminds man that He is united with the other Manifestations *"as one soul and the same person."* He teaches that *"the works and acts of each and every one of these Manifestations of God . . . are all ordained by God, and are a reflection of His Will and Purpose."*<sup>50</sup> One must accept all of God's Messengers, not just Bahá'u'lláh. If he does not, Bahá'u'lláh warns that he has *"indeed disbelieved in God,"* has *"repudiated His signs,"* and has *"betrayed the Cause of His Messengers."*<sup>51</sup>

So it is that by accepting Bahá'u'lláh one accepts Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad, the Buddha, Zoroaster, the Báb, and all the Prophets of the past. One also accepts the coming of future Messengers from God, for Bahá'u'lláh promised that another Manifestation will come in no less than *"a full thousand years."*<sup>52</sup> He pledges His loyalty to the next Manifestation and *"to those Who shall come after Him till the end that hath no end."*<sup>53</sup> Because God is eternal, revelation is also eternal. Progressive revelation will never end.

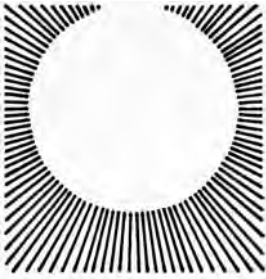
## 9 The Ocean of Knowledge

Each Messenger of the past brought a Holy Book. In this day of maturity, however, man has been given many Books to which to turn for divine guidance. The Bahá'í writings are like a vast ocean. *"Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words,"* Bahá'u'lláh urges, *"that ye may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths."*<sup>54</sup>

Progressive revelation is just one of the "pearls of wisdom" that one can find in the Bahá'í writings. This "pearl" alone could be studied for many years because, as one studies progressive revelation, he finds himself understanding many more of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. Each of them leads to knowledge both of God and of man as a being created in His image.

No one can give us this knowledge. We must seek it for ourselves. 'Abdu'l-Bahá lights our way with these words:

*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. Let us ask God's help to enable us to understand the Holy Books. Let us pray for eyes to see and ears to hear, and for hearts that long for peace.*<sup>55</sup>



## Notes

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- 23 Matt. 6:10.
- 24 Isa. 2:4.
- 25 Isa. 11:6.
- 26 Isa. 11:9.
- 27 Rev. 21:1, 4.

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- 2 John 16:12–13.
- 3 Isa. 9:6.
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