

The Power of the Covenant

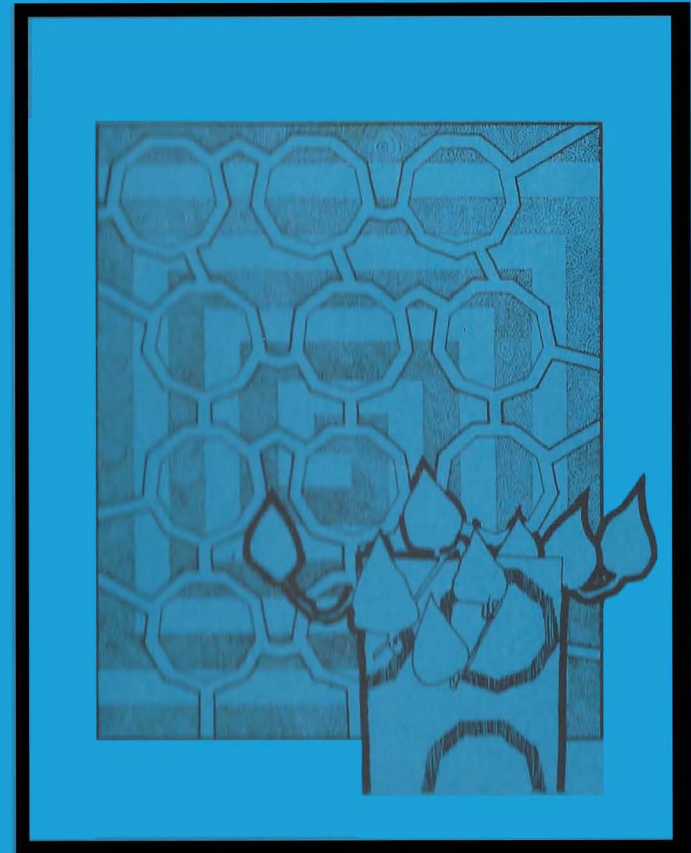
Part Four

Publications
Bahá'í Canada
Publications

7200 Leslie Street
Thornhill, Ontario L3T 6L8

Printed in USA

9780888671011



The Power of the Covenant

Part Four

Our Covenant with Bahá'u'lláh

Published by

THE NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF CANADA

October 2000

Acknowledgements

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Dr. Ann Boyles in the preparation of this booklet, and Mr. Archie McGillivray in preparing the cover design.

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Published October 2000

ISBN 0-88867-101-6

Printed in the United States of America
in cooperation with Palabra Publications

Contents

Introduction	1
The Covenant and Social Good	3
Love	4
Freedom and Responsibility	8
Means of Growth within Our Covenant with Bahá'u'lláh	11
Requisites for Spiritual Growth	13
<i>Obligatory Prayer</i>	14
<i>Reading of the Sacred Scriptures</i>	16
<i>Meditation</i>	18
<i>Bringing Our Behaviour More into Accordance with the Teachings</i>	19
<i>Teaching</i>	27
<i>Selfless Service in the Work of the Cause and in One's Trade or Profession</i>	30
The Material Made Sacred: Some Expressions of Our Love for the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh	33

The Right of God (Huqúqu'lláh)	34
The Funds of the Faith	35
Our Relationship with the Institutions of the Faith	39
Bahá'í Elections	45
The Complementary Relationship between Bahá'í Institutions and Individual Believers	48
Channels of Communication	53
The Nineteen Day Feast	53
Consultation with the Spiritual Assembly	56
The Counsellors and Auxiliary Boards	57
Consultation	58
Conclusion	63
References	65

Preface

On the weekend of July 4 - 8, 1975, the members of all the senior institutions of the Bahá'í Faith in North America gathered at the House of Worship in Wilmette, to participate in a special conference called by the Universal House of Justice. The subject was the responsibility of the Bahá'í community for the protection of the Cause entrusted to us by Bahá'u'lláh. Three Hands of the Cause participated, as did all of the members of the Continental Board of Counsellors and the three National Spiritual Assemblies. All of the Auxiliary Board members for North America likewise took part.

The conference had originated in an appeal from the Universal House of Justice dated November 26, 1974:

Five months before he passed away, the beloved Guardian ... drew our attention to the fact that from both without and within the Faith evidences of 'increasing hostility' and 'persistent machinations' were apparent, and that they foreshadowed the 'dire contests' predicted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which were destined to 'range the Army of light against the forces of darkness, both secular and religious.'

The House of Justice went on to say:

The marvellous victories won in the name of Bahá'u'lláh since those words were written, and the triumphs increasingly being achieved by His dedicated and ardent lovers in every land, will no doubt serve to rouse the internal and external enemies of the Faith to fresh attempts to attack the Faith and dampen the enthusiasm of its supporters.

The House of Justice noted some recent evidences that this reaction had already begun in various parts of the world, and enclosed a compilation of excerpts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the beloved Guardian, which explain the principle that the progressive unfoldment of the Faith is bound, by its very nature, to raise up opposition which in turn will accelerate the expansion of the Cause. With this principle in mind, the House of Justice concluded:

We feel strongly that, whatever method is chosen to inform the friends, the time has come for them to clearly grasp the inevitability of the critical contests that lie ahead, to give you (the National Spiritual Assemblies) their full support ... and aid and enable the Faith of God to scale loftier heights, win more signal triumphs, and traverse more vital stages in its predestined course to complete victory and worldwide ascendancy.

On receipt of this letter, Canada's National Assembly began developing a series of publications and regional seminars for the education of the Canadian community in the subject of the protection of the Cause. At this point we received further advice from the House of Justice that it was calling a special conference on the subject for the institutions of the Faith in North America. It was this meeting which assembled at the House of Worship, the weekend of July 4 - 8, and which produced important advances in the unity of the institutions of the Faith on this continent.

During the course of the consultations at Wilmette, our National Assembly had an opportunity to present the outline of the program which we were developing. It consisted essentially of resource material for a series of four weekend institutes to be conducted by the National Assembly for groups of local Spiritual Assemblies. It is this material, modified and expanded as a result of the invaluable discussions at Wilmette, that forms the content of this series of four booklets.

Each booklet introduces one of four different aspects of the subject of the protection of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, and provides footnotes which will serve as an index to the Bahá'í texts from which the reference material has been drawn. The themes of the four presentations are:

- I Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant with Mankind.
- II The Problem of Covenant-breaking.
- III The Bahá'í Faith and Its Critics.
- IV Our Covenant with Bahá'u'lláh.

The booklets have been prepared as a stimulus and general guide to group discussions. Clearly, the material is in no sense a comprehensive presentation of the subject matter concerned: the Cause of God is like an ocean and

the truths it contains are limitless. Nor do the booklets represent authoritative statements of Bahá'í belief, apart from the various excerpts from the Scriptures of the Faith and from the commentaries of the Guardian and the guidance of the Universal House of Justice which are quoted.

Rather, the spirit of the discussion which the National Assembly hopes these thoughts will provide in the community is that described by the Universal House of Justice in a statement dealing with one of the central themes touched on in this series:

A clear distinction is made in our Faith between authoritative interpretation and the interpretation or understanding that each individual arrives at for himself from his study of its teachings. While the former is confined to the Guardian, the latter, according to the guidance given to us by the Guardian himself, should by no means be suppressed. In fact such individual interpretation is considered the fruit of man's rational power and conducive to a better understanding of the teachings, provided that no disputes or arguments arise among the friends and the individual himself understands and makes it clear that his views are merely his own. Individual interpretations continually change as one grows in comprehension of the teachings. As Shoghi Effendi wrote: 'To deepen in the Cause means to read the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and the Master so thoroughly as to be able to give it to others in its pure form. ... There is no limit to the study of the Cause. The more we read the writings, the more truths we can find in them, the more we will see that our previous notions were erroneous.' (*Wellspring of Guidance*, pp. 88-89)

Faithfully,
NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF CANADA

Introduction

This volume explores both our relationship with Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant and our part in it. Bahá'u'lláh declares "The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men."¹ He further proclaims that He has come "to unite and weld together all that dwell on earth."² The instrument He has created to effect that unity is His Covenant.

Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, unparalleled in human history, explicitly identifies 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the Interpreter and Exemplar of His Teachings, designating Him as its Centre and Pivot. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in turn, established the Institutions ordained in Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order, thus ensuring unity among the Bahá'ís after His passing. In addition to establishing the line of succession and authority, the Covenant is a fortress for our refuge and the means for our true liberation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that "The power of the Covenant is as the heat of the sun which quickeneth and promoteth the devel-

opment of all created things on earth. The light of the Covenant, in like manner, is the educator of the minds, the spirits, the hearts and souls of men.”³

Establishing the Covenant within the framework of love, this booklet discusses means by which we can draw on its power and become more greatly illumined by its light – exploring Bahá’u’lláh’s definitions of liberty and freedom, activities that result in spiritual growth and transformation, how we express love through the generous offering of our material wealth, and the nature of our engagement with the institutions He has raised up to be at the heart of His World Order.

Our steadfastness in the Covenant, our allegiance to its Creator, our loyalty to its provisions, and our humble gratitude for this “excellent and priceless heritage,”⁴ will equip us to meet serenely, calmly, and confidently whatever tests we may face in our individual lives and whatever assaults the Cause itself is destined to withstand.

The Covenant and Social Good

And the honor and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world’s multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellowmen? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight.⁵

These words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, written in His treatise on government and society called *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, describe the noble station to which each of us can aspire if we set our sights on attaining that goal. But the individual is not left to his or her own devices in pursuing it. The Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh is the means by which we can attain this honour and distinction.

In common usage, the word “covenant” often means a “contract” or a set of rules and injunctions. But the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh is far more than this. Its purpose is our transformation into the kinds of beings who can bring about social good, peace, well-being, happiness and the advantage of all. In this process we are enabled to gain qualities that will help our own souls progress eternally.

In fact, Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant is an expression of love – a new paradigm that demands our full attention.

Love

In *The Hidden Words*, Bahá’u’lláh has written, “Love me, that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee. Know this, O servant.”⁶ He also says, “Walk in My statutes for love of Me”⁷ and “My love is My stronghold; he that entereth therein is safe and secure, and he that turneth away shall surely stray and perish.”⁸ The essence of our Covenant with Bahá’u’lláh lies within these brief but profound statements.

The love described by Bahá’u’lláh in the Writings of His Faith is not what is commonly regarded as “love” in the contemporary world. It promises much more: security and nearness to God. But in return, it also demands much more of us. It involves self-surrender and submission – qualities that require effort to develop.

In a talk given in Paris, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá elaborated on the four kinds of love. He said make up the universe: that of God for humanity, that of human beings for God, that of God “towards the Self or Identity of God”, and that of human beings for each other.⁹ The Covenant that we make with Bahá’u’lláh

when we become Bahá’ís is most immediately concerned with the first two kinds of love. Of the first, God’s love for humanity, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “... it consists of the inexhaustible graces, the Divine effulgences and heavenly illumination. Through this love the world of being receives life. Through this love man is endowed with physical existence, until, through the breath of the Holy Spirit – this same love – he receives eternal life and becomes the image of the Living God. This love is the origin of all the love in the world of creation.”¹⁰ This is God’s part – to endow us with life, to give us the capacity to recognize Him, and to enable our souls to progress once we do. This love is the foundation of all existence – the force that holds the universe together.

Of the second kind of love, that of human beings for God, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “This is faith, attraction to the Divine, enkindlement, progress, entrance to the Kingdom of God, receiving the Bounties of God, illumination with the lights of the Kingdom. This love is the origin of all philanthropy; this love causes the hearts of men to reflect the rays of the Sun of Reality.”¹¹ This is our part: to take our love for God and to translate it into deeds performed with pure motives, to become mirrors reflecting divine qualities – “to become a source of social good ... the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to [our] fellowmen.”¹² The rewards of this faith and love are spiritual bounties, confirmation, and spiritual growth or “illumination”. The Covenant we embrace when we declare our faith in Bahá’u’lláh provides us with the channels through which we can express our love for Him in healthy, transformative ways.

One of the wonderful features of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh is that He has not just left us to discover by trial and error

how we can become a cause of peace and well-being to others. Part of His Covenant with us is to show us clearly how we can achieve this goal.

In the opening paragraph of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh has written,

The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws, Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation. Whoso achieveth this duty hath attained unto all good; and whoso is deprived thereof hath gone astray, though he be the author of every righteous deed. It behoveth every one who reacheth this most sublime station, this summit of transcendent glory, to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world. These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other. Thus hath it been decreed by Him Who is the Source of Divine inspiration.¹³

It is not sufficient merely to recognize or accept the claims of the Manifestation of God for this day, wonderful as that is; we must also obey His laws and ordinances. These two things must go together.

In a sense, there follows from this primary Covenant into which we enter with the Manifestation a kind of “contract” between our higher and lower selves, putting ourselves in a position where our higher selves lead us and determine our behaviour. The benefit of adhering to this contract is not insignificant. Bahá'u'lláh assures us that “Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revela-

tion, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty.”¹⁴ That such submission should lead to liberty is one of the profound paradoxes at the heart of religious belief.

But submission and obedience are not to be regarded as perfunctory. When love inspires us to obey and submit, the benefits are inestimable. As Bahá'u'lláh states,

Say: From My laws the sweet-smelling savour of My garment can be smelled, and by their aid the standards of Victory will be planted upon the highest peaks. The Tongue of My power hath, from the heaven of My omnipotent glory, addressed to My creation these words: ‘Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty.’ Happy is the lover that hath inhaled the divine fragrance of his Best-Beloved from these words, laden with the perfume of a grace which no tongue can describe. By My life! He who hath drunk the choice wine of fairness from the hands of My bountiful favour will circle around My commandments that shine above the Dayspring of My creation.¹⁵

Our obedience, then, should not be blind. Bahá'u'lláh appeals to our sense of fairness, a divine quality bestowed upon us by God, which then enables us to recognize and to submit to Him through a sense of love. In this passage, Bahá'u'lláh portrays human love for the divine Beloved in concrete terms: He alludes to the “sweet-smelling savour” of His “garment” and the “divine fragrance” of the “Best Beloved”, wafted to us through indescribably beautiful aromatic words, “laden with the perfume of ... grace.”¹⁶ Furthermore, He gives us to drink “choice wine” from His own hands – truly an image of great intimacy.¹⁷ In such terms does the Manifestation of

God depict the giving and the receiving of the laws, bestowed by the “Best Beloved” upon the true lover. This is the basic framework of belief for the individual Bahá’í.

Freedom and Responsibility

“Liberty,” like “love,” has been redefined by Bahá’u’lláh for this age. The liberty of which Bahá’u’lláh speaks is not license. Bahá’u’lláh has said that kind of liberty “causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station.”¹⁸ The achievement of “true liberty” is dependent upon moderation to exert a beneficial effect and to “carry forward an ever-advancing civilization”. Our declaration of faith in Bahá’u’lláh is an expression of our trust in Him and in the truth of His statement regarding what is best for us. Our part is to obey and submit.

The Universal House of Justice has written about the “equilibrium of responsibilities” inherent in our activities as Bahá’ís – particularly the electoral process in the Bahá’í Faith – saying that it “presupposes maturity on the part of all concerned.”¹⁹ The Supreme Body goes on to point out:

This maturity has an apt analogy in adulthood in human beings. How significant is the difference between infancy and childhood, adolescence and adulthood! In a period of history dominated by the surging energy, the rebellious spirit and frenetic activity of adolescence, it is difficult to grasp the distinguishing elements of the mature society to which Bahá’u’lláh beckons all humanity. The models of the old world order blur vision of that which must be perceived; for these models were, in many instances, conceived in rebellion and re-

tain the characteristics of the revolutions peculiar to an adolescent, albeit necessary, period in the evolution of human society.²⁰

In the period of adolescence, with its “rebellious spirit” and “frenetic activity,” it is often difficult to accept laws which in our later lives appear to us to be very wise. Remaining in a state of perpetual adolescent rebellion is very harmful for us as individuals and for our society as a whole. We are required, as Bahá’ís, to grow in our understanding of the concepts of both freedom and responsibility as members of this maturing human society. As the Universal House of Justice concludes in its letter on individual rights and freedoms in the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh,

The spirit of liberty which in recent decades has swept over the planet with such tempestuous force is a manifestation of the vibrancy of the Revelation brought by Bahá’u’lláh. His own words confirm it. ‘The Ancient Beauty,’ He wrote in a soul-stirring commentary on His sufferings, ‘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.’

Might it not be reasonably concluded, then, that ‘true liberty’ is His gift of love to the human race? Consider what Bahá’u’lláh has done: He revealed laws and principles to guide the free; He established an Order to channel the actions of the free; He proclaimed a Covenant to guarantee the unity of the free.

Thus, we hold to this ultimate perspective: Bahá’u’lláh came to set humanity free. His Revelation is, indeed, an invitation to freedom – freedom from want, freedom from war, freedom to unite, free-

dom to progress, freedom in peace and joy.²¹

As civilization matures, individuals will become more ready to promote the good of the whole rather than what benefits them alone. This does not mean that the individual will not have any rights. The Guardian states emphatically that in the future Bahá'í world commonwealth, "the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded."²² But at the same time there must be a balance between individual rights and the good of society.

In short, the freedom found in the laws of Bahá'u'lláh is more than the ability to do what one wants, which reflects a superficial view of liberty. The freedom bestowed upon us by Bahá'u'lláh is such that it promotes the transformation of every individual on this planet, allowing the opportunity for all of us to develop our capacities to their full extent and thus to transform the entire society in which we live. What could be more profound a meaning of "freedom" than this? What could be more precious than those laws and teachings leading us towards this goal?

Means of Growth within Our Covenant with Bahá'u'lláh

The power of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh exists at all levels, from the individual to the collective. To become firm and steadfast in the Covenant requires daily effort. We can draw on the power of the Covenant and be strengthened by it through specific actions.

A vital step is to learn more about the essentials of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant. A study of certain key documents, such as Bahá'u'lláh's *Book of the Covenant*, *The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, Shoghi Effendi's *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*, and *The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice*, will enable us to build a firm understanding

of the station of the Báb, of Bahá'u'lláh, of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and of the role of the Administrative Order in the development of the Cause. From our study of these works we can learn more about the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh and our relationship with it, and kindle the spiritual forces latent in our own souls.

Another important element in developing our understanding of our relationship with Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant is that we must consider deeply our human nature. Part of our Covenant with Bahá'u'lláh must be acceptance of the idea that we are essentially noble creatures capable of spiritual attainments. "O Son of Spirit! Noble have I created thee," Bahá'u'lláh has written.²³ If we do not believe this about ourselves, then we are not believing what Bahá'u'lláh has told us about our human nature. Undoubtedly there are times when we feel dispirited, when our shortcomings appear especially glaring. We are not perfect beings. That is one of the reasons that Bahá'u'lláh has told us we must bring ourselves to account each day.

To assist us further in this process of spiritual growth, Bahá'u'lláh has provided for us a Being to serve as a perfect example. 'Abdu'l-Bahá is Bahá'u'lláh's gift to humanity of "an enduring model to emulate" Who personifies "virtues and perfection in personal and social behaviour."²⁴ Of course, we will never reach the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá; He is a unique creation in all of human history. But we can look to Him as a model for our own individual aspirations, attitudes, and behaviour.

Requisites for Spiritual Growth

In addition to emulating the model of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Centre of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, we can look to the institutions of the Cause for specific guidance that will assist us in our spiritual development. The Universal House of Justice has summarized six "essential requisites for our spiritual growth," saying that "they represent the path towards the attainment of true spirituality that has been laid down by the Manifestation of God for this age." These requisites are as follows:

1. The recital each day of one of the Obligatory Prayers with pure-hearted devotion.
2. The regular reading of the Sacred Scriptures, specifically at least each morning and evening, with reverence, attention and thought.
3. Prayerful meditation on the Teachings, so that we may understand them more deeply, fulfill them more faithfully, and convey them more accurately to others.
4. Striving every day to bring our behavior more into accordance with the high standards that are set forth in the Teachings.
5. Teaching the Cause of God.
6. Selfless service in the work of the Cause and in the carrying on of our trade or profession.²⁵

All of these spiritual practices are necessary if we are to grow in our love for Bahá'u'lláh and in our understanding of and devotion to His Covenant.

Obligatory Prayer

Bahá'u'lláh has prescribed that we say an "obligatory" prayer each day, but in His divine wisdom He has given us a choice of three: a short prayer to be said at noon, a medium prayer to be said in the morning, at noon, and in the evening; or a long prayer to be said any time in the twenty-four hour period. For the purposes of reciting these obligatory prayers, "morning", "noon" and "evening" refer respectively to the periods from sunrise until noon, from noon until sunset, and from sunset until two hours thereafter. The choice of the prayer is left entirely to the individual, but one must be chosen each day and recited according to the specific directions accompanying it.

In its message outlining the requisites for spiritual growth, mentioned above, the Universal House of Justice includes the saying each day of one of the obligatory prayers with "pure hearted devotion". There are two elements to this injunction: first, the discipline of saying the prayer each day at a prescribed time, and second, the attitude with which we approach the act of prayer. The Báb has said, "The most acceptable prayer is the one offered with the utmost spirituality and radiance; its prolongation hath not been and is not beloved of God. The more detached and the purer the prayer, the more acceptable is it in the presence of God."²⁶

Saying the obligatory prayer is one of the most significant spiritual journeys we undertake when we become Bahá'ís. 'Abdu'l-Bahá made reference to the depth of meaning within the obligatory prayers, which we strive to appreciate in some small measure each time we say our prayer, when He wrote, "Know thou that in every word and movement of the obliga-

tory prayer there are allusions, mysteries and a wisdom that man is unable to comprehend, and letters and scrolls cannot contain."²⁷ Saying the obligatory prayer is one action that connects us directly to the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh.

'Abdu'l-Bahá has likened prayer to conversation, saying, "...the greatest happiness for a lover is to converse with his beloved, and the greatest gift for a seeker is to become familiar with the object of his longing."²⁸ Specifically referring to the obligatory prayers, He says, "The obligatory prayers are binding inasmuch as they are conducive to humility and submissiveness, to setting one's face toward God and expressing devotion to Him. Through such prayer man holdeth communion with God, seeketh to draw near unto Him, converseth with the true Beloved of one's heart, and attaineth spiritual stations."²⁹ Again, we see in its various elements that the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh is not a mere contract; it is the means whereby we may express our love for God.

There may certainly be times in our lives when, for one reason or another, we are not able to achieve that communion of which 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke, but this is not a reason for abandoning the discipline of prayer. Rather, it shows us that we need to consider carefully the quality of that conversation we undertake to have with the Beloved of our hearts each day. We do not achieve, one day and forever afterwards, perfection in that conversation. Each day offers us a fresh opportunity to grow in our love for Bahá'u'lláh and to express that love more purely when we turn to Him in prayer. It is a process that continues throughout our entire lives. The constant in this process is Bahá'u'lláh's love for us and His generosity in keeping open that channel of love to Him through prayer. We need to learn how to use that channel more effectively

throughout our lives, and the daily discipline of the obligatory prayer is an important means by which we can do so. As stated in a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual, "These daily prayers have been endowed with a special potency which only those who regularly recite them can adequately appreciate."³⁰ And further, he wrote to another believer, "The power of God can entirely transmute our characters and make of us beings entirely unlike our previous selves. Through prayer and supplication, obedience to the divine laws Bahá'u'lláh has revealed, and ever-increasing service to His Faith, we can change ourselves."³¹

Reading of the Sacred Scriptures

Bahá'u'lláh states in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, "Recite ye the verses of God every morn and eventide." He continues, "Whoso faileth to recite them hath not been faithful to the Covenant of God and His Testament, and whoso turneth away from these holy verses in this day is of those who throughout eternity have turned away from God."³²

Regular exposure to the Creative Word is clearly a fundamental element of the Covenant we make with Bahá'u'lláh. Why is this so vital to our spiritual development?

Reading and reciting the verses of God influences our own soul as well as others'. Bahá'u'lláh counsels us:

Intone, O My servant, the verses of God that have been received by thee, as intoned by them who have drawn nigh unto Him, that the sweetness of thy melody may kindle thine own soul, and attract the hearts of all men. Whoso reciteth, in the privacy of his chamber, the verses revealed by God, the scattering angels of the Almighty shall scatter abroad

the fragrance of the words uttered by his mouth, and shall cause the heart of every righteous man to throb. Though he may, at first, remain unaware of its effect, yet the virtue of the grace vouchsafed unto him must needs sooner or later exercise its influence upon his soul. Thus have the mysteries of the Revelation of God been decreed by virtue of the Will of Him Who is the Source of power and wisdom.³³

Over time as we read more and more, we acquire a firmer grasp of the Teachings of the Cause. This enables us to convey them more accurately to others and to draw closer to Bahá'u'lláh. "Immerse yourselves," Bahá'u'lláh says, "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."³⁴

The condition of reading with "reverence, attention and thought" indicates the manner in which we should approach this spiritual practice, in much the same way that the House of Justice tells us we should say our daily obligatory prayer with "pure-hearted devotion." The conditions provide a particular kind of focus to the act. We may habitually read very fast. Or we may skim material rather than giving it our full attention. Or we may not allow time to ponder what we read. The House of Justice makes it very clear that in approaching our reading of the Writings, however, we are to read reverently (implying a certain attitude as we approach and engage in the act of reading); we are to read with full concentration; and we are to consider what we read. Fulfilling these requirements means that we may have to devote some energy to establishing the proper environment and schedule. If we do so, however, the reading will inspire and uplift us.

Meditation

Among these requisites for spiritual growth, the Universal House of Justice refers to “prayerful meditation on the teachings.” There is no prescribed form of meditation in the Bahá’í Faith. In a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi indicated, “it would be wiser for the Bahá’ís to use the Meditations given by Bahá’u’lláh, and not any set form of meditation recommended by someone else; but the believers must be left free in these details and allowed to have personal latitude in finding their own level of communion with God.”³⁵

‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that meditation promotes understanding. He says, “Bahá’u’lláh says there is a sign in every phenomenon: the sign of the intellect is contemplation and the sign of contemplation is silence, because it is impossible for a man to do two things at one time – he cannot both speak and meditate.”³⁶ He also asserts that “This faculty of meditation frees man from the animal nature, discerns the reality of things, puts man in touch with God” and further, that “This faculty brings forth from the invisible plane the sciences and arts. Through the meditative faculty inventions are made possible, colossal undertakings are carried out; through it governments can run smoothly. Through this faculty man enters into the very Kingdom of God.”³⁷

The House of Justice makes it clear that meditation is not an end in itself. It should be undertaken with the object not only to understand the Writings more clearly, but also to “fulfill them more faithfully” and to “convey them more accurately to others.”³⁸

Bringing Our Behaviour More into Accordance with the Teachings

Making an explicit connection between our level of conduct and the Covenant, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has written,

Through the protection and help vouchsafed by the Blessed Beauty – may my life be a sacrifice to His loved ones – ye must conduct yourselves in such a manner that ye may stand out distinguished and brilliant as the sun among other souls. Should any one of you enter a city, he should become a center of attraction by reason of his sincerity, his faithfulness and love, his honesty and fidelity, his truthfulness and loving-kindness towards all the peoples of the world, so that the people of that city may cry out and say: ‘This man is unquestionably a Bahá’í, for his manners, his behavior, his conduct, his morals, his nature, and disposition reflect the attributes of the Bahá’ís.’ Not until ye attain this station can ye be said to have been faithful to the Covenant and Testament of God.³⁹

Striving to improve our character and acquire the attributes mentioned above by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá not only connects us individually to the Covenant but also may have a potent effect on others. As Shoghi Effendi’s secretary wrote on his behalf, “The world is seeking not a compromise but the embodiment of a high and shining ideal. The more the friends live up to our teachings in every aspect of their lives, in their homes, in business, in their social relationships, the greater will be the attraction they exercise over the hearts of others.”⁴⁰ And in another letter written on behalf of the Guardian a similar message was conveyed: “He hopes that you will develop into

Bahá'ís in character as well as in belief. The whole purpose of Bahá'u'lláh is that we should become a new kind of people, people who are upright, kind, intelligent, truthful, and honest and who live according to His great laws laid down for this new epoch in man's development. To call ourselves Bahá'ís is not enough; our inmost being must become ennobled and enlightened through living a Bahá'í life."⁴¹ In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, the Guardian has outlined the standards that Bahá'ís should strive to attain in order to become this new kind of people. He describes in detail the following requirements: "a high sense of moral rectitude in their social and administrative activities, absolute chastity in their individual lives, and complete freedom from prejudice in their dealings with peoples of a different race, class, creed, or color."⁴²

Daily vigilance in one's own behaviour plays an important part in this process and is emphasized by Bahá'u'lláh in the following passage from *The Hidden Words*: "Bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds."⁴³

Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh associates the observance of His laws and ordinances with the primary reason for creating the world – "for man to know God":

The supreme cause for creating the world and all that is therein is for man to know God. In this Day whosoever is guided by the fragrance of the raiment of His mercy to gain admittance into the pristine Abode, which is the station of recognizing the Source of divine commandments and the Dayspring of His Revelation, hath everlastingly attained unto

all good. Having reached this lofty station a two-fold obligation resteth upon every soul. One is to be steadfast in the Cause with such steadfastness that were all the peoples of the world to attempt to prevent him from turning to the Source of Revelation, they would be powerless to do so. The other is observance of the divine ordinances which have streamed forth from the wellspring of His heavenly-propelled Pen. For man's knowledge of God cannot develop fully and adequately save by observing whatsoever hath been ordained by Him and is set forth in His heavenly Book.⁴⁴

The laws are an expression of God's love and care for us. The Universal House of Justice states:

- * Just as there are laws governing our physical lives, requiring that we must supply our bodies with certain foods, maintain them within a certain range of temperatures, and so forth, if we wish to avoid physical disabilities, so also there are laws governing our spiritual lives. These laws are revealed to mankind in each age by the Manifestation of God, and obedience to them is of vital importance if each human being, and mankind in general, is to develop properly and harmoniously. Moreover, these various aspects are interdependent. If an individual violates the spiritual laws for his own development he will cause injury not only to himself but to the society in which he lives. Similarly, the condition of society has a direct effect on the individuals who must live in it.⁴⁵

The marriage law, for example, is one of the laws through which Bahá'u'lláh safeguards our individual well-being – laws

which we ignore at our individual and collective peril. Bahá'u'lláh has decreed that we are free to choose our life partner; arranged marriages are forbidden. We must choose someone who is “pleasing” to us, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says. And before deciding to marry, we should investigate the person’s character as carefully as possible, maintaining chastity throughout the relationship. In this way, our judgement about the person does not become clouded by factors that blind us to his or her true nature. Having made their choice, Bahá’í law then requires that the couple obtain consent from all living natural parents – a provision that aims at establishing harmony within and between the two families:

It hath been laid down in the Bayán that marriage is dependent upon the consent of both parties. Desiring to establish love, unity and harmony amidst Our servants, We have conditioned it, once the couple’s wish is known, upon the permission of their parents, lest enmity and rancour should arise amongst them. And in this We have yet other purposes. Thus hath Our commandment been ordained.⁴⁶

These stipulations, we should always remember, are not set as hardships but as a protection, so that we can exercise our will to act in healthy ways that will promote our happiness not only in this world but throughout eternity. As the marriage vow states, “We will all, verily, abide by the will of God.” This is the keystone of a successful marriage: to discover the will of God and to abide by it.

Another important law conducive to our individual well-being is the annual Bahá’í Fast. In His Most Holy Book, Bahá'u'lláh states, “We have commanded you to pray and fast from the beginning of maturity; this is ordained by God,

your Lord and the Lord of your forefathers.”⁴⁷ The Bahá’í Fast consists of abstaining from food and drink between sunrise and sunset for nineteen days (2 March – 20 March) each year. Bahá'u'lláh has provided certain exemptions from the law of fasting, as, for example, in the case of illness, pregnancy, and, under specific circumstances, travel.⁴⁸

‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote about the Fast in these terms to a group of early believers:

Fortunate are ye to have obeyed the commandment of God, and kept this fast during the holy season. For this material fast is an outer token of the spiritual fast; it is a symbol of self-restraint, the withholding of oneself from all appetites of the self, taking on the characteristics of the spirit, being carried away by the breathings of heaven and catching fire from the love of God.⁴⁹

Bahá'u'lláh referred to the Fast as a brief reminder. It lasts only nineteen of the 365 days of the year. It is shorter in duration than the Moslem fast, which lasts 28 days, and it is less severe than the Jewish fasting day of Yom Kippur, when believers fast for 24 hours without food or drink. Furthermore, it occurs at a time of the year when the days and nights are roughly the same length throughout most of the world; and in locations where they are not, fasting for about 12 hours according to the clock is ordained. Clearly the point of the Fast is not to create undue physical hardship; rather, it is an opportunity for us to deepen our spiritual ties to our Faith. The practice of denying ourselves food and drink can make us reflect on the relationship between the realm of the spirit and the physical body. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, “prayer and fasting is the cause of awakening and mindfulness and conducive to pro-

tection and preservation from tests.”⁵⁰ In consciously and deliberately refraining from taking sustenance for some twelve hours each day, we must reflect on what has inspired us to follow this law, obedience to which – not merely in form but in spirit – places us within the protection of the Covenant.

Every hour of the days of the Fast, Bahá’u’lláh says, is “endowed with a special virtue, inscrutable to all except [God].”⁵¹ And while we may never be able to fathom the mystery of the Fast, just as we may never be able to fathom the mysteries of the obligatory prayer, attempting to do so enriches our lives more each year. These are the days when Bahá’u’lláh seems to have arranged for earth to draw a little closer to heaven. It is our individual response to His Covenant, in obeying the law of fasting, that can determine how fully we take advantage of so precious a gift.

As daily obligatory prayer is an act of individual volition that attaches us to the Covenant every day, so the annual Fast is another obligatory yet entirely voluntary act – in a different cycle or rhythm of our lives. Obligatory prayer and fasting “constitute the two pillars that sustain the revealed Law of God.”⁵² They play a vital role in our spiritual development. They are, in fact, two of the most basic elements of our Covenant with Bahá’u’lláh and vehicles for expressing our love for Him.

Other laws and standards currently applied throughout the world include the Right of God (see page 34 for further information), abstention from alcohol and other habit-forming drugs, strict avoidance of partisan political activity, and laws on divorce and burial.

Apart from laws binding on all believers, the Bahá’í Writings are replete with guidance on individual and community standards of conduct. Rather than a rigid code of conduct uniformly applied in all situations, these standards are applied according to the situation at hand. Often the matter is left entirely to the individual to determine the correct course of action, as pointed out in a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice:

In most areas of human behaviour there are acts which are clearly contrary to the Law of God and others which are clearly approved or permissible; between these there is often a grey area where it is not immediately apparent what should be done. It has been a human tendency to wish to eliminate these grey areas so that every aspect of life is clearly prescribed. A result of this tendency has been the tremendous accretion of interpretation and subsidiary legislation which has smothered the spirit of certain of the older religions. In the Bahá’í Faith moderation, which is so strongly upheld by Bahá’u’lláh, is applied here also. Provision is made for supplementary legislation by the Universal House of Justice – legislation which it can itself abrogate and amend as conditions change. There is also a clear pattern already established in the Sacred Scriptures, in the interpretations made by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, and in the decisions so far made by the Universal House of Justice, whereby an area of the application of the laws is intentionally left to the conscience of each individual believer. This is the age in which mankind must attain maturity, and one aspect of this is the assumption by individuals of the responsibil-

ity for deciding, with the assistance of consultation, their own course of action in areas which are left open by the Law of God.⁵³

In striving to bring our own behaviour into conformity with the high standards Bahá'u'lláh prescribes, two factors that can greatly assist us are a heartfelt fear of God and an appreciation of the basic truth that "He shall not be asked of His doings." He states:

In formulating the principles and laws a part hath been devoted to penalties which form an effective instrument for the security and protection of men. However, dread of the penalties maketh people desist only outwardly from committing vile and contemptible deeds, while that which guardeth and restraineth man both outwardly and inwardly hath been and still is the fear of God. It is man's true protector and his spiritual guardian. It behoveth him to cleave tenaciously unto that which will lead to the appearance of this supreme bounty.⁵⁴

In another passage He writes:

The spirit that animateth the human heart is the knowledge of God, and its truest adorning is the recognition of the truth that 'He doeth whatsoever He willeth, and ordaineth that which He pleaseth.' Its raiment is the fear of God, and its perfection steadfastness in His Faith. Thus God instructeth whosoever seeketh Him. He, verily, loveth the one that turneth towards Him.⁵⁵

And again:

Blessed is the man that hath acknowledged his belief in God and in His signs, and recognized that

'He shall not be asked of His doings.' Such a recognition hath been made by God the ornament of every belief and its very foundation. Upon it must depend the acceptance of every goodly deed. Fasten your eyes upon it, that haply the whisperings of the rebellious may not cause you to slip.

Were He to decree as lawful the thing which from time immemorial had been forbidden, and forbid that which had, at all times, been regarded as lawful, to none is given the right to question His authority. Whoso will hesitate, though it be for less than a moment, should be regarded as a transgressor.

Whoso hath not recognized this sublime and fundamental verity, and hath failed to attain this most exalted station, the winds of doubt will agitate him, and the sayings of the infidels will distract his soul. He that hath acknowledged this principle will be endowed with the most perfect constancy. All honour to this all-glorious station, the remembrance of which adorneth every exalted Tablet. Such is the teaching which God bestoweth on you, a teaching that will deliver you from all manner of doubt and perplexity, and enable you to attain unto salvation in both this world and in the next. He, verily, is the Ever-Forgiving, the Most Bountiful. He it is Who hath sent forth the Messengers, and sent down the Books to proclaim 'There is none other God but Me, the Almighty, the All-Wise.'⁵⁶

Teaching

A statement of Bahá'u'lláh's clearly shows the responsibility of the individual in propagating the Faith and the connection between the individual's character and his or her effective-

ness in sharing the teachings of the Faith. He says: "God hath prescribed unto every one the duty of teaching His Cause. Whoever ariseth to discharge this duty, must needs, ere he proclaimeth His Message, adorn himself with the ornament of an upright and praiseworthy character, so that his words may attract the hearts of such as are receptive to his call. Without it, he can never hope to influence his hearers."⁵⁷

In many passages Bahá'u'lláh elucidates further the condition of the teacher and the means of teaching His Faith. The following is one example:

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. Such a deed is acceptable only when he that teacheth the Cause is already a firm believer in God, the Supreme Protector, the Gracious, the Almighty. He hath, moreover, ordained that His Cause be taught through the power of men's utterance, and not through resort to violence. Thus hath His ordinance been sent down from the Kingdom of Him Who is the Most Exalted, the All-Wise. Beware lest ye contend with any one, nay, strive to make him aware of the truth with kindly manner and most convincing exhortation. If your hearer respond, he will have responded to his own behoof, and if not, turn ye away from him, and set your faces towards God's sacred Court, the seat of resplendent holiness.

Dispute not with any one concerning the things of this world and its affairs, for God hath abandoned them to such as have set their affection upon them.

Out of the whole world He hath chosen for Himself the hearts of men – hearts which the hosts of revelation and of utterance can subdue.⁵⁸

The greater purpose for which we teach the Faith is reflected in the following passage, where Bahá'u'lláh says, "Regard ye the world as a man's body, which is afflicted with divers ailments, and the recovery of which dependeth upon the harmonizing of all of its component elements."⁵⁹ We do not teach the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh for our personal benefit; we teach it because humanity is in need of the healing properties it embodies, which God in His infinite love for us has bestowed upon all mankind. This is yet another expression of our devotion to Bahá'u'lláh, through which our relationship to His Covenant can develop.

Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes repeatedly in His Writings that teaching His Cause is the duty of every Bahá'í. No one is exempt. If an individual for some reason is unable to perform this duty, Bahá'u'lláh has made provisions, as in the following passage: "Center your energies in the propagation of the Faith of God. Whoso is worthy of so high a calling, let him arise and promote it. Whoso is unable, it is his duty to appoint him who will, in his stead, proclaim this Revelation...."⁶⁰ The Universal House of Justice has encouraged National Spiritual Assemblies to provide a means of linking those wishing to deputize with those qualified and ready to be deputized. The friends are also free to use the International Deputization Fund for this purpose.⁶¹

Selfless Service in the Work of the Cause and in One's Trade or Profession

In striving to serve, we can again look to the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who chose for Himself the title "Servant of Bahá". During one of His talks in America, He made the following statements about service:

There is no greater result than bonds of service in the Divine kingdom and attainment to the good-pleasure of the Lord. Therefore I desire that your hearts may be directed to the kingdom of God, that your intentions may be pure and sincere, your purposes turned toward altruistic accomplishment unmindful of your own welfare; nay, rather, may all your intentions center in the welfare of humanity, and may you seek to sacrifice yourselves in the pathway of devotion to mankind. Even as His Holiness Jesus Christ forfeited his life, may you likewise offer yourselves in the threshold of sacrifice for the betterment of the world; and just as His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh suffered severe ordeals and calamities nearly fifty years for you, may you be willing to undergo difficulties and withstand catastrophes for humanity in general.⁶²

A pitfall to be avoided is serving the Cause for selfish or ambitious motives, rather than for the sake of God and the realization of His purpose. The standard is "selfless service". The history of the Cause provides some sad examples of strong souls who fell victim to their own selfish desires, including a lust for leadership, and who then willfully turned away from the path the Covenant prescribed.

The Universal House of Justice has stated that success in Bahá'í service requires a systematic approach.

Each individual, too, must make a conscious decision as to what he or she will do to serve the Plan, and as to how, where and when to do it. This determination enables the individual to check the progress of his actions and, if necessary, to modify the steps being taken. Becoming accustomed to such a procedure of systematic striving lends meaning and fulfilment to the life of any Bahá'í.⁶³

Bahá'u'lláh has made it obligatory for men and women to engage in a trade or profession and teaches that work performed in the spirit of service is the same as worship of God.⁶⁴

Commenting on the obligation to engage in a trade or profession, Shoghi Effendi stated:

With reference to Bahá'u'lláh's command concerning the engagement of the believers in some sort of profession: the Teachings are most emphatic on this matter, particularly the statement in the Aqdas to this effect which makes it quite clear that idle people who lack the desire to work can have no place in the new World Order. As a corollary of this principle, Bahá'u'lláh further states that mendicancy should not only be discouraged but entirely wiped out from the face of society. It is the duty of those who are in charge of the organization of society to give every individual the opportunity of acquiring the necessary talent in some kind of profession, and also the means of utilizing such a talent, both for its own sake and for the sake of earning the means of his livelihood. Every individual, no matter how handicapped and

limited he may be, is under the obligation of engaging in some work or profession, for work, especially when performed in the spirit of service, is according to Bahá'u'lláh a form of worship. It has not only a utilitarian purpose, but has a value in itself, because it draws us nearer to God, and enables us to better grasp His purpose for us in this world. It is obvious, therefore, that the inheritance of wealth cannot make anyone immune from daily work.⁶⁵

Even the needs of the Cause itself do not supersede the requirement to earn a livelihood through work, as pointed out in another letter to an individual believer:

In connection with your dear husband, Shoghi Effendi would consider it in full and happy accord with the expressed desire of the Master that every man should have some permanent work. Much as he desires to see you both devote your entire energies to a well-thought out, progressive and attractive presentation of the Cause - a thing he feels we lack lamentably - he would be very pleased to see your husband follow what the Master often repeated even to His own immediate family, namely the necessity of a profession. Of course you know that He always said His had been mat-making.⁶⁶

The Material Made Sacred: Some Expressions of Our Love for the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh

This booklet opened by referring to the honour and distinction of the individual who becomes a source of social good, to Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant as the means for achieving this honour, and to love as the attracting force at the heart of the Covenant's requirements. It then discussed the requisites for spiritual growth which when applied by us as individuals, transform not only ourselves but also the society in which we live. Now we will look at some very practical ways in which we can express our love for the Creator and the Covenant He has given to us, and begin to see the power of the Covenant to transform the relationship between individuals and social institutions.

Let us first look at two institutions that are concerned with material resources.

The Right of God (Huqúqu'lláh)

Render thou thanks unto God, for He hath graciously enabled thee to observe the injunction set forth in His Most Holy Book, inasmuch as thou hast arisen to fulfil the obligation of Huqúq, and God hath accepted thy goodly deed.

Know thou, moreover, that those who faithfully serve the All-Merciful will be enriched by Him out of His heavenly treasury, and that the Huqúq offering is but a test applied by Him unto His servants and maidservants. Thus every true and sincere believer will offer Huqúq to be expended for the relief of the poor, the disabled, the needy, and the orphans, and for other vital needs of the Cause of God, even as Christ did establish a Fund for benevolent purposes.⁶⁷

The law of the Right of God (Huqúqu'lláh) is another expression of God's love for humankind – and our love for and obedience to Him. Through this great law, whereby we return to God that portion of our wealth which is His due, we support the development of society throughout the world and provide tangible means for the achievement of the good of the world and the happiness of its peoples. This payment, which is subject to certain conditions, is made to the head of the Faith through the members of the Institution of Huqúqu'lláh in every part of the world. With the material means provided through Huqúqu'lláh, great social institutions will be founded that will benefit all.

This act of obedience benefits the individual, as well. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated that the Right of God "is intended for the benefit and prosperity of the individuals themselves and is conducive to their happiness and constancy."⁶⁸ In His Will and Testament, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote that the offering of Huqúqu'lláh should be regarded as a bounty from God for the reason that, when given in the proper spirit, it "causeth the people to become firm and steadfast and draweth Divine increase upon them."⁶⁹ He states elsewhere that although God is independent of all things, He has allowed us to share in the divine attribute of generosity. "Consider how well-pleasing must this mighty act be in His estimation that He hath ascribed it unto His Own Self. Rejoice ye then, O people of generosity!"⁷⁰

The Funds of the Faith

One of the most tangible ways we can express our love for and obedience to the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh is by giving regularly and sacrificially to the Funds of His Faith. There are Funds at the local, national, continental and international levels.

The Universal House of Justice has stated:

There is, we believe, a worldwide need for appreciation of this basic principle of our Faith: that contributing to the Fund should constitute an integral part of the spiritual life of every Bahá'í and be regarded as the fulfilment of a fundamental spiritual obligation. In too many countries we have encountered a reluctance among the teachers of the Cause to include, in their presentation of the Teachings, support of the Fund as a natural part of Bahá'í life. In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh more than

once refers to the necessity for combining spiritual and material means in achieving the purposes of the Faith. Shoghi Effendi, for his part, referred to the Fund as the life-blood of the Cause.⁷¹

It is through the private and voluntary contributions to the various Funds that the work of Bahá'í institutions can proceed. Without each individual's support, the work cannot be prosecuted in an orderly way, and planning for projects at all levels is seriously impeded. If the "life-blood" ceases to flow, obviously the health of the community will suffer. Concerning the role of the individual in giving to the Funds, the Guardian has written: "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."⁷² Providing for the Faith's material needs at all levels enables the individual to participate directly in the Bahá'í community's global undertakings and helps to develop world-mindedness.

The Guardian discussed the idea of sacrifice in these terms:

As to the idea of 'giving what one can afford'; this does by no means put a limit or even exclude the possibility of self-sacrifice. There can be no limit to one's contributions to the national fund. The more one can give the better it is, especially when such offerings necessitate the sacrifice of other wants and desires on the part of the donor. The harder the sacrifice the more meritorious will it be, of course, in the sight of God. For after all it is not so much the quantity of one's offerings that matters, but rather the measure of deprivation that such offerings entail. It is the spirit, and not the mere fact of contributing that we should always

take into account when we stress the necessity for a universal and wholehearted support of the various funds of the Cause.⁷³

Another letter, written on behalf of the Guardian, states,

Each and every believer, undaunted by the uncertainties, the perils and the financial stringency afflicting the nation, must arise and insure, to the full measure of his or her capacity, that continuous and abundant flow of funds into the national Treasury, on which the successful prosecution of the Plan must chiefly depend....

He wishes you particularly to impress the believers with ... the importance of the institution of the National Bahá'í Fund which, in these early days of the administrative development of the Faith, is the indispensable medium for the growth and expansion of the Movement. Contributions to this fund constitute, in addition, a practical and effective way whereby every believer can test the measure and character of his faith, and prove in deeds the intensity of his devotion and attachment to the Cause....

We must be like the fountain or spring that is continually emptying itself of all that it has and is continually being refilled from an invisible source. To be continually giving out for the good of our fellows undeterred by the fear of poverty and reliant on the unfailing bounty of the Source of all wealth and all good – this is the secret of right living.⁷⁴

Participation in giving to the Funds opens yet another channel for the individual to express his or her love for God and experience the mysterious phenomenon of sacrifice – a bringer of deep spiritual joy and growth.

In accordance with this age of the maturity of the human race, Bahá'u'lláh has decreed that each of us has the right and the responsibility to decide for ourselves what “sacrificial giving” means in our own particular circumstances. This is yet another example of God’s mercy to us in this day.

Our Relationship with the Institutions of the Faith

When we recognize Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God for this day – the Divine Physician sent to heal the ills of this crisis-ridden world – we accept not only the spiritual teachings that relate to our individual spiritual lives but also those teachings that relate to community life.

Shoghi Effendi has emphasized the distinctive character of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, stating that it “is fundamentally different from anything that any Prophet has previously established, inasmuch as Bahá'u'lláh has Himself revealed its principles, established its institutions, appointed the person to interpret His Word and conferred the necessary authority on the body designed to supplement and apply His legislative ordinances.”⁷⁵

Through this Administrative Order, we are attempting to build an entirely new kind of community, something that has never existed before in the history of civilization.

We understand this new creation only imperfectly. Sometimes we become impatient with it, but it is important for us to regard the development of the Faith and its community as a process. We do not yet live in the ideal civilization depicted in the Bahá'í Writings; its establishment lies far in the future. But the evolution of such a community largely depends on the actions of each of us, as we grow in our understanding and love of the principles involved in building it. In its 1985 statement to the peoples of the world, the Universal House of Justice offered the Bahá'í community as a model: "Its existence," the House of Justice states, "is yet another convincing proof of the practicality of its Founder's vision of a united world, another evidence that humanity can live as one global society, equal to whatever challenges its coming of age may entail. If the Bahá'í experience can contribute in whatever measure to reinforcing hope in the unity of the human race, we are happy to offer it as a model for study."⁷⁶

The Bahá'ís offer this model not because we are perfect, but because we are striving to create a community based on Bahá'í ideals. To function within this evolving society and to apply more aptly the principles that sustain it is part of the Covenant we embrace when we recognize Bahá'u'lláh. We are all responsible for the health and growth of our community; we all play a part in the formulation and prosecution of its plans.

Fundamental to our growth in understanding of community life is our relationship with the institutions of the Faith. So important is this principle that Shoghi Effendi devoted an

entire section of his great letter *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* to clarifying the nature of the Administrative Order of the Bahá'í Faith. Throughout the entire thirty-six years of his ministry he wrote countless letters to institutions and individuals on this subject. It is vitally important that we clearly understand this central part of the Faith and our relationship to it.

The Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh was established by Him to meet the needs of this day. To be a Bahá'í means to recognize, obey, and support those institutions. At the head of the Bahá'í Administrative Order are the twin institutions of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice. The Universal House of Justice describes their origin, relationship and responsibilities in this way:

In His Will and Testament 'Abdu'l-Bahá conferred the mantle of Guardian of the Cause and infallible Interpreter of its teachings upon His eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi, and confirmed the authority and guarantee of divine guidance decreed by Bahá'u'lláh for the Universal House of Justice on all matters 'which have not outwardly been revealed in the Book'. The Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice can thus be seen to be, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, the 'Twin Successors' of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. They are the supreme institutions of the Administrative Order which was founded and anticipated in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and elaborated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will.

During the thirty-six years of his ministry, Shoghi Effendi raised up the structure of elected Spiritual Assemblies - the Houses of Justice referred to in

the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, now in their embryonic stage - and with their collaboration initiated the systematic implementation of the Divine Plan that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had laid out for the diffusion of the Faith throughout the world. He also set in motion, on the basis of the strong administrative structure that had been established, the processes which were an essential preparation for the election of the Universal House of Justice. This body, which came into existence in April 1963, is elected through secret ballot and plurality vote in a three-stage election by adult Bahá'ís throughout the world. The revealed Word of Bahá'u'lláh, together with the interpretations and expositions of the Centre of the Covenant and the Guardian of the Cause, constitute the binding terms of reference of the Universal House of Justice and are its bedrock foundation.⁷⁷

The Bahá'í Administrative Order is evolving at different rates and in different ways from country to country. Virtually everywhere there are National Spiritual Assemblies, Local Spiritual Assemblies, Continental Counsellors, and Auxiliary Board members and their assistants. In some countries, there are also institutions of a special kind at the regional level called regional Bahá'í Councils. The Universal House of Justice guides all of them, and provides impetus to the work of the Bahá'í community worldwide. 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated that God has ordained the Universal House of Justice as "the source of all good and freed from all error."⁷⁸ Bahá'u'lláh empowered this supreme institution to legislate on matters not explicitly revealed in His own Word and to progressively apply His laws and ordinances. Yet every Bahá'í can be affected in very personal ways by the Universal House of

Justice's messages. The direction the House of Justice sets each year in its Ridván letter can be life-changing as individuals respond to the priorities for service at a given time. The same can be true of our response to guidance from our National and Local Spiritual Assemblies.

National Spiritual Assemblies have the supremely important duty of electing the Universal House of Justice. They also are to "direct, unify, coordinate and stimulate the activities of individuals as well as local Assemblies within their jurisdiction."⁷⁹ While our relationship with the National Spiritual Assembly may be less direct and intimate than our relationship with our Local Assembly, the Covenant places on us a responsibility to consider national interests ahead of purely local ones. The beloved Guardian expressed his hope of seeing the friends support their local and particularly their national institutions as "the one joy and yearning" of his life:

And now as I look into the future, I hope to see the friends at all times, in every land, and of every shade of thought and character, voluntarily and joyously rallying round their local and in particular their national centers of activity, upholding and promoting their interests with complete unanimity and contentment, with perfect understanding, genuine enthusiasm, and sustained vigor. This indeed is the one joy and yearning of my life, for it is the fountainhead from which all future blessings will flow, the broad foundation upon which the security of the Divine Edifice must ultimately rest.⁸⁰

Speaking of the relationship between the individual and the Local Spiritual Assembly, the Universal House of Justice states:

The friends are called upon to give their whole-hearted support and co-operation to the Local Spiritual Assembly, first by voting for the membership and then by energetically pursuing its plans and programmes, by turning to it in time of trouble or difficulty, by praying for its success and taking delight in its rise to influence and honour. This great prize, this gift of God within each community must be cherished, nurtured, loved, assisted, obeyed and prayed for.⁸¹

This is part of that sacred Covenant we make with Bahá'u'lláh when we become members of His Community.

The Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice are twin institutions of the Administrative Order. A parallel structure exists at the national and local levels. While Spiritual Assemblies plan and direct the work, the Board of Counsellors on each continent and the Auxiliary Boards at regional and local levels offer advice at all stages and foster support among community members: "It is the Spiritual Assemblies who plan and direct the work, but these plans should be well known to the Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members, because one of the ways in which they can assist the Assemblies is by urging the believers continually to support the plans of the Assemblies."⁸² The Universal House of Justice gives us a compelling vision of the important role the Auxiliary Boards play in the Bahá'í community:

One of the most potent aids to the consolidation of local communities and Assemblies and the deepening of the Faith of the believers, is the services of the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants. Here is an institution of the Faith, reaching into every locality, composed of firm believers who

know the area they have to serve and are familiar with its problems and potentialities – an institution expressly designed to encourage and reinforce the work of the Spiritual Assemblies, to enthuse the believers, to stimulate them to study the Teachings and apply them in their lives – a body of Bahá'ís whose efforts and services will complement and support the work being done by your committees and the Local Assemblies themselves in every sphere of Bahá'í endeavour.⁸³

Within their overall duties of protecting and propagating the Faith, Auxiliary Board members and their assistants "help in promoting the interests of the Plan, assist in the efficient and prompt execution of the goals, watch over the security of the Faith, stimulate and strengthen the teaching and pioneer work, impress upon the friends the importance of individual effort, initiative and sacrifice, and encourage them to participate in Bahá'í activities and be unified under all circumstances."⁸⁴

Having an accurate understanding of the roles of the institutions helps us co-operate intelligently with them in the manner the Covenant requires.

Bahá'í Elections

We express our recognition and support of the institutions ordained by Bahá'u'lláh when we exercise our privilege to vote in Bahá'í elections. These elections are so unlike elections in the secular world that we may not fully appreciate their unique character. First of all, Bahá'í elections are sacred in nature. The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice, for example, states:

In order to preserve the spiritual character and purpose of Bahá'í elections the practices of nomination or electioneering, or any other procedure or activity detrimental to that character and purpose shall be eschewed. A silent and prayerful atmosphere shall prevail during the election so that each elector may vote for none but those whom prayer and reflection inspire him to uphold.⁸⁵

The part of the individual in this process is vital. Shoghi Effendi has written of Local Spiritual Assembly elections, that "every declared believer of twenty-one years and above, far from standing aloof and assuming an indifferent or independent attitude, should regard it his sacred duty to take part conscientiously and diligently, in the election, the consolidation, and the efficient working of his own local Assembly."⁸⁶

Another distinctive characteristic in Bahá'í elections is the emphasis on the particular qualities that we should look for in those we elect to serve. Shoghi Effendi counsels us: "it is incumbent... to consider without the least trace of passion and prejudice, and irrespective of any material consideration, the names of only those who can best combine the necessary qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience."⁸⁷

A third distinctive characteristic is that, in the face of our feelings of inadequacy given the "high qualifications" ascribed to members of Bahá'í Assemblies, we have assurance of divine assistance – if we act in accordance with spiritual principles: "If we but turn our gaze to the high qualifications of the members of Bahá'í Assemblies ... we are filled with feelings of unworthiness and dismay, and would feel truly disheartened but for the comforting thought that if we rise to

play nobly our part every deficiency in our lives will be more than compensated by the all-conquering spirit of His grace and power."⁸⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself tells us: "These Spiritual Assemblies are aided by the Spirit of God. Their defender is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Over them He spreadeth His wings. ... From them the spirit of life streameth in every direction. They, indeed, are the potent sources of the progress of man, at all times and under all conditions."⁸⁹

A fourth distinctive characteristic in the Bahá'í electoral process is the importance of unity. In a spirit of unity, we must take part in the election. We must abide by the results of that election and support the body we have elected. As Bahá'ís, we accept that this is a unique entity that is more than the sum of its parts or a mere collection of individuals. It is a Spiritual Assembly, a divine institution ordained by Bahá'u'lláh. If we, as community and/or Assembly members, behave in a way that shows we have confidence in the Assembly, then the unity of the community is protected, which is an important element in our Covenant with Bahá'u'lláh. Shoghi Effendi has stated the importance of this point in the following passage:

In order to avoid division and disruption, that the Cause may not fall a prey to conflicting interpretations, and lose thereby its purity and pristine vigour, that its affairs may be conducted with efficiency and promptness, it is necessary that every one should conscientiously take an active part in the election of these Assemblies, abide by their decision, enforce their decree, and co-operate with them wholeheartedly in their task of stimulating the growth of the Movement throughout all regions.⁹⁰

The Complementary Relationship between Bahá'í Institutions and Individual Believers

Just as we have a sacred responsibility to participate in the election of Bahá'í institutions and to obey them, Bahá'u'lláh has entrusted those institutions with the sacred responsibility to promote the well-being of all. For example, among the powers and duties of the Universal House of Justice – the supreme governing institution in the Bahá'í world – are the following: “to foster that which is conducive to the enlightenment and illumination of the souls of men and the advancement and betterment of the world”; “to safeguard the personal rights, freedom and initiatives of individuals”; and “to give attention to the preservation of human honour.”⁹¹ And at the local level, Shoghi Effendi has written, “The members of these Assemblies, on their part, must disregard utterly their own likes and dislikes, their personal interests and inclinations, and concentrate their minds upon those measures that will conduce to the welfare and happiness of the Bahá'í Community and promote the common weal.”⁹²

Individuals and institutions in the Bahá'í community are to have a co-operative and complementary relationship, as the following guidance makes clear:

There is no task more urgently necessary than the assurance of perfect harmony and fellowship among the friends, especially between the Local Assemblies and individual believers. The Local Assemblies should inspire confidence in the individual believers, and these in their turn should express their readiness to fully abide by the decisions and directions of the Local Assembly. The two must learn to co-operate, and to realize that only through such a

co-operation can the institutions of the Cause effectively and permanently function. While obedience to the Local Assembly should be unqualified and whole-hearted, yet that body should enforce its decisions in such a way as to avoid giving the impression that it is animated by dictatorial motives. The spirit of the Cause is one of mutual co-operation, and not that of a dictatorship.⁹³

The believers should learn to turn more often to their Assemblies for advice and help and at an earlier date, and the Assemblies, on the other hand, should act with more vigilance and a greater sense of Community responsibility towards every situation that may damage the prestige of the Faith in the eyes of the public. When decisions have been reached by the Assembly, they must be carried out loyally and willingly by all concerned.⁹⁴

In society today there is much emphasis on the “rights” of citizens, and we see from the Constitution of the Universal House of Justice that one of the duties of that institution is to safeguard individual rights. Individuals, however, must also assume responsibility for the advancement of their communities. As the Universal House of Justice has stated, it is a fundamental “responsibility resting on the individual to conduct himself in such a way as to ensure the stability of society.”⁹⁵

Furthermore, we must have trust in the integrity of the institutions and in the decisions they make. The Guardian states:

The Assembly may make a mistake, but, as the Master pointed out, if the Community does not abide by its decisions, or the individual Bahá'í, the result is worse, as it undermines the very institution which must be strengthened in order to up-

hold the principles and laws of the Faith. He tells us God will right the wrongs done. We must have confidence in this and obey our Assemblies. He therefore strongly urges you to work directly under your Bahá'í Assembly, to accept your responsibilities as a voting member, and do your utmost to create harmony within the community.⁹⁶

This does not mean that we cannot appeal decisions made by a Local Spiritual Assembly, but it does mean that we must support the decision the Assembly makes. Such support serves to preserve unity and uphold the authority vested in the institutions of the Faith: "One of the fundamentals involved in our Administrative Order, which we must remember will become the pattern for our World Order, is that even if an Assembly makes an ill-advised decision it must be upheld in order to preserve the unity of the community. Appeal can be made from the Local Assembly's decision to the National Assembly,... But the principle of authority invested in our elected bodies must be upheld. This is not something which can be learned without trial and test."⁹⁷

It can happen that upon reflection and in all good conscience, a Bahá'í is moved to appeal a decision. Bahá'u'lláh has built channels into the Administrative Order for this purpose. The By-laws of the Universal House of Justice outline the appeal process:

1. (a) Any member of a local Bahá'í community may appeal from a decision of his Local Spiritual Assembly to the National Spiritual Assembly which shall determine whether it shall take jurisdiction of the matter or refer it back to the Local Spiritual Assembly for reconsideration. If such an appeal concerns the membership of a person in the Bahá'í community, the National Spiritual As-

sembly is obliged to take jurisdiction of and decide the case.

- (b) Any Bahá'í may appeal from a decision of his National Spiritual Assembly to the Universal House of Justice which shall determine whether it shall take jurisdiction of the matter or leave it within the final jurisdiction of the National Spiritual Assembly. ...

2. An appellant, whether institution or individual, shall in the first instance make appeal to the Assembly whose decision is questioned, either for reconsideration of the case by that Assembly or for submission to a higher body. In the latter case the Assembly is in duty bound to submit the appeal together with full particulars of the matter. If an Assembly refuses to submit the appeal, or fails to do so within a reasonable time, the appellant may take the case directly to the higher authority.⁹⁸

An important point to bear in mind is that in the Bahá'í Faith the elected institutions are not responsible to those who elect them. As Shoghi Effendi states, Spiritual Assemblies are "invested with an authority rendering them unanswerable for their acts and decisions to those who elect them. ..."⁹⁹ This does not mean, however, that the elected institutions are to be aloof from the affairs of the community. The Guardian further states:

They may, indeed they must, acquaint themselves with the conditions prevailing among the community, must weigh dispassionately in their minds the merits of any case presented for their consideration, but must reserve for themselves the right of an unfettered decision. 'God will verily inspire

them with whatsoever He willeth', is Bahá'u'lláh's incontrovertible assurance. They, and not the body of those who either directly or indirectly elect them, have thus been made the recipients of the divine guidance which is at once the life-blood and ultimate safeguard of this Revelation.¹⁰⁰

Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant requires us to trust in the workings of His Administrative Order – and thus to support His institutions, to assist them by engaging in frank and loving consultation with them on the occasions He has provided for that purpose, and in refusing to engage in the kinds of undermining of institutions that is all too prevalent in society today. Bahá'ís, for example, are forbidden to electioneer in order to influence the election of the institutions of the Faith, nor should members of the community seek to stir up dissidence within the Bahá'í community in order to force the Assembly to change its course. In the words of the Universal House of Justice, "In terms of the Covenant, dissidence is a moral and intellectual contradiction of the main objective animating the Bahá'í community, namely, the establishment of the unity of humankind."¹⁰¹

Channels of Communication

What are the channels which Bahá'u'lláh has designated for the co-operative interchange of individuals and Bahá'í institutions? There are a number of options, including the consultative portion of the Nineteen Day Feast, personal consultation with the Assembly or its representatives or with a representative of the Auxiliary Boards or the Continental Counsellors.

The Nineteen Day Feast

The Nineteen Day Feast is an institution of the Faith ordained by the Báb and confirmed by Bahá'u'lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Bahá'u'lláh states its purpose is "to bind hearts together."¹⁰² While it is not obligatory for Bahá'ís to attend the Feast, Shoghi Effendi says it is "very important,

and every believer should consider it a duty and a privilege to be present on such occasions.”¹⁰³

Over and over again, the writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá repeat that the primary purpose of the Feast is to create unity, agreement, fellowship, love for the entire human race so that we as individuals and the community to which we belong can become more spiritual in nature and in practice. The devotional readings which form the first part of the Feast can certainly aid in this process. But so can the consultative and social portions of the gathering. The Universal House of Justice has called the Feast “a glorious convergence” of the “primary elements of community life – acts of worship, of festivity and other forms of togetherness.”¹⁰⁴ In a letter written on 27 August 1989 to the Bahá’í world community, the House of Justice states:

Because of the opportunity which it provides for conveying messages from the national and international levels of the administration and also for communicating the recommendations of the friends to those levels, the Feast becomes a link that connects the local community in a dynamic relationship with the entire structure of the Administrative Order. But considered in its local sphere alone there is much to thrill and amaze the heart. Here it links the individual to the collective processes by which a society is built or restored. Here, for instance, the Feast is an arena of democracy at the very root of society, where the Local Spiritual Assembly and the members of the community meet on common ground, where individuals are free to offer their gifts of thought, whether as new ideas or constructive criticism, to the building processes of an advanc-

ing civilization. Thus it can be seen that aside from its spiritual significance, this common institution of the people combines an array of elemental social disciplines which educate its participants in the essentials of responsible citizenship.¹⁰⁵

Thus, the Feast – while not obligatory – forms another essential part in our growth in the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh. Attendance at the Feast teaches us how to develop new ways of communicating with and dealing with other community members and the Assembly we have all jointly elected to govern our community’s affairs. It teaches us how to consult, how to encourage, and how to express disagreement in a healthy, constructive way. A letter written on behalf of the Guardian provides specific guidelines on this topic:

Now with reference to your last dear letter in which you had asked whether the believers have the right to openly express their criticism of any Assembly action or policy: it is not only the right, but the vital responsibility of every loyal and intelligent member of the Community to offer fully and frankly, but with due respect and consideration for the authority of the Assembly, any suggestion, recommendation or criticism he conscientiously feels he should in order to improve and remedy certain existing conditions or trends in his local Community, and it is the duty of the Assembly also to give careful consideration to any such views submitted to them by any one of the believers. The best occasion chosen for this purpose is the Nineteen Day Feast, which, besides its social and spiritual aspects, fulfils various administrative needs and requirements of the Community, chief among them being the need for open and constructive criticism

and deliberation regarding the state of affairs within the local Bahá'í Community.

But again it should be stressed that all criticisms and discussions of a negative character which may result in undermining the authority of the Assembly as a body should be strictly avoided. For otherwise the order of the Cause itself will be endangered, and confusion and discord will reign in the Community.¹⁰⁶

The Nineteen Day Feast is a new creation. It offers us spiritual, intellectual, and social nourishment if we prepare ourselves to participate in it and approach it in a befitting spirit. It is a potent instrument to help us grow strong in our love for the Faith and in our understanding of its divinely ordained administration.

Consultation with the Spiritual Assembly

The Feast offers an opportunity for a Bahá'í to consult openly with the Assembly and the community. It is also possible to approach the Assembly directly, either in writing or by contacting its secretary or another member to ask to meet with the institution or its representatives on a more private basis. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi advises a believer to "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—indeed they were established just for the purpose of keeping order and unity and obedience to the law of God amongst the believers."¹⁰⁷

While we are encouraged to consult our Local Spiritual Assemblies, at the same time the Universal House of Justice encourages

us not to burden them with problems we can solve ourselves:

When a believer has a problem concerning which he must make a decision, he has several courses open to him. If it is a matter that affects the interests of the Faith he should consult with the appropriate Assembly or committee, but individuals have many problems which are purely personal and there is no obligation upon them to take such problems to the institutions of the Faith; indeed, when the needs of the teaching work are of such urgency it is better if the friends will not burden their Assemblies with personal problems that they can solve by themselves.

A Bahá'í who has a problem may wish to make his own decision upon it after prayer and after weighing all the aspects of it in his own mind; he may prefer to seek the counsel of individual friends or of professional counsellors such as his doctor or lawyer so that he can consider such advice when making his decision; or in a case where several people are involved, such as a family situation, he may want to gather together those who are affected so that they may arrive at a collective decision. There is also no objection whatever to a Bahá'í asking a group of people to consult together on a problem facing him.¹⁰⁸

The Counsellors and Auxiliary Boards

In matters involving protection or personal problems, a believer is free to turn to the Counsellors and the Auxiliary Board members or their assistants:

In general, whenever a believer becomes aware of a matter affecting the protection of the Cause, he

should immediately contact whatever institution he feels moved to turn to, whether it be a Hand of the Cause, an Auxiliary Board member, the National Spiritual Assembly or his own Local Spiritual Assembly. It is then the duty of that institution to ensure that the report is fed into the correct channels and that all the other institutions affected are promptly informed.¹⁰⁹

Concerning personal problems:

Individual believers may seek help and advice on their personal problems either from Local Spiritual Assemblies or Auxiliary Board members and/or their assistants. A Local Assembly may of course refer a believer to an Auxiliary Board member if it feels that it would be preferable for advice to be given by an Auxiliary Board member to the individual concerned.¹¹⁰

Although they have no legislative power or priestly functions, the role of the Counsellors and the Auxiliary Board members is to edify souls, release the power of the individuals who compose the Bahá'í community, and advise the elected institutions.¹¹¹ Their responsibilities include "promoting whatever will increase the spirit of loving unity in Bahá'í communities."¹¹²

Consultation

A word should also be said about the manner in which we engage in consultation with each other and with the institutions of the Faith. In a talk given at Hotel Plaza in Chicago, 2 May 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated emphatically that

In this Cause consultation is of vital importance, but spiritual conference and not the mere voicing

of personal views is intended. ... Antagonism and contradiction are unfortunate and always destructive to truth....

... consultation must have for its object the investigation of truth. He who expresses an opinion should not voice it as correct and right but set it forth as a contribution to the consensus of opinion, for the light of reality becomes apparent when two opinions coincide. A spark is produced when flint and steel come together. Man should weigh his opinions with the utmost serenity, calmness and composure. Before expressing his own views he should carefully consider the views already advanced by others. If he finds that a previously expressed opinion is more true and worthy, he should accept it immediately and not willfully hold to an opinion of his own. By this excellent method he endeavors to arrive at unity and truth. Opposition and division are deplorable. ... true consultation is spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love. Members must love each other in the spirit of fellowship in order that good results may be forthcoming. Love and fellowship are the foundations.¹¹³

In writing of the members of a Spiritual Assembly, He said:

The members thereof must take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. This can be attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only

after the clash of differing opinions. If after discussion, a decision be carried unanimously well and good; but if, the Lord forbid, differences of opinion should arise, a majority of voices must prevail.¹¹⁴

‘Abdu’l-Bahá identifies several conditions necessary for true consultation, including “absolute love and harmony” among those consulting and, when gathering that they turn to God “and ask aid from the Realm of Glory.” He continues:

They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one’s views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden. The honored members must with all freedom express their own thoughts, and it is in no wise permissible for one to belittle the thought of another, nay, he must with moderation set forth the truth, and should differences of opinion arise a majority of voices must prevail, and all must obey and submit to the majority. It is again not permitted that any one of the honored members object to or censure, whether in or out of the meeting, any decision arrived at previously, though that decision be not right, for such criticism would prevent any decision from being enforced.¹¹⁵

Our relationship to the administrative institutions of the Faith, as an expression of our relationship to the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh, requires “great self-discipline” in the consultative process.¹¹⁶ As the Universal House of Justice explains: “Consultation is no easy skill to learn, requiring as it does the subjugation of all egotism and unruly passions, the cultiva-

tion of frankness and freedom of thought as well as courtesy, openness of mind, and wholehearted acquiescence in a majority decision.”¹¹⁷ By trusting the process of consultation, which is one of the most important means through which we interact in the Bahá’í community, we are allowing the provisions of Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant to take fullest effect.

Trusting in the process of consultation and channeling our contributions to Bahá’í community life into the institutions Bahá’u’lláh has provided require our complete trust in Him. Otherwise, we may be tempted to subvert and undermine those institutions when things do not go the way we want them to. Many of us who embrace Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings come from backgrounds where cynicism towards institutions is the accepted norm. Difficult as it can be, we must unlearn this attitude. It requires that we be patient with ourselves; it requires patience and guidance on the part of the institutions; it requires our heartfelt prayers for advancement in this crucial matter. Through time, as we see this trust develop between community members and their institutions, we will notice a growing maturity on the part of both – and a growth in the loving spirit surrounding the functions of the community as well. From this, we can see again that there is an important relationship between the laws that promote individual spiritual growth and those that promote healthy community functioning. Through the nurturing and encouragement of both individuals and institutions in the Faith, we create an atmosphere where learning can take place and a spirit of dynamic change permeates our activities. This is the climate in which an “ever-advancing civilization” can grow and thrive.

Conclusion

In The Book of the Covenant (Kitáb-i-‘Ahd), Bahá’u’lláh states that he has given us a “priceless heritage”¹¹⁸ – “that which is conducive to the regeneration of the world and the salvation of the peoples and kindreds of the earth....”¹¹⁹

The Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh is “the instrument by which belief in Him is translated into constructive deeds.” Furthermore, in a message delivered on the Day of the Covenant during the Second World Congress, 1992, the House of Justice states emphatically that the Covenant is “the guarantee against schism”. This same message, addressed to the Bahá’ís of the world, calls for the Bahá’ís to be “daring and persistent” against a background of “universal consequences of a failed understanding as to the purpose of God for humankind” and states in this context that Covenantal requirements “assume even more critical importance than before.”¹²⁰

The Covenant embodies the “spirit, instrumentality and method” necessary for us to attain the oneness of humankind

and brings into existence “a wholly new relationship between humanity and its Supreme Creator.” This relationship is “summed up in the Covenant” and the pattern it establishes for healing the social ills of the world encompasses both unifying spiritual principles and practical institutional provisions.¹²¹

Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant is the most glorious gift given to humanity by an all-loving Creator. If we stop to ponder this gift, we can see that it offers each of us a framework that will shape our lives in constructive, healthy ways. For this inestimable gift we must be boundlessly grateful. And how better to express our gratitude than by striving to become “the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage” to our fellow human beings? As we are assured, “there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight” than this.¹²²

From amongst all mankind hath He chosen you,
and your eyes have been opened to the light of
guidance and your ears attuned to the music of the
Company above; and blessed by abounding grace,
your hearts and souls have been born into new life.
Thank ye and praise ye God that the hand of infi-
nite bestowals hath set upon your heads this gem-
studded crown, this crown whose lustrous jewels
will forever flash and sparkle down all the reaches
of time.

To thank Him for this, make ye a mighty effort,
and choose for yourselves a noble goal. Through
the power of faith, obey ye the teachings of God,
and let all your actions conform to His laws.¹²³

References

¹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, 2nd ed. (1939; reprint, Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 215.

² Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, (1941; reprint, Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971), p. 24.

³ Cited by Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (1944; reprint, Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1965), pp. 238-39.

⁴ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), p. 216.

⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, 2nd ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970), pp. 2-3.

⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words* (1939; reprint, Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985), p. 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, #38, p. 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, #9, p. 5.

⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 11th ed. (1969; reprint London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1972), pp. 179-81.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 180.

¹² *Secret of Divine Civilization*, pp. 2-3.

¹³ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre), K1, p. 17.

¹⁴ Ibid., K125, pp. 63-64.

¹⁵ Ibid., K4, pp. 20-21.

¹⁶ "This is an allusion to the story of Joseph in the Qur'án and the Old Testament, in which Joseph's garment, brought by his brothers to Jacob, their father, enabled Jacob to identify his beloved long-lost son. The metaphor of the fragrant 'garment' is frequently used in the Bahá'í Writings to refer to the recognition of the Manifestation of God and His Revelation. Bahá'u'lláh, in one of His Tablets, describes Himself as the 'Divine Joseph' Who has been 'bartered away' by the heedless 'for the most paltry of prices'. The Báb, in the Qayyúmu'l-Asmá', identifies Bahá'u'lláh as the 'true Joseph' and forecasts the ordeals that He would endure at the hands of His treacherous brother..." (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, N1, p. 165).

¹⁷ "The consumption of wine and other intoxicants is prohibited in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*...

"Reference to the use of 'wine' in an allegorical sense - such as being the cause of spiritual ecstasy - is found, not only in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, but in the Bible, in the Qur'án, and in ancient Hindu traditions.

"For example, in the Qur'án the righteous are promised that they will be given to drink of the 'choice sealed wine'. In His Tablets, Bahá'u'lláh identifies the 'choice Wine' with His Revelation whose 'musk-laden fragrance' has been wafted 'upon all created things'. He states that He has 'unsealed' this 'Wine', thereby disclosing spiritual truths that were hitherto unknown, and enabling those who quaff thereof to 'discern the splendours of the light of divine unity' and to 'grasp the essential purpose underlying the Scriptures of God'.

"In one of His meditations, Bahá'u'lláh entreats God to supply the believers with 'the choice Wine of Thy mercy, that it may cause them to be forgetful of anyone except Thee, and to arise to serve Thy Cause, and to be steadfast in their love for Thee'." (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, N2, pp. 165-166).

¹⁸ *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K125, pp. 63-64.

¹⁹ The Universal House of Justice, *Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989), p. 10.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 10-11.

²¹ Ibid., p. 21-22.

²² Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*, 2nd rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 203.

²³ *The Hidden Words*, #22, p. 9.

²⁴ The Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, November 1992, p. 26.

²⁵ The Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, September 1983.

²⁶ *Selections from the Writings of the Báb* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1976), pp. 77-78.

²⁷ *Spiritual Foundations: Prayer, Meditation, and the Devotional Attitude* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980), p. 9.

²⁸ *Bahá'í World Faith*, rev. ed. (1943; reprint, Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975), p. 368.

²⁹ *Spiritual Foundations*, p. 8.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

³¹ Ibid., p. 17.

³² *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K149, pp. 73-74.

³³ *Gleanings*, p. 295.

³⁴ *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K182, p. 85.

³⁵ *Spiritual Foundations*, 20.

³⁶ *Paris Talks*, pp. 174-175.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ The Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, September 1983.

³⁹ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), pp. 70-71.

⁴⁰ *The Bahá'í Life* (National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, 1973), p. 11.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴² *The Advent of Divine Justice*, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), p. 22; see also pp. 18-28.

⁴³ *The Hidden Words*, #31, p. 11.

⁴⁴ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 268.

⁴⁵ *A Chaste and Holy Life*, (Leicestershire: Bahá'í Publishing Trust), p. 1.

⁴⁶ *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K65, p. 42.

⁴⁷ *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K10, p. 22.

⁴⁸ See *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K10, K13, K16, Q22, Q36, Q71, Q75-76 Q93; N13-14, N17, N25, N30-32, and Synopsis and Codification of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Section IV.B. pp. 1-6.

⁴⁹ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp. 69-70.

⁵⁰ *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 368.

⁵¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* (1938; reprint, Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979), p. 143.

⁵² *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* N25, p. 176.

⁵³ From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 14 November 1986.

⁵⁴ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 93.

⁵⁵ *Gleanings*, pp. 290-91.

⁵⁶ *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K161-163, pp. 77-78.

⁵⁷ *Gleanings*, p. 335.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 278-79.

⁵⁹ *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1967), p. 22.

⁶⁰ *Gleanings*, pp. 196-97.

⁶¹ The Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 20 April 1990.

⁶² *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 2nd ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 59.

⁶³ The Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, Ridván 155.

⁶⁴ *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K33, p. 30.

⁶⁵ Ibid., N56, p. 192.

⁶⁶ Hornby, Helen, comp. *Lights of Guidance*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), pp. 623-24.

⁶⁷ *The Right of God Huqúqu'lláh*, rev. ed. (Thornhill, Ont.: Bahá'í Canada Publications, 1999), p. 28.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

⁶⁹ *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (1944; reprint, Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), p. 15.

⁷⁰ *Huqúqu'lláh*, pp. 22-23.

⁷¹ The Universal House of Justice to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in every land, 18 November 1991.

⁷² Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974) pp. 41-42.

⁷³ *Bahá'í Funds: Contributions and Administration*, rev. ed. (Thornhill, Ont.: Bahá'í Canada Publications, 1988), pp. 9-10.

- ⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 11.
- ⁷⁵ *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 145.
- ⁷⁶ *The Promise of World Peace*, rev. ed. (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1992), pp. 22-23.
- ⁷⁷ *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, pp. 3-4.
- ⁷⁸ *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 14.
- ⁷⁹ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 332.
- ⁸⁰ *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 67.
- ⁸¹ The Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, Naw-Rúz, 1974.
- ⁸² *The Continental Boards of Counselors* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981), p. 40.
- ⁸³ The Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 2 December 1976.
- ⁸⁴ *Lights of Guidance*, p. 41.
- ⁸⁵ *The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1972), p. 14.
- ⁸⁶ *Principles of Bahá'í Administration*, 3rd ed. (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1973), pp. 40-41.
- ⁸⁷ *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 88.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid.
- ⁸⁹ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 80.
- ⁹⁰ *Principles of Bahá'í Administration*, p. 41.
- ⁹¹ *The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice*, p. 5.
- ⁹² *Principles of Bahá'í Administration*, p. 41.
- ⁹³ *The Local Spiritual Assembly* (National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, 1970), p. 19.

- ⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 21.
- ⁹⁵ *Individual Rights and Freedoms*, p. 25.
- ⁹⁶ *The Local Spiritual Assembly*, p. 58.
- ⁹⁷ *Lights of Guidance*, pp. 80-81.
- ⁹⁸ *The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice*, pp. 14 – 15.
- ⁹⁹ *God Passes By*, p. 331.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid.
- ¹⁰¹ *Individual Rights and Freedoms*, p. 16.
- ¹⁰² *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K57, p. 40.
- ¹⁰³ Ibid., N82, p. 202.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Stirring of the Spirit: Celebrating the Institution of the Nineteen Day Feast* (Thornhill, Ont.: Bahá'í Canada Publications), p. 2.
- ¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 3.
- ¹⁰⁶ *Issues Concerning Community Functioning* (Mona Vale, N.S.W., Australia: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1993), p. 18.
- ¹⁰⁷ *The Local Spiritual Assembly*, p. 12.
- ¹⁰⁸ *Consultation: A Compilation*, (Thornhill, Ont.: Bahá'í Community of Canada, 1980), p. 22.
- ¹⁰⁹ The Universal House of Justice to the Hands of the Cause in the Holy Land, 19 November 1971.
- ¹¹⁰ From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 16 June 1982.
- ¹¹¹ The Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, 19 May 1999, cited in *Rights & Responsibilities* (Thornhill, Ont.: Bahá'í Canada Publications, 1997), p. 31. See also *Rights & Responsibilities*, p. 34: “We have said in an earlier letter that ‘the existence of institutions of such exalted rank, comprising individuals who play such

a vital role, who yet have no legislative, administrative or judicial authority, and are entirely devoid of priestly functions or the right to make authoritative interpretations, is a feature of Bahá'í administration unparalleled in the religions of the past.' It is a difficult concept to grasp. But with the passage of time since the first contingent of Continental Counsellors was appointed, much understanding has surely been acquired."

¹¹² *Lights of Guidance*, p. 331.

¹¹³ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 72-73.

¹¹⁴ *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 21.

¹¹⁵ quoted by Shoghi Effendi in *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 22.

¹¹⁶ *Lights of Guidance*, p. 47.

¹¹⁷ *Wellspring of Guidance*, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 96.

¹¹⁸ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 219.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

¹²⁰ The Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, 26 November 1992.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 3.

¹²³ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 35.