

# 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 are composed of many simpler systems or units that are 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 comprises numerous organized systems, including the respiratory, circulatory, and nervous systems, among others. The health and development of the whole body depend on the proper functioning of each of these systemic 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 still has certain requirements that make it less damaging to those involved and to 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...*
  - 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 **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: The Most Holy Book*, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992), par. 68, p. 43.

**affection:** moderate feelings of warmth, tenderness, and fondness  
**antipathy:** opposition that settles 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 dissolution 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 undeserved wrong, insult, or injury  
**returned:** come back

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 the Universal House of Justice

Cited in *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992), Notes no. 100, 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 undeserved wrong, insult, or injury  
**strive:** devote serious energy or effort  
**urged:** strongly advised  
**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

“Divorce”, In *The Compilation of Compilations: Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990*, (Maryborough: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991), vol. I, no. 535, p. 239.

**antipathy:** opposition that settles 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  
**independently:** free from the control and influence of others

**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

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

“Divorce”, In *The Compilation of Compilations: Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990*, (Maryborough: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991), vol. I, no. 534, pp. 238-39.

**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

“Preserving Bahá’í Marriages”, In *The Compilation of Compilations: Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990*, (Maryborough: Bahá’í Publications Australia, 1991), vol. II, no. 2331, p. 452.

**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:** 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*, (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1975, 1979 printing), p. 71.

**achievement:** the attainment of a perfected state  
**before:** in the presence of  
**Books:** recorded Revelation of God, today the 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 or her] 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:** status of being highly regarded 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  
**man:** humanity  
**man’s:** a person’s  
**obedience:** willing submission and compliance  
**obedient:** willing to obey submissively  
**observance of:** following and complying with  
**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 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. 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, they risk 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, the 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? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Continued on next page...

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
  - \_\_\_\_\_ one's marriage
  - \_\_\_\_\_ service to the Faith
  - \_\_\_\_\_ passion in marriage

### 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 "Bahá'í Marriage Laws," describe what ***you*** are inspired to put into reality and action. ***I will make conscious efforts to...*** \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

#### 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.

Upon you be the glory of Abhá!

—`Abdu'l-Bahá

“Divorce”, In *The Compilation of Compilations: Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990*, (Maryborough: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991), vol. I, no. 530, pp. 236-37.

## **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 great value to maintaining one's marriage.

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