

Bahá'í Divorce Laws

INTRODUCTION: *Approaching the threshold...*

The Bahá'í divorce laws can best be understood by considering the facts and truths evident in the natural world. When one takes a few moments to observe the makeup of creation it becomes evident that the more advanced life forms and natural systems in nature are all made up of many less complicated systems or units, necessary for their establishment and survival. That is, highly evolved organisms and natural systems of creation need a systematic organization of smaller units to function.

The human body is one such example. It is comprised of numerous organized systems that include the respiratory system, the circulatory system, the nervous system and others. The health and development of the whole body is reliant upon the proper functioning of each of these systematic parts.

Human society is much like the human body. For it to maintain health, grow and develop, its units and systems must function effectively. If the more basic units of order in the human body begin to dissolve or break down, eventually the body becomes ill and death will ensue. In the body of society the most basic institution of its complex order is the union of a man and woman in marriage. Without the firm establishment and reinforcement of this foundational unit of society, the whole social order begins to decline. The history of civilization repeatedly bears this out.

The Bahá'í Revelation reaffirms the importance of a strong marriage as the basic unit of society. The Bahá'í laws pertaining to divorce are, without question, unique in history, and definitely supportive of the institution of marriage. Even in conditions where the unit of marriage is no longer able to survive, its dissolution has certain requirements that make it less damaging to those involved or to the society as a whole. The Bahá'í laws concerning divorce are based on principles that first attempt to reconcile and strengthen the bonds of marriage, or, when necessary, provide for its ordered and peaceful dissolution.



Two doves in a tree at Mazra'ih, Israel, where Bahá'u'lláh lived for two years following His nine-year imprisonment in `Akká.

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

Facilitator

Review the following objective with the participants:

The objective of this study is to understand the fundamental verities or basic truths regarding the Bahá'í laws of divorce and the necessity to abide by them.

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 Bahá'í laws of divorce or the necessity to abide by them.

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

1. *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, that perchance the fragrance of affection may be renewed between them. If, upon the completion of this period, their love hath not returned, it is permissible for divorce to take place.*

(Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 43)

affection: moderate feelings of warmth, tenderness, and fondness
antipathy: opposition that settled as involuntary feelings of dislike, aversion, or repugnance
arise: come about
bide: wait with expectation
completion: carrying out fully; fulfillment
course: period of events
divorce: legal(ly) dissolve (of) the marriage (with)
fragrance: pleasant and favorable impression
love: warm attraction with strong affection and ↻

concern for the good of the other
patience: calm endurance under suffering or provocation
perchance: maybe; perhaps; possibly
permissible: formally allowed or permitted
renewed: made like new
resentment: feelings of bitter hurt or indignant displeasure, from experiencing something regarded as an undeserved wrong, insult, or injury
returned: come back

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2. Divorce is strongly condemned in the Bahá'í Teachings. If, however, antipathy or resentment develop between the marriage partners, divorce is permissible after the lapse of one full year. During this year of patience, the husband is obliged to provide for the financial support of his wife and children, and the couple is urged to strive to reconcile their differences.

(Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in Notes of *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, pp. 210-11)

antipathy: opposition that has settled as involuntary feelings of dislike, aversion, or repugnance
condemned: disapproved of and pronounced as wrong without reservation
develop: come about gradually
differences: disagreements in opinion; disputes; quarrels
divorce: legal dissolution of one's marriage
lapse: passage in time
obliged: compelled or bound by moral responsibility
permissible: formally allowed or permitted

provide: supply what is needed
reconcile: restore friendship and harmony, and settle
resentment: feelings of bitter hurt or indignant displeasure, from experiencing something regarded as an undeserved wrong, insult, or injury
strive: devote serious energy or effort
urged: under pressing persuasion
year of patience: For Bahá'ís this is a year of living apart for the purpose of seeking reconciliation, while refraining from sexual activity and the courting of others.

3. 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.

(Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990, Vol. I, p. 239, #535)

antipathy: opposition that has settled as involuntary feelings of dislike, aversion, or repugnance
approval: decision to accept as suitable or satisfactory
conditional: allowed but dependent
divorce: legal dissolution of a marriage
grounds: cause or basis
intense: existing in a high degree and deeply felt

permission: given formal consent
reconciliation: restoration of friendship and harmony and settling of differences
removal: going away; elimination
Spiritual Assembly: local Administrative Body of the Bahá'í community
utterly: to the fullest extent; totally
valid: well-grounded on principle, truth, and fact [kind of]

4. Regarding the Bahá'í teachings on divorce. While the latter has been made permissible by Bahá'u'lláh yet He has strongly discouraged its practice, for if not checked and seriously controlled it leads gradually to the disruption of family life and to the disintegration of society.

(Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990, Vol. I, pp. 238-39, #534)

checked: caused to be slowed or stopped
controlled: restrained or regulated with power
discouraged: persuaded us to refrain by disfavoring
disintegration: breaking up and destruction of the unity
disruption: disturbance or breaking up of the orderly course

divorce: the legal dissolution of a marriage
gradually: through a series of progressing changes
leads: brings to a conclusion by its influence
permissible: formally allowed or permitted
practice: actual use or application
seriously: with earnest thought and endeavor
society: the order of human relationships

5. 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.

(Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990, Vol. II, p. 452, #2331)

blessing: special benefits of happiness and welfare
conflicting: clashing desires or tendencies
deprived: withheld from and shut out
effort: mental and physical exertion and attempt
jointly: unitedly; together

loyalties: in regard to feelings of faithfulness and allegiance
means: useful methods
suffer: be forced to endure mental pain, grief, and distress as a victim

6. It is certain that man's highest distinction is to be lowly before and obedient to his God; that his greatest glory, his most exalted rank and honor, depend on his close observance of the Divine commands and prohibitions. Religion is the light of the world, and the progress, achievement, and happiness of man result from obedience to the laws set down in the holy Books.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 71)

achievement: the attainment of a perfected state
before: in the presence of
Books: recorded Revelation of God; today, Bahá'u'lláh's Writings
certain: sure and too evident to be doubted
commands: given orders and directives
depend: is subject to or conditioned
distinction: special quality that sets [him] apart with recognition and honor
Divine: God inspired; holy; sacred
exalted: highly praised, elevated, and glorified
glory: distinguishing honor and admiration
happiness: the conscious enjoyment of the feelings of well-being, peace, and contentment
honor: distinguished decoration for moral ↗

worth, nobility, and excellence of character
laws: rules of conduct established and enforced by authority
light: illuminating spiritual knowledge and goodness
lowly: in an inferior, humble, and meek nature
obedience: willing submission and compliance
obedient: willing to obey submissively
observance: following and obeying
progress: advancement and improvement
prohibitions: laws forbidding certain things or actions
rank: degree or position of dignity, eminence, or excellence
result: comes about as a consequence

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. Divorce is strongly _____ and strongly _____ in the Bahá'í Teachings. What are the meanings of these two words? _____
and _____
2. Only two conditions existing between a husband and wife are considered grounds for divorce in the Bahá'í Faith. The conditions are irreconcilable _____ or _____
3. A year of patience (also referred to as a year of *waiting*) provides the couple with the opportunity to reconcile their differences so that affection may be renewed between them. Reconciliation implies that they will work at _____

4. How can married Bahá'ís utilize the teachings to prevent antipathy or resentment from occurring? _____

5. If a person persistently feels antipathy or resentment towards their spouse and wants a divorce, they must contact their Local Spiritual Assembly to initiate
 - a. a year of waiting.
 - b. reconciliation.
 - c. a year of patience.
 - d. the divorce.
6. If, while going through a divorce, a Bahá'í fails to abide by the Local Spiritual Assembly's decisions, he or she is in jeopardy of losing many sacred Bahá'í rights and privileges. This is because a Local Spiritual Assembly must approve the divorce.
 - true false
7. Divorce disrupts family life and causes conflicting loyalties with the children. What, on the other hand, are some positive effects on the family when the adult members struggle to overcome differences and are able to preserve their marriage? _____

8. Since humankind is one, divorce of one couple affects an entire society. What might be the positive effects on society when couples successfully overcome difficulties and maintain their marriages? _____

9. Which are true about the Bahá'í laws of divorce?
 - a. You must have permission from your Local Spiritual Assembly to divorce.
 - b. The couple must have consent from their parents to have a divorce.
 - c. You must observe a year of patience set by your Local Spiritual Assembly before a divorce can take place.
 - d. The National Spiritual Assembly can grant an instant divorce.
10. As you understand the Bahá'í Writings, list the following in order of priority or importance. (1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th) (the answer is not found in the quotations or introduction)

_____ one's career	_____ service to the Faith
_____ one's marriage	_____ passion in marriage

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 Bahá'í laws of divorce, describe what **you** are inspired to put into reality and action. **I will make conscious efforts to...** _____

From a Tablet by 'Abdu'l-Bahá...

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 ... 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 should 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.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, cited in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990, Vol. I, pp. 236-37, #530)

ANSWERS: *Affirming treasures...*

1. condemned and discouraged — condemned: disapproved of and pronounced as wrong without reservation; discouraged: persuaded us to refrain by disfavoring
2. antipathy and resentment
3. restoration of friendship and harmony and settling of differences
4. nearly all answers will be valuable
5. a and c
6. true
7. nearly all answers will be valuable
8. nearly all answers will be valuable
9. a and c
10. all answers are valuable. Collectively the Bahá'í Writings give the highest value to maintaining one's marriage.