

Preserving Bahá'í Marriages

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I. Extracts From The Writings Of Bahá'u'lláh

- ¹ Truly, the Lord loveth union and harmony and abhorreth separation and divorce.¹
(*Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Paragraph 70)

¹ A newer translation of this passage has been substituted for the translation originally included.

- ² Should resentment or antipathy arise between husband and wife, he is not to divorce her but to bide in patience throughout the course of one whole year, ...²
(*Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Paragraph 68)

² A newer translation of this passage has been substituted for the translation originally included.

II. From the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

³ Marriage, among the mass of the people, is a physical bond, and this union can only be temporary, since it is foredoomed to a physical separation at the close.

Among the people of Bahá, however, marriage must be a union of the body and of the spirit as well, for here both husband and wife are aglow with the same wine, both are enamoured of the same matchless Face, both live and move through the same spirit, both are illumined by the same glory. This connection between them is a spiritual one, hence it is a bond that will abide forever. Likewise do they enjoy strong and lasting ties in the physical world as well, for if the marriage is based both on the spirit and the body, that union is a true one, hence it will endure. If, however, the bond is physical and nothing more, it is sure to be only temporary, and must inexorably end in separation.

When, therefore, the people of Bahá undertake to marry, the union must be a true relationship, a spiritual coming together as well as a physical one, so that throughout every phase of life, and in all the worlds of God, their union will endure; for this real oneness is a gleaming out of the love of God.

In the same way, when any souls grow to be true believers, they will attain a spiritual relationship with one another, and show forth a tenderness which is not of this world. They will, all of them, become elated from a draught of divine love, and that union of theirs, that connection, will also abide forever. Souls, that is, who will consign their own selves to oblivion, strip from themselves the defects of humankind, and unchain themselves from human bondage, will beyond any doubt be illumined with the heavenly splendours of oneness, and will all attain unto real union in the world that dieth not.

(*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá'* (Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, IL), sec. 84, pp. 124-25)

⁴ As for the question regarding marriage under the Law of God: first thou must choose one who is pleasing to thee, and then the matter is subject to the consent of the father and mother. Before thou makest thy choice, they have no right to interfere....

(*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá'*, sec. 85, p. 125)

- 5 Bahá'í marriage is the commitment of the two parties one to the other, and their mutual attachment of mind and heart. Each must, however, exercise the utmost care to become thoroughly acquainted with the character of the other, that the binding covenant between them may be a tie that will endure forever. Their purpose must be this: to become loving companions and comrades and at one with each other for time and eternity....

The true marriage of Bahá'ís is this, that husband and wife should be united both physically and spiritually, that they may ever improve the spiritual life of each other, and may enjoy everlasting unity throughout all the worlds of God. This is Bahá'í marriage.

(*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá'*, sec. 86, p. 125)

- 6 O ye two believers in God! The Lord, peerless is He, hath made woman and man to abide with each other in the closest companionship, and to be even as a single soul. They are two helpmates, two intimate friends, who should be concerned about the welfare of each other.

If they live thus, they will pass through this world with perfect contentment, bliss, and peace of heart, and become the object of divine grace and favour in the Kingdom of heaven. But if they do other than this, they will live out their lives in great bitterness, longing at every moment for death, and will be shamefaced in the heavenly realm.

Strive, then, to abide, heart and soul, with each other as two doves in the nest, for this is to be blessed in both worlds.

(*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá'*, sec. 92, p. 129)

- 7 Formerly in Persia divorce was very easily obtained. Among the people of the past Dispensation a trifling matter would cause divorce. However, as the light of the Kingdom shone forth, souls were quickened by the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh, then they totally eschewed divorce. In Persia now divorce doth not take place among the friends, unless a compelling reason existeth which makes harmony impossible. Under such rare circumstances some cases of divorce take place.

Now the friends in America must live and conduct themselves in this way. They must strictly refrain from divorce unless something ariseth which compelleth them to

separate because of their aversion for each other, in that case with the knowledge of the Spiritual Assembly they may decide to separate. They must then be patient and wait one complete year. If during this year, harmony is not re-established between them, then their divorce may be realized. It should not happen that upon the occurrence of a slight friction or displeasure between husband and wife, the husband would think of union with some other woman, or, God forbid, the wife also think of another husband. This is contrary to the standard of heavenly value and true chastity. The friends of God must so live and conduct themselves, and evince such excellence of character and conduct, as to make others astonished. The love between husband and wife must not be purely physical, nay, rather, it must be spiritual and heavenly. These two souls should be considered as one soul. How difficult it would be to divide a single soul! Nay, great would be the difficulty!

In short, the foundation of the Kingdom of God is based upon harmony and love, oneness, relationship and union, not upon differences, especially between husband and wife. If one of these two becomes the cause of divorce, that one will unquestionably fall into great difficulties, will become the victim of formidable calamities and experience deep remorse.

(From a Tablet—translated from the Persian)

III. Extracts from Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi³

³ To individual believers unless otherwise noted

⁸ When such difference of opinion and belief occurs between husband and wife it is very unfortunate for undoubtedly it detracts from that spiritual bond which is the stronghold of the family bond, especially in times of difficulty. The way, however, that it could be remedied is not by acting in such wise as to alienate the other party. One of the objects of the Cause is actually to bring about a closer bond in the homes. In all such cases, therefore, the Master used to advise obedience to the wishes of the other party and prayer. Pray that your husband may gradually see the light and at the same time so act as to draw him nearer rather than prejudice him. Once that harmony is secured then you will be able to serve unhampered.

(15 July 1928)

⁹ Divorce is, according to the “Aqdas”, permissible. But it is discouraged. Both the

husband and wife have equal right to ask for divorce, and whenever either of them feels it absolutely essential to do so. Divorce becomes valid even if one of the parties refuses to accept it, and after one year of separation, during which period the husband is under the obligation of providing for his wife and children.

(6 July 1935)

- 10 The Guardian has received your letter ... and has learned with deep concern of your family difficulties and troubles. He wishes me to assure you of his fervent prayers on your behalf and on behalf of your dear ones at home, that you may be guided and assisted from on High to compose your differences and to restore complete harmony and fellowship in your midst. While he would urge you to make any sacrifice in order to bring about unity in your family, he wishes you not to feel discouraged if your endeavours do not yield any immediate fruit. You should do your part with absolute faith that in doing so you are fulfilling your duty as a Bahá'í. The rest is assuredly in God's hand.

(23 July 1937)

- 11 The validity of a Bahá'í marriage is dependent upon the free and full consent of all four parents. The freedom of the parents in the exercise of this right is unrestricted and unconditioned. They may refuse their consent on any ground, and they are responsible for their decision to God alone.

(19 March 1938)

- 12 Regarding divorce, the Guardian stated that it is discouraged, deprecated and against the good pleasure of God. The Assembly must circulate among the friends whatever has been revealed from the Pen of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in this connection so that all may be fully reminded. Divorce is conditional upon the approval and permission of the Spiritual Assembly. The members of the Assembly must in such matters independently and carefully study and investigate each case. If there should be valid grounds for divorce and it is found that reconciliation is utterly impossible, that antipathy is intense and its removal is not possible, then the Assembly may approve the divorce.

(7 July 1938 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

- 13 The Guardian is in receipt of your letter .. and has learned with deep concern of the state of disharmony existing between you and your husband.

While he wishes me to assure you that he will pray for the solution of your domestic troubles, he would urge you to endeavour, by every means in your power, to compose your differences, and not to allow them to reach such proportions as to lead to your complete and final separation from your husband.

For while, according to the Bahá'í law, divorce is permissible, yet it is highly discouraged, and should be resorted to only when every effort to prevent it has proved to be vain and ineffective.

It is for you, and for Mr.... as well, to ponder carefully over the spiritual implications which any act of divorce on either part would involve, and, strengthened by the power of faith and confident in the blessings which strict adherence to the principles and laws of Bahá'u'lláh is bound to confer upon every one of His faithful followers, to make a fresh resolve to solve your common difficulties and to restore the harmony, peace and happiness of your family life.

(11 September 1938)

- 14 I wish to assure you, in particular, of his supplications for your guidance in connection with your proposed plan to unite in marriage with Dr.. May the Beloved help you in forming the right decision, and spare you the anxiety and suffering which too hasty action in such matters inevitably produces. You should give this question, which is of such vital concern to your future, the full consideration it deserves, and examine all its aspects carefully and dispassionately. The final decision rests with you and Dr.....

(17 January 1939)

- 15 The Bahá'í Teachings do not only encourage marital life, considering it the natural and normal way of existence for every sane, healthy and socially-conscious and responsible person, but raise marriage to the status of a divine institution, its chief and sacred purpose being the perpetuation of the human race—which is the very flower of the entire creation—and its elevation to the true station destined for it by God.

(15 April 1939)

16 The situation facing you⁴ is admittedly difficult and delicate, but no less grave and indeed vital are the responsibilities which it entails and which, as a faithful and loyal believer, you should conscientiously and thoroughly assume. The Guardian, therefore, while fully alive to the special circumstances of your case, and however profound his sympathy may be for you in this challenging issue with which you are so sadly faced, cannot, in view of the emphatic injunctions contained in the Teachings, either sanction your demand to contract a second marriage while your first wife is still alive and is united with you in the sacred bonds of matrimony, or even suggest or approve that you divorce her just in order to be permitted to marry a new one.

For the Bahá'í Teachings do not only preclude the possibility of bigamy, but also, while permitting divorce, consider it a reprehensible act, which should be resorted to only in exceptional circumstances, and when grave issues are involved, transcending such considerations as physical attraction or sexual compatibility and harmony. The institution of marriage, as established by Bahá'u'lláh, while giving due importance to the physical aspect of marital union, considers it as subordinate to the moral and spiritual purposes and functions with which it has been invested by an all-wise and loving Providence. Only when these different values are given each their due importance, and only on the basis of the subordination of the physical to the moral, and the carnal to the spiritual, can such excesses and laxity in marital relations as our decadent age is so sadly witnessing be avoided, and family life be restored to its original purity, and fulfil the true function for which it has been instituted by God.

The Guardian will most fervently pray that, inspired and guided by such a divine standard, and strengthened by Bahá'u'lláh's unfailing assistance and confirmations, you may be able to satisfactorily adjust your relations with the persons concerned, and thus reach the one right solution to this assuredly challenging problem of your life.

(8 May 1939)

⁴ A believer who, having married his first wife out of compassion, now wished to be permitted to marry a woman with whom he had fallen in love, saying that his wife was agreeable to his taking this second wife.

17 He has noted the question you had asked concerning the problem of marriage, and its infrequency among the believers in general. It is indeed a matter of deep regret to him that some of our young believers do not attach due importance to the question of marriage, and seem, as you state, to be under the impression that marital life has

been discouraged in the Cause. This is certainly an erroneous conception, and whosoever takes the pain to carefully and intelligently read the words of Bahá'u'lláh, and to ponder over their implications, cannot but be convinced of the truth that in the Bahá'í Faith marriage, and family life, in particular, are both not only commendable, but constitute a social function of highest and indeed vital importance, as through them alone the human race is perpetuated.

The believers should well know that whereas Bahá'u'lláh has not made marriage a binding obligation, He has nevertheless attributed to it such spiritual and social significance as no individual believer, under normal circumstances, can well be justified in disregarding it. In fact, in His Book of Laws (the "Kitáb-i-Aqdas") He emphatically stresses its importance, and defines its essential purpose, namely the procreation of children and their training in the Religion of God, that they may know and adore Him, and mention and praise His Name.

(17 February 1940)

18 ... he indeed feels rejoiced at the happy news of the settlement of your domestic differences with Mrs.... and particularly to know that you have jointly undertaken a most successful teaching tour .. This bond of common service to the Cause which has proved such an effective solution of your personal problems, he hopes, and indeed will fervently pray, will be further cemented by the passing of years and through your increased and joint participation in the teaching work ...

(16 December 1940)

19 Regarding the question whether it is necessary to obtain the consent of the parents of a non-Bahá'í participant in a marriage with a Bahá'í: as Bahá'u'lláh has stated that the consent of the parents of both parties is required in order to promote unity and avoid friction, and as the "Aqdas" does not specify any exceptions to this rule, the Guardian feels that under all circumstances the consent of the parents of both parties is required.

(12 August 1941 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

20 Bahá'u'lláh has laid great emphasis on the sanctity of marriage, and the believers should exert their utmost to create harmony in their homes and a situation which at least is not bad for their children. But if, after prayer and self-sacrificing effort, this

proves quite impossible, then they may resort to divorce.

(10 November 1943)

- 21 Marriage is, in the “Aqdas”, set forth as a most sacred and binding tie, and the Bahá'ís should realize that divorce is viewed as a last resort, to be avoided at all costs if possible and not to be lightly granted.

(17 October 1944)

- 22 He feels that you and your wife should do everything in your power to produce a harmonious relationship between you and avoid divorce by all means, if possible. The Bahá'í attitude is that marriage is a very serious and sacred relationship and divorce a last resort to be avoided if humanly possible.

(10 August 1945)

- 23 He was very sorry to hear that you and your husband are still so unhappy together. It is always a source of sorrow in life when married people cannot get on well together, but the Guardian feels that you and your husband, in contemplating divorce, should think of the future of your children and how this major step on your part will influence their lives and happiness.

If you feel the need of advice and consultation he suggests you consult your Local Assembly; your fellow Bahá'ís will surely do all they can to counsel and help you, protect your interests and those of the Cause.

(16 November 1945)

- 24 The Guardian has the impression that your husband is a fine man, and he is very pleased to hear you two are arranging to be reunited. He feels very strongly that Bahá'ís, if possible, more especially Bahá'ís who serve the Cause as actively and conspicuously as you and your family do, should set the newer believers and the young Bahá'ís a high example in every way. As Bahá'u'lláh was so very much against divorce (even though He permits it) and considered marriage a most sacred responsibility, believers should do everything in their power to preserve the marriages they have contracted, and to make of them exemplary unions, governed by the

noblest motives.

(19 October 1947)

- 25 Bahá'u'lláh has clearly stated the consent of all living parents is required for a Bahá'í marriage. This applies whether the parents are Bahá'ís or non-Bahá'ís, divorced for years or not. This great law He has laid down to strengthen the social fabric, to knit closer the ties of the home, to place a certain gratitude and respect in the hearts of children for those who have given them life and sent their souls out on the eternal journey towards their Creator. We Bahá'ís must realize that in present-day society the exact opposite process is taking place: young people care less and less for their parents' wishes, divorce is considered a natural right, and obtained on the flimsiest and most unwarrantable and shabby pretexts. People separated from each other, especially if one of them has had full custody of the children, are only too willing to belittle the importance of the partner in marriage also responsible as a parent for bringing those children into this world. The Bahá'ís must, through rigid adherence to the Bahá'í laws and teachings, combat these corrosive forces which are so rapidly destroying home life and the beauty of family relationships, and tearing down the moral structure of society.

(25 October 1947 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

- 26 There is no doubt about it that the believers in America, probably unconsciously influenced by the extremely lax morals prevalent and the flippant attitude towards divorce which seems to be increasingly prevailing, do not take divorce seriously enough and do not seem to grasp the fact that although Bahá'u'lláh has permitted it, He has only permitted it as a last resort and strongly condemns it.

The presence of children, as a factor in divorce, cannot be ignored, for surely it places an even greater weight of moral responsibility on the man and wife in considering such a step. Divorce under such circumstances no longer just concerns them and their desires and feelings but also concerns the children's entire future and their own attitude towards marriage.

As to whether you and Mr... should now divorce: this is a matter which so intimately concerns you both, your children, and your future that he does not feel he can do more than point out to you what he has stated above. The decision must rest with you both.

(19 December 1947)

- 27 Divorce should be avoided most strictly by the believers, and only under rare and urgent circumstances be resorted to. Modern society is criminally lax as to the sacred nature of marriage, and the believers must combat this trend assiduously.

(5 January 1948)

- 28 He was sorry to hear of the inharmony and unhappiness which has arisen in your home, and he assures you he will pray for its removal.

He suggests to you that perhaps you are not giving your husband enough of your love, physically and spiritually, to keep his interest centred in you. Marriage problems are often very involved and subtle, and we Bahá'ís, being enlightened and progressive people, should not hesitate, if it seems necessary or desirable, to turn to science for help in such matters. If you and your husband talked over your problems—together or separately—with a good physician you might find that you can cure your own husband, or at least try to do so. It is a great pity that two believers, united in this glorious Cause, and blessed with a family, should not be able to live together really harmoniously, and he feels you should take constructive action and not allow the situation to get worse. When the shadow of separation hangs over a husband and wife they should leave no stone unturned in their effort to avert its becoming a reality.

He urges you both to devote more of your time to teaching the Cause and to pray together that Bahá'u'lláh may give you a real and lasting love for each other.

(5 July 1949)

- 29 He was very sorry to hear that you are contemplating separation from your husband. As you no doubt know, Bahá'u'lláh considers the marriage bond very sacred; and only under very exceptional and unbearable circumstances is divorce advisable for Bahá'ís.

The Guardian does not tell you that you must not divorce your husband; but he does urge you to consider prayerfully, not only because you are a believer and anxious to obey the laws of God, but also for the sake of the happiness of your children, whether it is not possible for you to rise above the limitations you have felt in your marriage hitherto, and make a go of it together.

We often feel that our happiness lies in a certain direction; and yet, if we have to

pay too heavy a price for it in the end we may discover that we have not really purchased either freedom or happiness, but just some new situation of frustration and disillusion.

(5 April 1951)

- 30 He feels that you should by all means make every effort to hold your marriage together, especially for the sake of your children, who, like all children of divorced parents, cannot but suffer from conflicting loyalties, for they are deprived of the blessing of a father and mother in one home, to look after their interests and love them jointly.

Now that you realize that your husband is ill, you should be able to reconcile yourself to the difficulties you have faced with him emotionally, and not take an unforgiving attitude, however much you may suffer.

We know that Bahá'u'lláh has very strongly frowned upon divorce; and it is really incumbent upon the Bahá'ís to make almost a superhuman effort not to allow a Bahá'í marriage to be dissolved.

(6 March 1953)

- 31 What the Bahá'ís must do is not commit adultery if they are married, and refrain from sexual intimacy before marriage. It is not a sin in the Bahá'í Faith if you do not marry, but marriage is recommended to the believers by Bahá'u'lláh.

There is no teaching in the Bahá'í Faith that “soul mates” exist. What is meant is that marriage should lead to a profound friendship of spirit, which will endure in the next world, where there is no sex, and no giving and taking in marriage; just the way we should establish with our parents, our children, our brothers and sisters and friends a deep spiritual bond which will be everlasting, and not merely physical bonds of human relationship.

(4 December 1954)

- 32 He has been very sorry to hear that your marriage seems to have failed utterly. I need not tell you as a Bahá'í that every effort should be made by any Bahá'í to salvage their marriage for the sake of God, rather than for their own sake. In the case of pioneers, it is even more important, because they are before the public eye.

However, in such matters it is neither befitting nor right that the Guardian should bring pressure on individuals. He can only appeal to you and ... to try again; but if you cannot rise to this test, that is naturally a personal matter.

(13 January 1956)

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- 33 The Guardian will pray for the solution of your problems. He will pray for the healing of your son, and for the happiness and unity of your family. The true basis of unity is service, and he hopes all the members will arise with renewed effort to teach the Faith.

(6 September 1956)

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- 34 Wherever there is a Bahá'í family, those concerned should by all means do all they can to preserve it, because divorce is strongly condemned in the Teachings, whereas harmony, unity and love are held up as the highest ideals in human relationships. This must always apply to the Bahá'ís, whether they are serving in the pioneering field or not.

(9 November 1956 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

IV. Extracts from Letters Written on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice⁵

⁵ To individual believers unless otherwise noted

- 35 In considering the problems that you and your wife are experiencing, the House of Justice points out that the unity of your family should take priority over any other consideration. Bahá'u'lláh came to bring unity to the world, and a fundamental unity is that of the family. Therefore, we must believe that the Faith is intended to strengthen the family, not weaken it. For example, service to the Cause should not produce neglect of the family. It is important for you to arrange your time so that your family life is harmonious and your household receives the attention it requires.

Bahá'u'lláh also stressed the importance of consultation. We should not think this worthwhile method of seeking solutions is confined to the administrative institutions of the Cause. Family consultation employing full and frank discussion, and animated by awareness of the need for moderation and balance, can be the panacea for

domestic conflict. Wives should not attempt to dominate their husbands, nor husbands their wives....

(1 August 1978)

- 36 Your letter ... describing the difficulties confronting your family distressed the Universal House of Justice and we are requested to convey the following to you.

Noting that you and your husband have consulted about your family problems with your Spiritual Assembly but did not receive any advice, and also discussed your situation with a family counsellor without success, the House of Justice feels it most essential for your husband and you to understand that marriage can be a source of well-being, conveying a sense of security and spiritual happiness. However, it is not something that just happens. For marriage to become a haven of contentment it requires the cooperation of the marriage partners themselves, and the assistance of their families. You mention your concern over your eldest daughter. It is suggested that you include her and perhaps your younger children in family consultations. As Bahá'ís we understand the importance of the consultative process and we should not feel it is to be used only by the Spiritual Assemblies.

(24 June 1979)

- 37 Irreconcilable antipathy arising between the parties to a marriage is not merely a lack of love for one's spouse but an antipathy which cannot be resolved. It is for the Spiritual Assembly to decide whether this condition exists before it sets the date for the beginning of the year of waiting, and this it may do on the application of one of the parties. It is not affected by the other party's not wishing to apply for a divorce.

The date for the beginning of the year of waiting having been fixed, it is the obligation of the parties to make every effort to reconcile their differences and to try to preserve the marriage. The Spiritual Assembly has the obligation to offer them every assistance in this regard ...

...

Obviously, seeking the assistance of one's Spiritual Assembly is a part of the Bahá'í divorce procedure, and the parties concerned should consult with the Assembly about their problems. It is within the discretion of the parties, or either of them, to also avail themselves of professional marriage counsellors.

(12 July 1979)

- 38 Your letter of ... to the Universal House of Justice makes clear that you are seeking to re-establish your marriage through study of the Writings and through various modes of consultation and assistance. We are asked to convey its advice on this vital subject of reconciliation of partners in marriage in the context of understanding of yourself and your relationship to others.

You are urged to persevere in your studies, in your prayers for resolution of your problems, and in your meditation which may provide guidance and confidence, inasmuch as the understanding of self and of relationships to others are contained in the Writings and in the example of the Master, 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Neither you nor your husband should hesitate to continue consulting professional marriage counsellors, individually and together if possible, and also to take advantage of the supportive counselling which can come from wise and mature friends. Non-Bahá'í counselling can be useful but it is usually necessary to temper it with Bahá'í insight.

You ask how to deal with anger. The House of Justice suggests that you call to mind the admonitions found in our Writings on the need to overlook the shortcomings of others; to forgive and conceal their misdeeds, not to expose their bad qualities, but to search for and affirm their praiseworthy ones, and to endeavour to be always forbearing, patient, and merciful. Such passages as the following extracts from letters written on behalf of the beloved Guardian will be helpful:

There are qualities in everyone which we can appreciate and admire, and for which we can love them; and perhaps, if you determine to think only of these qualities which your husband possesses, this will help to improve the situation You should turn your thoughts away from the things which upset you, and constantly pray to Bahá'u'lláh to help you. Then you will find how that pure love, enkindled by God, which burns in the soul when we read and study the Teachings, will warm and heal, more than anything else. Each of us is responsible for one life only, and that is our own. Each of us is immeasurably far from being "perfect as our heavenly father is perfect" and the task of perfecting our own life and character is one that requires all our attention, our will-power and energy

(17 July 1979)

- 39 The relationship between husband and wife must be viewed in the context of the Bahá'í ideal of family life. Bahá'u'lláh came to bring unity to the world, and a fundamental unity is that of the family. Therefore, one must believe that the Faith is intended to strengthen the family, not weaken it, and one of the keys to a strengthening of unity is loving consultation. The atmosphere within a Bahá'í family as within the community as a whole should express “the keynote of the Cause of God” which, the beloved Guardian has stated, “is not dictatorial authority, but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation....”

In any group, however loving the consultation, there are nevertheless points on which, from time to time, agreement cannot be reached. In a Spiritual Assembly this dilemma is resolved by a majority vote. There can, however, be no majority where only two parties are involved, as in the case of a husband and wife. There are, therefore, times when a wife should defer to her husband, and times when a husband should defer to his wife, but neither should ever unjustly dominate the other....

(28 December 1980 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

- 40 You have asked, however, for specific rules of conduct to govern the relationships of husbands and wives. This the House of Justice does not wish to do, and it feels that there is already adequate guidance included in the compilation on this subject; for example, the principle that the rights of each and all in the family unit must be upheld, and the advice that loving consultation should be the keynote, that all matters must be settled in harmony and love, and that there are times when the husband and wife should defer to the wishes of the other. Exactly under what circumstances such deference should take place is a matter for each couple to determine. If, God forbid, they fail to agree, and their disagreement leads to estrangement, they should seek counsel from those they trust and in whose sincerity and sound judgement they have confidence, in order to preserve and strengthen their ties as a united family.

(16 May 1982)

- 41 Concerning the definition of the term “aversion” in relation to Bahá'í divorce law, the Universal House of Justice points out that there are no specific “grounds” for Bahá'í divorce such as there are in some codes of civil law. Bahá'í law permits divorce but, as

both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have made very clear, divorce is abhorred. Thus, from the point of view of the individual believer he should do all he can to refrain from divorce. Bahá'ís should be profoundly aware of the sanctity of marriage and should strive to make their marriages an eternal bond of unity and harmony. This requires effort and sacrifice and wisdom and self-abnegation. A Bahá'í should consider the possibility of divorce only if the situation is intolerable and he or she has a strong aversion to being married to the other partner. This is a standard held up to the individual. It is not a law, but an exhortation. It is a goal to which we should strive.

From the point of view of the Spiritual Assembly, however, the matter is somewhat different. The Spiritual Assembly should always be concerned that the believers in its community are being deepened in their understanding of the Bahá'í concept of marriage, especially the young people, so that the very thought of divorce will be abhorrent to them....

It can be seen, therefore, that “aversion” is not a specific legal term that needs to be defined. Indeed a number of other terms are used in describing the situation that can lead to divorce in Bahá'í law, such as “antipathy”, “resentment”, “estrangement”, “impossibility of establishing harmony” and “irreconcilability”. The texts, however, point out that divorce is strongly condemned, should be viewed as “a last resort” when “rare and urgent circumstances” exist, and that the partner who is the “cause of divorce” will “unquestionably” become the “victim of formidable calamities”.

(3 November 1982)

42 When an application for divorce is made to a Spiritual Assembly, its first thought and action should be to reconcile the couple and to ensure that they know the Bahá'í teachings on the matter. God willing, the Assembly will be successful and no year of waiting need be started. However, if the Assembly find that it is unable to persuade the party concerned to withdraw the application for divorce, it must conclude that, from its point of view, there appears to be an irreconcilable antipathy, and it has no alternative to setting the date for the beginning of the year of waiting. During the year the couple have the responsibility of attempting to reconcile their differences, and the Assembly has the duty to help them and encourage them. But if the year of waiting comes to an end without reconciliation the Bahá'í divorce must be granted as at the date of the granting of the civil divorce if this has not already taken place.

(6 May 1987)

- 43 It is clear that the Bahá'í teachings call for an absolute standard of fidelity in the relationship between husband and wife. An excerpt from a letter dated 28 September 1941 to an individual believer written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, quoted in "Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1968-1973", page 108, states:

The question you raise as to the place in one's life that a deep bond of love with someone we meet other than our husband or wife can have is easily defined in view of the teachings. Chastity implies both before and after marriage an unsullied, chaste sex life. Before marriage absolutely chaste, after marriage absolutely faithful to one's chosen companion. Faithful in all sexual acts, faithful in word and in deed.

It is also evident from Bahá'í teachings that no husband should subject his wife to abuse of any kind, and that such a reprehensible action is the antithesis of the relationship of mutual respect and equality enjoined by the Bahá'í writings—a relationship governed by the principles of consultation and devoid of the use of force to compel obedience to one's will.

(22 July 1987)

- 44 The House of Justice advises you to continue the strenuous efforts you are making to overcome the difficulties in your marriage. It is pleased to note that you and your husband have turned to the Local Spiritual Assembly for guidance and have sought help from a Bahá'í who is a marriage counsellor. Such endeavours, when combined with a strong and determined effort, improve greatly the prospects that your marriage can be maintained. However, it must also be borne in mind that the fact that Bahá'u'lláh has permitted divorce is, no doubt, an indication that in certain circumstances it is unavoidable. If your earnest efforts to maintain your marriage do not yield the desired result, you should not be distraught.

(28 April 1989)

- 45 The House of Justice is distressed to learn that you and your husband are continuing to experience marital difficulties. It has frequently advised believers in such situations to turn to the Spiritual Assemblies for advice and counsel, and to follow this advice in their efforts to preserve the unity of their marital relationship. It has been found

useful in many instances to also seek the assistance of competent professional marriage counsellors, who can provide useful insights and guidance in the use of constructive measures to bring about a greater degree of unity.

(17 July 1989)

46 ... no husband should subject his wife to abuse of any kind, whether emotional, mental or physical...

When a Bahá'í wife finds herself in such a situation and feels it cannot be resolved through consultation with her husband, she could well turn to the Local Spiritual Assembly for advice and guidance, and might also find it highly advantageous to seek the assistance of competent professional counsellors. If the husband is also a Bahá'í, the Local Spiritual Assembly can bring to his attention the need to avoid abusive behaviour and can, if necessary, take firm measures to encourage him to conform to the admonitions of the teachings.

There have been many instances in which a couple, through a consecrated and determined effort, aided by the power of prayer and the advice of experts, succeeded in overcoming seemingly insuperable obstacles to their reconciliation and in reconstructing a strong foundation for their marriage. There are also innumerable examples of individuals who have been able to effect drastic and enduring changes in their behaviour, through drawing on the spiritual powers available by the bounty of God.

As you know, in the Bahá'í Faith, divorce is discouraged and should be resorted to only when a prolonged effort to effect reconciliation has been unsuccessful. However, it should also be noted that divorce is permissible when an irreconcilable antipathy exists between the two parties to the marriage.

(6 August 1989)
