

# The Principle of Consultation

## INTRODUCTION: *Approaching the threshold...*

What is Bahá'í consultation? It is, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, "spiritual conference,"<sup>1</sup> where a group of people or an institution of the Faith comes together in an atmosphere of love and unity for the purpose of addressing a common issue or concern. Their aim: to reach a consensus with a resolution that will best serve the true purpose of all those affected by its collective decision. It is respectful, kind, and sincere, with interested, composed engagement by all. "And, when they are called upon to arrive at a certain decision," the beloved Guardian wrote, "they should, after dispassionate, anxious and cordial consultation, turn to God in prayer, and with earnestness and conviction and courage record their vote and abide by the voice of the majority..."<sup>2</sup>

Of its great significance, Bahá'u'lláh wrote: "No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation."<sup>3</sup>

"It is important to realise," the Universal House of Justice reminds us, "that the spirit of Bahá'í consultation is very different from that current in the decision-making processes of non-Bahá'í bodies."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore: "Consultation is no easy skill to learn, requiring as it does the subjugation of all egotism and unruly passions, the cultivation of frankness and freedom of thought as well as courtesy, openness of mind and wholehearted acquiescence in a majority decision."<sup>5</sup>

"Consultation is one of the greatest bounties given to man. It is an art, a key which can unlock the mysteries of life and open the door to answers to the most perplexing questions – questions of intimate and personal concern, or question of world-wide significance. It is a major tool for the coming-of-age of the human race, a fundamental element in the bringing into being of a new world civilization."<sup>6</sup>

This study does not attend to the mechanics, process, or details of consultation, but will focus instead on its importance, value, and necessity as a vital component of Bahá'í life.



**Brazier (fire-container) and samovar (vessel for tea)  
belonging to the Báb**  
*Let us have tea and consult together...*

## 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 about the importance and value of consultation.

<sup>1</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 72 ¶31.1

<sup>2</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 64

<sup>3</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, cited in *The Compilation of Compilations: Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990*, Vol. I, p. 93 #167

<sup>4</sup> From a letter written by the Universal House of Justice 6 March 1970 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, cited in *The Compilation of Compilations: Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990*, Vol. I, p. 108 #209

<sup>5</sup> *Messages From the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, The Third Epoch of the Formative Age*, p. 95 ¶37.9

<sup>6</sup> John E. Kolstoe, *Consultation: A Universal Lamp of Guidance*, p. 5

## 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...*
  - A. **Read the quotation** out loud in its entirety.
2. **CONFIRMING MEANING:** *A spray from the fountain of light...*

To better understand certain words used in the quotation, take turns with the following:

  - A. Each participant **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.
  - C. Repeat A and B above until everyone is satisfied with their understanding of the words.
3. **FINDING VALUE:** *Mining the gems of truth...*
  - A. **Read the quotation** out loud again in its entirety.
  - B. Take turns **stating each basic fact or truth** you can find in the quotation about **the importance and value of consultation**.

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

1. *The Great Being saith: The heaven of divine wisdom is illumined with the two luminaries of consultation and compassion. Take ye counsel together in all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding.*

(Bahá'u'lláh, *Fountain of Wisdom*, p. 155 ¶11.15)

**bestower:** the deliverer of boundless spiritual gifts from God; "...bestowals which are the wisdom and guidance of God and the favor of God, which constitute spiritual progress." (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 34 ¶1.8)  
**compassion:** sympathetic consciousness of the distress of others and the desire to alleviate it  
**consultation:** "...true consultation is spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love." (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 72-73 ¶31.2)

**counsel:** to spiritual discussions while seeking divine solutions  
**divine wisdom:** God's deep and thorough knowledge and understanding of truth and reality  
**Great Being:** God  
**heaven:** most sublime or exalted place or condition  
**illumined:** cast with the light of spiritual knowledge and understanding  
**luminaries:** sources of spiritual light  
**understanding:** rational and intellectual powers to distinguish truth from falsehood  
**way:** rightful and true course

2. *The intent of what hath been revealed from the Pen of the Most High is that consultation may be fully carried out among the friends, inasmuch as it is and will always be a cause of awareness and of awakening and a source of good and well-being.*

(Bahá'u'lláh, cited in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990, Vol. I, p. 93 #170)

**awakening:** being roused or stirred to become spiritually aware, active, and alert  
**awareness:** a state of being conscious, perceptive, and knowledgeable  
**consultation:** "...true consultation is spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love." (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of* ↗

*Universal Peace*, pp. 72-73 ¶31.2)  
**Pen of the Most High:** Manifestation of God, Bahá'u'lláh  
**revealed:** made known  
**source:** cause and origin  
**well-being:** state or condition of moral or physical wellness, happiness, and prosperity

3. *Consultation bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude. It is a shining light which, in a dark world, leadeth the way and guideth. For everything there is and will continue to be a station of perfection and maturity. The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation.*

(Bahá'u'lláh, cited in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990, Vol. I, p. 93 #168)

**awareness:** state of being conscious, perceptive, and knowledgeable about all things involved  
**bestoweth:** provides the gift of...  
**certitude:** an understanding of unfailing certainty and sureness  
**conjecture:** that which is guessed at, presumed, or disproven  
**consultation:** "...true consultation is spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love." (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 72-73 ¶31.2)

*Universal Peace*, pp. 72-73 ¶31.2)  
**light:** emanation of spiritual knowledge and goodness  
**manifest:** evident or obvious  
**maturity:** full development  
**perfection:** the greatest degree of excellence  
**transmuteth:** changes to a higher form  
**understanding:** rational and intellectual powers to distinguish truth from falsehood  
**way:** rightful and true course

4. Man must consult on all matters, whether major or minor, so that he may become cognizant of what is good. Consultation giveth him insight into things and enableth him to delve into questions which are unknown. The light of truth shineth from the faces of those who engage in consultation. Such consultation causeth the living waters to flow in the meadows of man's reality, the rays of ancient glory to shine upon him, and the tree of his being to be adorned with wondrous fruit. The members who are consulting, however, should behave in the utmost love, harmony and sincerity towards each other. The principle of consultation is one of the most fundamental elements of the divine edifice. Even in their ordinary affairs the individual members of society should consult.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990, Vol. I, p. 97 #180)

**adorned:** spiritually advantaged or enhanced  
**cognizant:** aware and have knowledge  
**consult:** collaborate on ideas, discuss together with others, and make collective decisions  
**consultation:** "...true consultation is spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love." (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 72-73 ¶31.2)  
**delve:** search deeply  
**divine edifice:** God's sacred, complex system providing order to chaos  
**enableth:** provides means and opportunity [for]  
**fruit:** results, outcomes, and consequences  
**fundamental:** basic and essential

**harmony:** complimentary and pleasant agreement  
**insight:** a deep understanding or clear perspective  
**light:** emanation of spiritual knowledge and goodness  
**love:** vulnerable, unconditional willingness for spiritual intimacy, dominated by warm-hearted affection, compassion, and concern for the good of all  
**man:** people  
**man's:** a person's  
**principle:** governing truth or standard  
**reality:** true and real existence  
**sincerity:** honesty and purity of intention  
**utmost:** greatest or highest degree [of]

5. Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation.

(Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 63)

**arbitrary:** rule by absolute authority [with]  
**authority:** exercise of power over thought, opinion, or behavior  
**Cause of God:** Bahá'í Faith  
**consultation:** "spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 72-73 #31.2)  
**dictatorial:** domineering, oppressive, or an arrogant overbearing  
**fellowship:** companionship, friendly association, and mutual sharing

**frank:** free, straightforward, open, and sincere expression  
**humble:** freedom from pride, arrogance, and assertiveness [in]  
**keynote:** guiding principle that everything relates to and aligns with  
**loving:** vulnerable, unconditional willingness for spiritual intimacy [in]  
**power:** force or influence  
**spirit:** disposition, outlook, or attitude

6. The principle of consultation, which constitutes one of the basic laws of the Administration, should be applied to all Bahá'í activities which affect the collective interests of the Faith, for it is through co-operation and continual exchange of thoughts and views that the Cause can best safeguard and foster its interests.

(Shoghi Effendi, cited in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990, Vol. I, pp. 103-04 #196)

**Administration:** institutions that unite, manage, and direct the affair of the Faith  
**collective:** common  
**constitutes:** composes or forms  
**consultation:** "spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *The* ▷

*Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 72-73 #31.2)  
**foster:** carefully promote the growth and development of  
**interests:** concerns and involvements  
**principle:** basic governing truth or standard  
**safeguard:** protect against loss or injury

7. Indeed, it has ever been the cherished desire of our Master, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that the friends in their councils, local as well as national, should by their candor, their honesty of purpose, their singleness of mind, and the thoroughness of their discussions, achieve unanimity in all things. Should this in certain cases prove impracticable the verdict of the majority should prevail, to which decision the minority must under all circumstances, gladly, spontaneously and continually, submit.

(Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 80)

**candor:** unreserved, frank, and sincere expression  
**certain cases:** exceptional or particular situations  
**cherished:** dearly held  
**councils:** Bahá'í administrative bodies including the Local and National Spiritual Assemblies, conventions etc.  
**impracticable:** incapable of being reasonably performed or accomplished  
**majority:** proposal having the greatest number of votes

**prevail:** rule and be enforced  
**spontaneously:** from a force within and not external  
**submit:** fully surrender or yield  
**thoroughness:** care, attention to detail, and completeness in all respects  
**unanimity:** being of one mind and in agreement by all people involved; consensus  
**verdict:** opinion or judgment

## SHARING EXERCISE: *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, one thing that was outstanding or inspiring and what spiritual feelings it enkindled. Please remind everyone not to remark on the comments of others.

One thing from the quotations that was outstanding or inspiring to me was \_\_\_\_\_

It made me feel \_\_\_\_\_

I felt this way because \_\_\_\_\_

## SOME QUESTIONS: *A cup from the showers of confirmation...*

### 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. So important is the principle of consultation that Bahá'u'lláh has instructed us to "Take ye counsel together in \_\_\_\_\_ matters."
2. Consultation is...
  - a. the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way.
  - b. the bestower of understanding.
  - c. a cause of awareness and of awakening.
  - d. a source of good and well-being.
  - e. like debate, a discussion or contest where you rigidly represent a side of a disagreement.
  - f. a shining light which, in a dark world, leadeth the way and guideth.
  - g. one of the most fundamental elements of the divine edifice.
  - h. constitutes one of the basic laws of the Administration.
  - i. a means of getting your way with something you think is right.
  - j. the keynote of the Cause of God.
  - k. very different from that current in the decision-making processes of non-Bahá'í bodies.
3. The principle of consultation should be applied to *all* Bahá'í activities which affect the collective interests of the Faith.
  - true
  - false
4. Shoghi Effendi wrote: "Consultation, frank and unfettered, is the bedrock of this unique Order."<sup>1</sup> What do you think "unfettered" mean? \_\_\_\_\_

Continued on next page...

<sup>1</sup> In the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi, appended to a letter dated 18 November 1933 written on his behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, cited in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990, Vol. I, p.103 #192

5. In which of the following gatherings does Bahá'í consultation take place?

a. at Feast  
 b. meetings of the Local Spiritual Assembly  
 c. conventions  
 d. devotions  
 e. can you list some others? \_\_\_\_\_

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6. The Universal House of Justice wrote: "The Local Spiritual Assembly, however, is not the only institution or agency to which the friends may turn for consultation on personal matters. Such consultation could be held with members of one's family, with friends, or with experts."<sup>1</sup> Can you give an example of how this might happen? \_\_\_\_\_

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7. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote: "Settle all things, both great and small, by consultation. Without prior consultation, take no important step in your own personal affairs. Concern yourselves with one another. Help along one another's projects and plans. Grieve over one another. Let none in the whole country go in need. Befriend one another until ye become as a single body, one and all..."<sup>2</sup> Consultation seems to be an expression of the central theme of this beautiful Faith, which is...

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8. What is the "keynote" (guiding principle everything relates to and aligns with) of the Cause of God? \_\_\_\_\_  
and \_\_\_\_\_

### APPLICATION: *Showing forth divine light...*

#### Facilitator

Read through #1 together and proceed as stated. Then take time for the participants to write out their individual plans for action in #2. (these are not shared) When everyone has finished, move on to the closing reading.

#### 1. IMAGINING THE POSSIBILITIES: *Visions of radiant lights...*

**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....**" Suggest as many ideas as you want.

#### 2. DECIDING ACTION: *Mirroring forth a beam of light...*

From your experience in this study class on "The Principle of Consultation," describe what **you** are inspired to put into reality and action. **I will make conscious efforts to...** \_\_\_\_\_

**My next step will be...** \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>1</sup> From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer dated 8 April 1975, cited in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990, Vol. I, p.110 #211

<sup>2</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990, Vol. I, pp.98-99 #185

## CLOSING MEDITATION: A *heart song...*

### A talk on true consultation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá at Hotel Plaza, Chicago, Illinois, 1912.

In this Cause consultation is of vital importance, but spiritual conference and not the mere voicing of personal views is intended. In France I was present at a session of the senate, but the experience was not impressive. Parliamentary procedure should have for its object the attainment of the light of truth upon questions presented and not furnish a battleground for opposition and self-opinion. Antagonism and contradiction are unfortunate and always destructive to truth. In the parliamentary meeting mentioned, altercation and useless quibbling were frequent; the result, mostly confusion and turmoil; even in one instance a physical encounter took place between two members. It was not consultation but comedy.

The purpose is to emphasize the statement that 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. It is better then to have the opinion of a wise, sagacious man; otherwise, contradiction and altercation, in which varied and divergent views are presented, will make it necessary for a judicial body to render decision upon the question. Even a majority opinion or consensus may be incorrect. A thousand people may hold to one view and be mistaken, whereas one sagacious person may be right. Therefore, 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 foundation.

The most memorable instance of spiritual consultation was the meeting of the disciples of Jesus Christ upon the mount after His ascension. They said, "Jesus Christ has been crucified, and we have no longer association and intercourse with Him in His physical body; therefore, we must be loyal and faithful to Him, we must be grateful and appreciate Him, for He has raised us from the dead, He made us wise, He has given us eternal life. What shall we do to be faithful to Him?" And so they held council. One of them said, "We must detach ourselves from the chains and fetters of the world; otherwise, we cannot be faithful." The others replied, "That is so." Another said, "Either we must be married and faithful to our wives and children or serve our Lord free from these ties. We cannot be occupied with the care and provision for families and at the same time herald the Kingdom in the wilderness. Therefore, let those who are unmarried remain so, and those who have married provide means of sustenance and comfort for their families and then go forth to spread the message of glad-tidings." There were no dissenting voices; all agreed, saying, "That is right." A third disciple said, "To perform worthy deeds in the Kingdom we must be further self-sacrificing. From now on we should forego ease and bodily comfort, accept every difficulty, forget self and teach the Cause of God." This found acceptance and approval by all the others. Finally a fourth disciple said, "There is still another aspect to our faith and unity. For Jesus' sake we shall be beaten, imprisoned and exiled. They may kill us. Let us receive this lesson now. Let us realize and resolve that though we are beaten, banished, cursed, spat upon and led forth to be killed, we shall accept all this joyfully, loving those who hate and wound us." All the disciples replied, "Surely we will — it is agreed; this is right." Then they descended from the summit of the mountain, and each went forth in a different direction upon his divine mission.

This was true consultation. This was spiritual consultation and not the mere voicing of personal views in parliamentary opposition and debate.

('Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp.72-73 ¶31.1-31.4)

## **ANSWERS: *Affirming treasures...***

1. all
2. a, b, c, d, f, g, h, j, and k
3. true
4. anything similar to: fully uninhibited, unrestrained, and unrestricted
5. a, b, c, and in e: all answers are valuable
6. all answers are valuable
7. **unity:** a heartfelt condition of peace, love, and harmony in human relations, free of conflict, contention, dissension, and the struggle for dominance
8. humble fellowship *and* the spirit of frank and loving consultation

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