

Bahá'u'lláh's Life and Mission

“This is the One Who Hath Glorified the Son”

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Introduction

In the tablet entitled the Lawh-i-Aqdas (Most Holy Tablet), also known as the Tablet to the Christians, Bahá'u'lláh refers to multiple biblical verses regarding the Return of Christ and unequivocally states that He is the fulfillment of these prophecies. One such prophecy comes from the Gospel of John:

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. [John 16:12-14]

In reference to the above verses and in declaration of His Own Mission Bahá'u'lláh states,

This is the Word which the Son concealed, when to those around Him He said: “Ye cannot bear it now.” ... Say, verily, He hath testified of Me, and I do testify of Him. Indeed, He hath purposed no on other than Me.... Verily, He Who is the Spirit of Truth is come to guide you unto all truth. He

speaketh not as prompted by His own self, but as bidden by Him Who is the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. [Lawh-i-Aqdas ¶7, 10]

With clear and straightforward language, Bahá'u'lláh claims to be the Word spoken of by Jesus Christ, to bring that which Christ necessarily concealed in the Christian Revelation, and to be “purposed” by Christ. Furthermore, in a statement that expresses His solidarity with Christ, Bahá'u'lláh states, “*Say, this is the One Who hath glorified the Son and hath exalted His Cause*” [Lawh-i-Aqdas ¶11]. Questions arise, such as: How does Bahá'u'lláh glorify Christ and exalt His Cause? And in what manner should followers of Bahá'u'lláh do the same?

For the purpose of understanding more about this aspect of Bahá'u'lláh's life and mission, this paper will examine three ways in which Bahá'u'lláh glorifies the Son and exalts His Cause, these being that Bahá'u'lláh quotes, explains, and defends Christian scripture; supplements Christ's teachings according to the needs of a fast-evolving society; and speaks of Jesus Christ as an existing eternal spiritual Reality. The duty of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh to teach these aspects of Christ's life and mission will be examined.

Quoting, Explaining, and Defending Christian Scripture

Bahá'u'lláh glorifies Christ and exalts His Cause by inextricably linking His Revelation with that of Christ and by confirming New Testament passages and explaining their meanings. For example, in *Gems of Divine Mysteries* Bahá'u'lláh quotes prophecies about a mighty personage represented in fantastic imagery in the Book of Revelation: “*His eyes were as a flame of fire*”, and “*brass-like were His feet*”, and “*out of His mouth goeth a two-edged sword*” [Revelation 1:14-16; 2:18; 19:15]. Bahá'u'lláh states that these verses are obviously not to be interpreted literally, then challenges the reader to reflect on the scripture's inner meanings. Those verses are, He states, “*of such surpassing eloquence and clarity as to mark the loftiest heights of utterance and the epitome of wisdom*” [GDM ¶72]. Bahá'u'lláh then proceeds to explain, in a seven-paragraph commentary, the truths hidden within those verses. Through His

explanation we learn that the imagery refers to the qualities, powers, and circumstances of the Promised One.

Additional examples in which Bahá'u'lláh as well as the Báb and 'Abdu'l-Bahá embrace biblical Scripture and explain its meanings, can be found throughout the Bahá'í Writings.¹ Although in today's world there is much cynicism about biblical scripture,² the Bahá'í Writings show absolute respect for both the Hebrew and Christian Testaments. Referring to the Book of the Revelation, widely acknowledged to be one of the most challenging books of the Christian Testament in terms of its seemingly “baffling and impenetrable” imagery,³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphatically states, “*This is the truth and what truth can be greater than that announced by the Revelation of St. John the Divine.*” [SWAB no. 3.2]

In addition to glorifying Christ and exalting His Cause by explaining verses from the Christian Testament, the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith often quote Christian scriptures solely to draw on the spiritual truths that they contain. 'Abdu'l-Bahá includes references to the Christian scriptures in most of His Tablets of the Divine Plan (one of three charters of the Bahá'í Faith), thereby demonstrating that understanding of the Bible is essential to the teaching effort. For example, in His April 8, 1916 Tablet to the United States and Canada, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, “*In short, O ye believers of God! Exalt your effort and magnify your aims. His Holiness Christ says: Blessed are the poor, for theirs shall be the Kingdom of Heaven*” [TDP no. 6.12]. We can speculate that 'Abdu'l-Bahá used that quotation because those to whom He was talking were familiar with that biblical verse – He was speaking to His audience in the language of their religious tradition. In doing so, He also honors the Christian scripture.

Bahá'u'lláh not only quotes and explains Christian scriptures, but also defends the spiritual integrity of these texts against claims that their teachings have been corrupted. He states,

We have also heard a number of the foolish of the earth assert that the genuine text of the heavenly Gospel doth not exist amongst the Christians How grievously they have erred! How oblivious of the fact that such a statement imputeth the gravest injustice and tyranny to a gracious and

loving Providence! How could God, when once the Day-star of the beauty of Jesus had disappeared from the sight of His people ... cause His holy Book, His most great testimony amongst His creatures, to disappear also? What law could be their stay and guide? [KI 89]

In addition to quoting, explaining, and defending the Christian scriptures, Bahá'u'lláh glorifies Christ and exalts His Cause as He adopts the literary style of the Christian Beatitudes and continues them in the Lawh-i-Aqdas.⁴ The Beatitudes (or Blessings) are found in the gospel verses commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Plain (in Luke 6) and the Sermon on the Mount (in Matthew 5). These “sermons” summarize many of Christ’s teachings such as the importance of justice, woe to the oppressor, the law of forgiveness, the call for unconditional love, the need for sacrificial service, and the necessity of building one’s life on sound spiritual principles. The delivery is in a distinctive style. The following is an excerpt:

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. [Matthew 5:3-5]

Bahá'u'lláh reveals twenty-one verses in the style of the Beatitudes in His closing passages of the Lawh-i-Aqdas. The following is an excerpt:

Say: Blessed the slumberer who is awakened by My Breeze.

Blessed the lifeless one who is quickened through My reviving breaths.

Blessed the eye that is solaced by gazing at My beauty.

Blessed the wayfarer who directeth his steps towards the Tabernacle of My glory and majesty. [Lawh-i-Aqdas]

Bahá'u'lláh’s stylistic embrace and continuation of the Beatitudes honors the Christian Beatitudes and is a literary reminder that

Bahá'u'lláh and Jesus Christ “*are the same Luminaries and the self-same Mysteries*” [GDM ¶44].

Because Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá show reverence for and use biblical scripture in Their teaching, it follows that Bahá'ís should do the same; that is, to reverently quote and explain its verses in light of the Bahá'í Writings, particularly when teaching the Faith to those from a biblical tradition. A question that sometimes arises about this topic revolves around the value of studying or quoting biblical verses when the biblical text lacks the word-for-word authenticity of the Bahá'í Writings. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged by biblical scholars that the New Testament texts were composed by many writers and editors after the Ascension of Christ and that the scriptures may not represent Christ's exact words.⁵ In this regard, the biblical text does not have the word-for-word authenticity of the Bahá'í Writings as the revealed Word of God.⁶ This knowledge is, of course, essential in placing the biblical scriptures in the context of progressive revelation and in understanding the unique authority of the Bahá'í Writings. It would be important to share this knowledge with wisdom when teaching the Faith. However, it should also be noted that in the hundreds of examples of Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá quoting or explaining biblical references, there is not one incident (found by this author) in which a biblical verse was referenced along with a disclaimer that the biblical text may not represent the exact words of the Christ, or that a book of the Christian scriptures just quoted may not be completely authentic. On the contrary, the Christian text is referenced in a straightforward manner that honors that text as scripture.

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was in London, He was invited to write an inscription in a church Bible. He wrote: “*THIS book is the Holy Book of God, of celestial Inspiration. It is the Bible of Salvation, the Noble Gospel. It is the mystery of the Kingdom and its light. It is the Divine Bounty, the sign of the guidance of God*” [ABL 17]. Of course, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá knew the historical circumstances surrounding the biblical texts and the degree to which they could or could not be considered authentic. Yet He wrote of these scriptures and referenced them in such terms as “the Divine Bounty” and “the sign of the guidance of God.” This is the spirit in which Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá quote and explain Christian scriptures and it would be

altogether appropriate and, indeed, incumbent upon the followers of Bahá'u'lláh to do the same.

Christ's Teachings Supplemented

A second way in which Bahá'u'lláh glorifies Christ and exalts His Cause is that He supplements Christ's teachings according to the needs of a fast-evolving society. The use of the word "supplements" may come as a surprise to some; however, this word was specifically chosen for this context by Shoghi Effendi. In the following excerpt from *God Passes By*, Shoghi Effendi states that Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation "supplements" the teachings of previous Revelations:

The Revelation identified with Bahá'u'lláh abrogates unconditionally all the Dispensations gone before it ... [and] supplements their teachings with such laws and ordinances as conform to the imperative needs, and are dictated by the growing receptivity, of a fast evolving and constantly changing society. [GPB 100]

Because the Bahá'í Faith claims to abrogate the social laws and organizational structures that were revealed or that evolved in the previous Dispensations, the "teachings" referred to in the above quotation; that is, those teachings that are supplemented, must be the foundational spiritual teachings of earlier religions. While these spiritual teachings are changeless and eternal, with each succeeding Revelation they are supplemented with teachings for greater understandings and wider applications commensurate with new human capacity. The Cause of Bahá'u'lláh glorifies Christ and exalts His Cause by supplementing Christ's teachings according to the needs of this age.

The inevitable need for the teachings of the Christian Revelation to be supplemented is stated in the Gospel of John. The following verses attributed to Christ indicate that Christ had more to say to His followers but was restricted due to the human capacity of the time:

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will

Speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. [John 16:12-13]

In reference to these verses, Bahá'u'lláh states that His Revelation contains that which Christ had necessarily concealed: *This is the Word which the Son concealed, when to those around Him He said: "Ye cannot bear it now"* [Lawh-i-Aqdas ¶4]. To examine this supplementation dynamic, this section will look at three Christian topics: oneness, salvation, and the Kingdom of God on earth.

In the Epistle to the Galatians (attributed to St. Paul) there is a radical statement concerning the oneness of the followers of Christ: *"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"* [Galatians 3:28]. This verse harmonizes with other teachings in the Christian scriptures, including the entire 17th chapter of John which is a prayer in which Christ states His oneness with His followers and with God. An excerpt reads: *"And the glory which Thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as We are one"* [John 17:22].

In the Bahá'í Revelation, Bahá'u'lláh supplements Christ's teachings on oneness by clarifying that the oneness of humanity is a truth that holds irrespective of gender, ethnicity, class, or nationality. These points have not always been clear in Christian history, as evidenced by the use of certain Christian scriptures to preach ethnic exclusivity, promote the subjugation of women, and defend slavery.⁷ In repeatedly proclaiming the oneness of mankind, Bahá'u'lláh clearly teaches that all *"men and women are equal in the sight of God"* [PUP 174] and deserving of equal resources, education, and opportunity. Bahá'u'lláh is the first Manifestation of God in this Cycle to abolish slavery in writing. He states: *"It is forbidden you to trade in slaves, be they men or women. It is not for him who is himself a servant to buy another of God's servants, and this hath been prohibited in His Holy Tablet"* [KA ¶72]. Addressing another aspect of the oneness of humanity, Bahá'u'lláh teaches that *mankind is one regardless of religious orientation: "There is perfect brotherhood underlying humanity, for all are servants of one God and belong to one family under the protection of divine providence"* [PUP 129]. He also specifies that *humanity's oneness transcends*

geographical and political boundaries: “The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens” [GWB CXVII]. Thus, in a multitude of clear and straightforward teachings and laws, Bahá’u’lláh supplements Christ’s teachings regarding the oneness of humanity.

A second way that Bahá’u’lláh supplements Christ’s teachings has to do with the topic of salvation, expanding it from focus on the individual to mankind as a whole. Shoghi Effendi explains:

The Revelation associated with the Faith of Jesus Christ focused attention primarily on the redemption of the individual and the molding of his conduct, and stressed, as its central theme, the necessity of inculcating a high standard of morality and discipline into man, as the fundamental unit in human society. Nowhere in the Gospels do we find any reference to the unity of nations or the unification of mankind as a whole. When Jesus spoke to those around Him, He addressed them primarily as individuals rather than as component parts of one universal, indivisible entity. The whole surface of the earth was as yet unexplored, and the organization of all its peoples and nations as one unit could, consequently, not be envisaged, how much less proclaimed or established. [PDC 119]

Bahá’u’lláh has supplemented Christian teachings by enlarging the concept of salvation to include humanity collectively. He states, *“Verily, He [Jesus] said: ‘Come ye after Me, and I will make you to become fishers of men.’ In this day, however, We say: ‘Come ye after Me, that We may make you to become the quickeners of mankind”* [PDC 119-20]. The Bahá’í Writings teach principles and practices required for the unification, advancement, and salvation of all of the peoples of the world, including the necessity of universal compulsory education, the need for a universal auxiliary language, and the requirement for all of the kings and rulers of the earth to form a tribunal of nations to consult on the best interest of the people of the world [see PB 111-122].

A third example of how Bahá’u’lláh supplements Christ’s teachings has to do with expectations of the Kingdom of God on earth. In the Christian scriptures, the Lord’s Prayer states the assurance that: *“Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”* [Matthew

6:10]. Understandings of this verse have varied widely.⁸ The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh supplements this teaching through the principles and practices already mentioned and by introducing the Bahá'í Administrative Order, a unique design for human organization shaped by principles of social justice – an administrative framework upon which spiritual principles and practices can find full human expression and which is inherently protected from the corruption of power. Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order provides for the practical and spiritual realization of Christ's teachings concerning the Kingdom of God on earth. When Bahá'u'lláh's teachings are understood as described by Shoghi Effendi – as supplemental to (not unseating, usurping, or supplanting) the foundational teachings of Christ – the way is eased for productive Bahá'í/Christian dialogue.

Inherent in the recognition that the Bahá'í Faith supplements Christ's teachings is the acknowledgement that the Christian Revelation played an essential part in preparing the way for the Manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh. In the Persian Bayan, the Báb explicitly states that while recognition of the Dayspring of Revelation in each Dispensation is essential to true knowledge, one should praise and show gratitude to former Revelations:

True knowledge, therefore, is the knowledge of God, and this is none other than the recognition of His Manifestation in each Dispensation. Nor is there any wealth save in poverty in all save God and sanctity from aught else but Him—a state that can be realized only when demonstrated towards Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation. This doth not mean, however, that one ought not to yield praise unto former Revelations. On no account is this acceptable, inasmuch as it behooveth man, upon reaching the age of nineteen, to render thanksgiving for the day of his conception as an embryo. For had the embryo not existed, how could he have reached his present state? Likewise had the religion taught by Adam not existed, this Faith would not have attained its present stage. Thus consider thou the development of God's Faith until the end that hath no end. [PB V, 4; SWB p. 89]

However one may express the importance of recognizing the Manifestation of God for today, this expression must harmonize with

the Bahá'í mandate to show praise and gratitude for the teachings of Christ (as well as other Manifestations) and to recognize that the Bahá'í teachings are supplemental to Christ's religion.

Christ as an existing eternal spiritual Reality

Bahá'u'lláh states, "*This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future*" [KA ¶182]. To what is He referring? In light of the Bahá'í principle of progressive revelation, this passage can be understood as referring to the Voice of God expressed through all of the divine Messengers and the spiritual foundation that unites all religions. It follows, then, that from a Bahá'í perspective, it would be correct to say that the foundational teachings of Christ, as well as the spiritual reality of Christ, are eternal and changeless.

At this point, one might wonder how the mission of Bahá'u'lláh glorifies Christ and exalts His Cause while at the same time abrogating unconditionally the Dispensation associated with Christianity. Indeed, Shoghi Effendi states, "*The Revelation identified with Bahá'u'lláh abrogates unconditionally all the Dispensations gone before it*" [GPB 100]. However, further study reveals a qualifying distinction in this regard. Shoghi Effendi explains that while abrogating earlier Dispensations, "*the Revelation, of which Bahá'u'lláh is the source and center, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it*" [WOB 57-58]. Dispensations are abrogated, religions are not. In this context "Dispensations" indicate systems of governance and social regulations identified with various Manifestations of God, whereas "religions" indicate the "fundamentals of Their doctrines" [PDC 108]. Shoghi Effendi explains:

The Revelation, of which Bahá'u'lláh is the source and center, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it, nor does it attempt, in the slightest degree, to distort their features or to belittle their value. It disclaims any intention of dwarfing any of the Prophets of the past, or of whittling down the eternal verity of their teachings. It can, in no wise, conflict with the spirit that animates their claims, nor does it seek to undermine the basis of any man's allegiance to their cause. Its declared, its primary purpose is to enable every

adherent of these Faiths to obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clearer apprehension of its purpose. [WOB 57-58]

Bahá'u'lláh uncompromisingly upholds the eternal verities enshrined in the Christian Revelation. Indeed, according to the above passage, one purpose of the Bahá'í Faith is to enable those who identify with the Christian religion to obtain a fuller understanding of the eternal verities taught by Christ and to better grasp His purpose. While the Bahá'í Writings state that the laws and organizational structures associated with Christianity (the Christian Dispensation) have been abrogated, the Writings never speak of the Spirit of Christ as abrogated. The Bahá'í Writings confirm the power and relevance of Christ. For example, in reference to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, Bahá'u'lláh states the blessings of turning toward Christ: *“He it is Who purified the world. Blessed is the man who, with a face beaming with light, hath turned towards Him”* [GWB XXXVI]. The eternal and changeless dimension of Christ is expressed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in this passage from *Some Answered Questions*: *“Prophethood is the station of the heart of Christ, and the Holy Spirit is the station of His spirit”* [SAQ 27:8]. From these and many other like passages, it is evident that Christ and Bahá'u'lláh are continuous in their purpose.

Unequivocally and without the least reservation it [the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh] proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, and indispensable in their value to mankind. [WOB 58]

In His talks to audiences in the West (as recorded in *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, and Paris Talks*) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s consistently expresses Bahá'í belief in the existing eternal Reality of the Spirit of Christ. Notice how in the following excerpts ‘Abdu’l-Bahá speaks of the spiritual bounty of Christ not as a power abrogated, but as an existing eternal spiritual Reality:

Christ is ever in the world of existence. He has never disappeared out of it.... Rest assured that Christ is present.

The Spiritual beauty we see around us today is from the breathings of Christ. [ABL 41]

Although the people possess external eyes, yet the insight of the soul is blind ... and the bounties of His Holiness Christ save souls from these conditions. [PUP 626]

We must follow His example. We must emulate the Prophets of God. We must follow Jesus Christ. [PUP 42]

... the reality of Christ is an unlimited essence. The infinite and unlimited Reality cannot be bounded by any limitation. [PUP 443]

Jesus Christ lived two thousand years ago. Today we behold His manifest signs; His light is shining; His sovereignty is established; His traces are apparent; His bounties are effulgent. [PUP 308]

The reality of Christ was always in heaven and will always be. [PUP 245]

Jesus Christ established the religion of God through love. His sovereignty is everlasting. [PUP 211]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Perfect Example, demonstrates that it is correct for Bahá’ís to think and speak of Jesus Christ as “*an unlimited essence*” Whose bounties can “*save souls.*” Indeed, the station of Jesus Christ as an existing eternal spiritual Reality is conveyed in Bahá’u’lláh’s identity as “*Christ returned in the Glory of the Father*” [GPB 230]. Bahá’u’lláh states, “*If ye be intent on crucifying once again Jesus, the Spirit of God, put Me to death, for He hath once more, in My person, been made manifest unto you*” [GWB XLVII]. From this perspective, the entirety of the Bahá’í Revelation is, in a sense, the manifestation of Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God, the existing eternal spiritual Reality.

Conclusion

In the above study I have attempted to demonstrate three ways that Bahá'u'lláh glorifies Christ and exalts His Cause, those being that Bahá'u'lláh quotes, explains, and defends Christian scripture; supplements the spiritual teachings of Christ; and refers to Jesus Christ as an existing eternal spiritual Reality. This is not a definitive list, but it is a practical one in that these actions can and, I would propose, should find expression in the followers of Bahá'u'lláh. In the manner of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'ís can quote, explain, and defend Christian scripture; teach how Bahá'u'lláh supplements the spiritual teachings of Christ; and speak of Jesus Christ as an existing eternal spiritual Reality. These are three substantial ways in which Bahá'ís can honor and accurately convey Bahá'u'lláh's Self-proclaimed mission as "This is the One Who hath glorified the Son and hath exalted His Cause" [Lawh-i-Aqdas].

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“Resurrection of Christ” Memorandum from the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Sept. 14, 1987

NOTES

¹ See Borovicka, *Light of the Kingdom* for a compilation of Bahá’í teachings on biblical topics.

² Byers

³ Bauckham, p. 1287

⁴ See the Lawh-i-Aqdas ¶23

⁵ See Borovicka, pp. 191-193.

⁶ “The Bahá’ís believe that God’s Revelation is under His care and protection and that the essence, or essential elements, of what His Manifestations intended to convey has been recorded and preserved in Their Holy Books. However, as the sayings of the ancient Prophets were written down some time later, we cannot categorically state, as we do in the case of the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, that the words and phrases attributed to Them are Their exact words.” (From a letter of the Universal House of Justice, dated August 9, 1984, to an individual believer, cited in “Resurrection of Christ” Memorandum from the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, September 14, 1987)

⁷ For studies and commentary on the use of Christian scripture to teach ethnic exclusivity, preach gender superiority, and defend slavery, see Borg, Bristow, Carter, Elliott, Gager.

⁸ See Allison, p. 856