

The Twin Covenants of Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá

INTRODUCTION: *Approaching the threshold...*

A Covenant, in a religious context, is a binding agreement between God and humankind. God's promise is that He will periodically send Divine Messengers so that we will never be without His guidance and strengthening grace. This is considered the Greater Covenant. Our role in this Covenant is to recognize the Manifestation of God for our time and to follow His teachings.

Unique to the Bahá'í Dispensation is that Bahá'u'lláh made provisions in His Will and Testament for an additional Covenant with the believers. He assures us of divine guidance after His ascension through successors, and expects in return that the Bahá'ís will turn to the specified individual and institution. The Covenant Bahá'u'lláh made with His followers is to turn to `Abdu'l-Bahá after His ascension and eventually to the Universal House of Justice. `Abdu'l-Bahá also made a Covenant in His Will and Testament for the believers to turn to Shoghi Effendi after His passing and in time to the Universal House of Justice. These Covenants of Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá are referred to as the twin Covenants of the Bahá'í Dispensation.

These twin Covenants are the single protecting factor that saves the unifying Faith of Bahá'u'lláh from schism, disorder, and chaos. A firm understanding and committed adherence to the principles of the Covenant is fundamental to establishing and sustaining the unity of the Faith and the eventual tranquility and peace of the peoples of the earth.



One of the tents of Bahá'u'lláh

“Verily, the end is for them who are ushered into the tent of the Covenant of thy merciful Lord.” — `Abdu'l-Bahá

OBJECTIVES: *A look to the horizon...*

Facilitator

Review the following objectives with the participants:

1. An objective of this study is to understand the fundamental verities or basic truths regarding the twin Covenants of Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá.
2. An objective of this study is to acquire a deeper understanding and appreciation for the Covenant.

THE STUDY PROCESS: *Attaining the water of life...*

Facilitator

Review the following study process with the participants. Then study the numbered quotations that follow, one at a time as described below.

1. **READING:** *A drink from the cup of guidance...*
Two volunteers take turns reading the quotation out loud so it is read twice.
2. **CONFIRMING MEANING:** *A spray from the fountain of light...*
PARTICIPANTS: To better understand certain words used in the quotation, take turns with the following:
 - A. Choose a word from the quotation and state it for the whole group to hear. (Like a fun game – pick a word!) Then...
 - B. Read out loud the sentence that contains the **word** you selected, **while substituting for that word**, its given phrase, definition, or synonym from the boxes below the quotation.
 Repeat A and B above until everyone is satisfied with their understanding of the words.
3. **FINDING VALUE:** *Mining the gems of truth...*
Take turns stating each basic fact or truth you can find in the quotation about the Covenant.

QUOTATIONS: *Within the meadows of Thy nearness...*

1. *The Lord of the universe hath never raised up a prophet nor hath He sent down a Book unless He hath established His covenant with all men, calling for their acceptance of the next Revelation and of the next Book; inasmuch as the outpourings of His bounty are ceaseless and without limit.*
(Selections from the Writings of the Báb, p. 87)

acceptance: willingness to favorably receive
Book: recorded Revelation of God
bounty: generous giving
ceaseless: without pause or stop
covenant: “A covenant in the religious sense,” the Universal House of Justice states, “is a binding agreement between God and man, whereby God requires of man certain behaviour in return for which He guarantees certain blessings, or ☞

whereby He gives man certain bounties in return for which He takes from those who accept them an understanding to behave in a certain way.”
 (The Covenant, p. 6)
established: originated and secured the permanent existence of
outpourings: full and continuous outflowings
Revelation: Communication of God and His Will to man

2. Bahá’u’lláh covenanted, not that I am the Promised One, but that `Abdu’l-Bahá is the Expounder of the Book and the Centre of His Covenant, and that the Promised One of Bahá’u’lláh will appear after one thousand or thousands of years. This is the Covenant which Bahá’u’lláh made.
(`Abdu’l-Bahá, cited in The Covenant, p. 5, #13)

Book: recorded Revelation of God; today, Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings
Centre: Person that is the most important and the central focus
covenant: binding agreement [with the Bahá’is to turn to and accept `Abdu’l-Bahá on all matters ☞

pertaining to the Faith]
covenanted: entered and confirmed in His Covenant
Expounder: Explainer, Interpreter, and Clarifier in detail
Promised One: prophesied Manifestation of God

3. “When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation is ended, turn your faces toward Him Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root.” The object of this sacred verse is none other except the Most Mighty Branch [‘Abdu’l-Bahá]. Thus have We graciously revealed unto you Our potent Will, and I am verily the Gracious, the All-Powerful.
(Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, pp. 221-22)

All-Powerful: sole One having complete power, prestige, and influence
Ancient Root: Manifestation, Bahá’u’lláh [one of His titles]
Book: recorded Revelation of God
Branch: descendant
branched: been born as a descendant
ebbed: gone back or passed away
Gracious: One having and showing abundant grace, kindness, and mercy
object: intention or purpose

Our: used by one in authority to denote himself
potent: powerfully effective
presence: divine being
purposed: intended or determined
revealed: made known
Revelation: Communication of God and His Will to man
sacred: holy and spiritually important
verse: sentence of the written Word
We: used by one in authority to denote himself
Will: Desire or Choice

4. They [Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá] have also, in unequivocal and emphatic language, appointed those twin institutions of the House of Justice and of the Guardianship as their chosen Successors, destined to apply the principles, promulgate the laws, protect the institutions, adapt loyally and intelligently the Faith to the requirements of progressive society, and consummate the incorruptible inheritance which the Founders of the Faith have bequeathed to the world.
(Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 19-20)

adapt: modify according to changing circumstances
appointed: officially decreed and named
bequeathed: given, handed down, or transmitted
consummate: complete in every detail and perfection
destined: predetermined through the Divine Will and of necessity
emphatic: forcefully expressive
Faith: Bahá’í Faith
Founders: Ones who brought into being and were the organizers [Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá]
Guardianship: The institution created by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His Will and Testament in the appointment of Shoghi Effendi to carry on into the future the function of authoritative interpretation of the Sacred Writings and the care and protection of the Bahá’í Faith.
House of Justice: The Universal House of Justice is the supreme authority and administrative and

governing institution of the Bahá’í world.
incorruptible: incapable of perversion or being defiled [type of]
inheritance: gifts from heirs
institutions: established administrative structures authorized and maintained through prescribed rules and agencies
intelligently: with skill, good judgment, and wisdom
loyally: faithfully and true
principles: basic governing truths or standards
progressive: an advancing or improving
promulgate: make known officially and put into effect
requirements: relative essentials
Successors: Ones to follow afterwards and inherit the position of authority
twin: two separate but similar and closely related
unequivocal: clear, sincere, and unquestionable

5. The sacred and youthful branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God [Shoghi Effendi], as well as the Universal House of Justice to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the `Abhá Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of the Exalted One (may my life be offered up for them both). Whatsoever they decide is of God. Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God; whoso rebelleth against him and against them hath rebelled against God; whoso opposeth him hath opposed God; whoso contendeth with them hath contended with God; whoso disputeth with him hath disputed with God; whoso denieth him hath denied God; whoso disbelieveth in him hath disbelieved in God; whoso deviateth, separateth himself and turneth aside from him hath in truth deviated, separated himself and turned aside from God.

(*Will and Testament of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 11)

`Abhá Beauty: Manifestation, Bahá'u'lláh [one of His titles]; `Abhá meaning 'Most Glorious'
branch: descendant
Cause of God: today, the Bahá'í Faith
contended: striven in debate or argued
contendeth: strives in debate or argues
denied: refused to accept the truth of
denieth: refuses to accept the truth of
deviated: strayed or gone a different way
deviateth: strays or goes a different way
disbelieved: refused to believe
disbelieveth: refuses to believe
disputed: argued irritably and struggled
disputeth: argues irritably and struggles
established: originated with its permanent existence secured
Exalted One: Manifestation, the Báb [one of His titles]
Guardian: One appointed by `Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will and Testament to carry on into the future the function of authoritative interpretation of the Sacred Writings and the care and protection of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi.

obeyed: carried out and submitted to instructions or orders [from]
obeyeth: carries out and submits to instructions or orders [from]
opposed: confronted with hard or searching questions or objections [with]
opposeth: confronts with hard or searching questions or objections [with]
rebelled: shown resistant action to authority
rebelleth: shows resistant action to authority
sacred: holy; entitled to reverence and respect, and spiritually important
separated: removed or set apart
separateth: removes or sets apart
turned aside: changed direction
turneth aside: changes direction
unerring: exact, flawless, and error free
Universal House of Justice: The Universal House of Justice is the supreme authority and administrative and governing institution of the Bahá'í world.
universally: all inclusively and from everywhere

6. From these statements it is made indubitably clear and evident that the Guardian of the Faith has been made the Interpreter of the Word and that the Universal House of Justice has been invested with the function of legislating on matters not expressly revealed in the teachings.

(Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 149-50)

evident: easy to understand; obvious
expressly: directly; distinctly; explicitly
Faith: Bahá'í Faith
Guardian: One appointed by `Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will and Testament to carry on into the future the function of authoritative interpretation of the Sacred Writings and the care and protection of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi.
indubitably: undoubtedly; unquestionably
Interpreter: One who explains or expounds the meaning

invested: furnished or granted by right
legislating: making, altering, or repealing laws
revealed: made known
teachings: Writings of Bahá'u'lláh
Universal House of Justice: The Universal House of Justice is the supreme authority and administrative and governing institution of the Bahá'í world.
Word: Revelation of God; today, Bahá'u'lláh's Writings

SHARING: *A breath from the spirit of inspiration...*

Facilitator

Ask the participants to complete the statements below. When everyone has finished, have each person share, in a round, the one thing that was most outstanding or inspiring and how it made him or her feel. Please remind everyone not to remark on the comments of others.

The one thing from the quotations that was the most outstanding or inspiring to me was _____

It made me feel _____

Explain _____

SOME QUESTIONS: *A gentle breeze from the testing winds...*

Facilitator

Ask the participants to answer the following questions. They can usually find answers in the quotations just studied or in the introduction. When everyone has finished, review the questions, then share and discuss the answers.

1. The Greater Covenant is the promise that the Manifestation of God makes regarding the coming of the next Prophet after Himself. The peoples' part of this Covenant is to accept the next Promised One. How long will it be before the next Manifestation of God appears? _____

2. Bahá'u'lláh left instructions in His Will and Testament for all the believers to turn to `Abdu'l-Bahá after His passing. He said that `Abdu'l-Bahá was the Interpreter and Expounder of His Word. He also left provisions for _____
to be elected to legislate on matters not provided for in His Writings.
3. If we are uncertain about the meaning of something Bahá'u'lláh wrote or said, or unclear as to how it is to be interpreted, where does He want us to turn for interpretation? _____
After that? _____ And after that? _____
4. The "*Most Mighty Branch*" in the Bahá'í Writings refers to
 - a. the largest limb of a tree.
 - b. Bahá'u'lláh's son, `Abdu'l-Bahá.
 - c. the Universal House of Justice.
5. As part of its legislative function, the Universal House of Justice has both the right and obligation to "elucidate" (make clear by explaining or illustrating) on matters "*which have not outwardly been revealed in the Book,*"¹ but cannot interpret (from divine inspiration describe the meaning or intent of) the Sacred Writings. Authoritative interpretation of the Sacred Writings is restricted to
 - a. `Abdu'l-Bahá, the Center of the Covenant.
 - b. the Universal House of Justice.
 - c. Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Cause of God.
 - d. anyone who wants to, and can convince others that he is right.

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¹ TOB, p. 68

6. If one is unfaithful to a decision of the Universal House of Justice, the current authority of the Bahá'í Faith, that would also make one unfaithful to the twin Covenants of Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá, and ultimately unfaithful to God. There are ten behaviors identified in The Will and Testament of `Abdu'l-Bahá that may be considered unfaithfulness to the Covenant. What are they? _____

7. Which two of the following are true? Interpretations of the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb by `Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi are
 a. inspired of God Himself, the Creator and Sustainer of the earth and heavens.
 b. the best we can hope for, for now, but in some circumstances could be wrong.
 c. consistent and harmonious with one another, as well as with the Holy Writings.
8. The twin Covenants of Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá have assured a continuous flow of divine guidance from God to humankind: first, through Bahá'u'lláh, then `Abdu'l-Bahá, then Shoghi Effendi, and now the Universal House of Justice. In what way do you feel these twin Covenants are beneficial or valuable to you personally? _____

9. In many major religions of the past, either the Manifestation of God did not appoint an authorized interpreter of His Word, or many of the followers turned away from the One appointed by the Manifestation, thus creating divisions and varied sects. Describe how the Bahá'í Faith is different. _____

APPLICATION: *Showing forth divine light...*

Facilitator

Read through the following paragraph together and proceed as stated. Then take time for the participants to write out their individual plans for action. When everyone has finished, move on to the closing reading.

Bahá'u'lláh wrote: *“It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action....”* Imagine how the Bahá'í Teachings in this study class could be translated into reality and action. Take turns sharing the possibilities. Begin your statements with: **“One could....”**

From your experience in this study class on the twin Covenants of Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá, describe what **you** are inspired to put into reality and action. **I will make conscious efforts to...** _____

An introduction to the Covenant...

Physical life in the world around us is governed by the laws of nature. The sun pours its energy upon all living things on this planet, the earth supplies the food, while every creature responds to the dictates of nature. The mineral, vegetable and animal kingdoms are all under its control and cannot deviate a hair's breath from the course which the Creator has set for them. For instance, the bee is created to make its hive only in the form of a hexagon; it cannot choose to build it in a different form. The fish must live in the water, and the beast inhabit the land. Each living organism and, indeed, the whole universe involuntarily obeys the laws of nature.

Man is the only exception. God has endowed him with two opposite natures, the animal or physical, and the spiritual. Man's physical being is subject to the laws of nature; but his soul, his spiritual nature, is not. The soul emanates from the spiritual worlds of God and cannot be bound by material ties. Because of his spiritual qualities man has been endowed by the Creator with the special faculty of free will, a faculty which is absent in the rest of His creation on earth. Furthermore, God has created man in His own image, meaning that He has conferred all His attributes upon man, attributes that are latent within him.

In order to enable the soul to progress and attain spiritual qualities and so reveal these latent attributes, God has made a Covenant with man and has required him to abide by its provisions. We note therefore that whereas the body of man is bound by the laws of nature, his soul is governed by the laws of the Covenant of God. A covenant is a contract between two sides, each of whom has obligations to fulfil. It follows that a meaningful covenant between God and man must require freedom of choice on both sides, and that man must exercise his free will in choosing his response to his Creator.

The relationship of God with man in this Covenant is somewhat similar to the relationship between the principal of a school and the child. As soon as a child goes to school for the first time, he enters into a covenant with the school principal, although often without really knowing it. In this contract the principal provides the means for the education of the child. He appoints teachers to teach him, draws up the educational programme and ensures the child's well-being and development in every way. The child's part in this covenant is to follow the instructions of the teacher and learn every lesson he is taught. It is through this process that the child acquires knowledge, develops his capacity, and becomes endowed with intellectual and spiritual powers. As the child grows in learning and maturity, the principal will appoint other teachers to contribute to his education. In this covenant, the responsibilities of the two parties are fundamentally different. They cannot be confused and are not interchangeable.

Another feature of this covenant is that the two parties are not of the same calibre. One side, the school principal, is knowledgeable, wise and strong. The other, the child, is unlearned, weak and immature. The terms of this covenant are drawn up entirely by the strong party and the child has no say in them. Usually, the weaker party is the loser when a contract is drawn up solely by the strong. Not so in this case, for the motive of the principal in making all the arrangements is his love for the child and concern for its education. His greatest ambition is to see the child attain wisdom and knowledge. He longs to see his pupil become a mature person.

The same is true of God. He is the Creator, the Almighty, the Author of the Covenant, whose terms He Himself has stipulated unilaterally without the help of man. As in the above example, God's part in this Covenant is different from man's. God's part is to release vivifying forces of life and of Revelation, and man's is to receive these voluntarily and obey His commandments wholeheartedly.

We learn from the study of religions that it is the act of creation itself that brings about this Covenant of God with man. God's part in the Covenant is to confer life upon the individual, to

provide him, on the one hand, with his physical needs by placing at his disposal all the resources of this earth and, on the other, to bestow upon his soul the bounty of His Revelation by sending His Messengers to guide his steps toward his everlasting abode.

...God provides not only for man's physical well-being, but He also reveals Himself to him through His Messengers in order to develop his spiritual life. Through the influence of these Messengers humanity has passed through the stages of infancy, childhood, and adolescence, and today, as a result of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, is destined to come of age. The Messengers are similar to the teachers in the above analogy. They reveal progressively the teachings of God in accordance with the capacity of the people of their own age.

As the recipient of God's spiritual bounties, mankind has progressed in each age to the extent that it has been able to carry out the teachings of His Messengers and Prophets. As in the analogy where a child's progress depends on his willingness to obey the teacher and carry out his instructions, the spiritual advancement of the human soul is, to a great extent, dependent upon the receptivity of the individual and his readiness to obey his Lord. Should he submit to the will of God, be willing to obey the teachings of His Messengers, and open his heart to receive the outpouring of God's Revelation for the age he lives in, then he has been faithful to the Covenant of God. But if he fails to turn to God's Messengers and His Manifestation, he will become spiritually impoverished. This is true both for individuals and for society as a whole.

(Adib Taherzadeh, *The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 1-3)

[Permission to reprint extract granted by George Ronald, Publisher]

ANSWERS: *Affirming treasures...*

1. after one thousand or thousands of years
2. the Universal House of Justice
3. `Abdu'l-Bahá; Shoghi Effendi; no one else is given authority to "interpret"
4. b
5. a and c
6. disobedience, rebellion, opposition, contention, disputation, denial, disbelief, deviation, separation and turning aside from either the Guardian of the Cause of God, Shoghi Effendi, or the Universal House of Justice
7. a and c
8. all answers are valuable
9. Bahá'u'lláh made it clear `Abdu'l-Bahá would be invested with the authority to interpret His Writings. `Abdu'l-Bahá made it clear Shoghi Effendi was authorized to interpret Bahá'u'lláh's Writings. The Universal House of Justice was invested by Bahá'u'lláh with the function of legislating on matters not expressly revealed in the Teachings.

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