

# The Bahá'í Covenant

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Shoghi Effendi has given us a penetrating observation about the development of Bahá'í history. More than once in his writings he explained that the pattern of growth in the Faith is one of crises followed by victory. Such victory leads to greater crises resulting in a still mightier victory. He referred to this pattern of growth as part of the process of integration. The crises always consist of attacks against the Faith both from within and from without. Indeed, at times the external and the internal elements of opposition work hand in hand with each other. He also drew our attention to a simultaneous process of disintegration in human affairs. While this second process is destined, alas, to lead humanity to the depths of deterioration and misery, the integrative process will lead to the triumph and ascendancy of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh throughout the world.

Christianity and Islam are two major religions whose followers, based on the statements found in their scriptures, have always aspired to conquer spiritually the population of the entire planet. They have failed ever since the inception of their faiths to achieve their goals. What guarantee do we Bahá'ís have that the Bahá'í Faith will not follow the same path? Shoghi Effendi has dealt with this question in his World Order Letters. That which safeguards the realization of the promises of Bahá'u'lláh is the Lesser Covenant. This is incorporated in clear terms in the Law of Succession revealed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and confirmed in the Kitáb-i-'Ahd, Bahá'u'lláh's Will and Testament.

Such Lesser Covenants have existed in all past religions, but were not laid out in explicit texts. It is in this Lesser Bahá'í Covenant that is the guarantee against schism and sectarianism. 'Abdu'l-Bahá gives us this assurance: "*So firm and mighty is this Covenant that from the beginning of time*

*until the present day no religious Dispensation hath produced its like.*" (GPB 238) He also states: *"It is indubitably clear that the pivot of the Oneness of Mankind is nothing else but the power of the Covenant..."* (GPB 238) *"The power of the Covenant is as the heat of the sun which quickeneth and promoteth the development of all created things on earth."* (GPB 239) After referring to the "invincible strength" (GPB 295) and "energizing power" (GPB 295) of the Covenant, Shoghi Effendi highlights two specific functions the Covenant is designed to discharge:

- "To direct and canalize" the forces released by two successive Manifestations in order to "ensure their harmonious and continuous operation." (GPB 237)
- To safeguard the "unity and integrity" of the Faith. (GPB 295)

Two misconceptions about the Covenant exist. These misconceptions are fomented by non-Bahá'í scholars who wish to weaken the loyalty of the friends towards the covenant. These need to be clarified. I will deal briefly with each one in the light of the texts of our Faith.

- The first is that as long as one believes in the divinity of Bahá'u'lláh, the Covenant is of secondary importance, and can be set aside as a non-essential part of the Bahá'í Revelation.
- The second is that the epoch of the Covenant was the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and therefore after the passing of the Center of the Covenant this chapter in the history of the Faith is closed.

### **First Misconception**

In *God Passes By* Shoghi Effendi has explained that "the excellent and priceless heritage" (GP 314) referred to in the first sentence of the Kitáb-i-'Ahd is a reference to the Bahá'í Covenant. The full text of the sentence reads as follows: *"Within the treasury of trust and resignation We have bequeathed to Our heirs an excellent and priceless heritage."* (TB 219) Shoghi Effendi assures us that this heritage is the Covenant, and that therefore we are all in one sense Bahá'u'lláh's heirs. A moment's reflection will make it clear

that if we accept the source legacy to be a Divine Source, we cannot but accept the legacy itself. To do otherwise, would be inconceivable. When one rejects a legacy, does it not indicate a denial of one's love towards the Bequeather?

The "Epistle to the Son of the Wolf" was the last outstanding Tablet revealed by the Pen of Bahá'u'lláh. In this epistle, Bahá'u'lláh states that in His Crimson Book He has recorded a "word" which *"is capable of fully disclosing that force which is hid in men, nay, of redoubling its potency."* (ESW 32) In a letter written on his behalf by his secretary, Shoghi Effendi has pointed out that what Bahá'u'lláh meant by the "word" recorded in the Crimson Book was the power of the Covenant. The Crimson Book is a reference to the book of His Covenant, the passage above means that the power for unity which the "Covenant possesses and radiates." (LG 181) The passage in the Kitáb-i-'Ahd confirming the potency of this power is as follows: *"A mighty force, a consummate power lieth concealed in the world of being. Fix your gaze upon it and upon its unifying influence and not upon the differences which appear from it."* (TB 221) In these two brief sentences Bahá'u'lláh is in effect telling us that the power of the covenant is "concealed." To me it means that one has to reflect on the importance of this theme to uncover and grasp its importance. Bahá'u'lláh is also telling us that the Covenant is like a double-edged sword: it leads to unity, and it causes differences. We must focus our minds and hearts on its unifying influence. The Covenant is our legacy from Bahá'u'lláh Himself, and, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated, is the Pivot of the Oneness of Mankind. How is it possible for us to regard it as a matter of secondary importance?

## Second Misconception

The second misconception has to do with the assumption that the Covenant is outdated and obsolete. We must remember that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, when commenting on His own ministry, has written that this period was only the "morning of the Covenant." Thus if His Ministry was only the morning of the Covenant, we still have a whole blissful day ahead of us, till the end of the Dispensation. Two Tablets to this effect are

included in compilations of the Persian Tablets of the Master (*Muntakhabáti az Makátib-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá*, vol. 5, pp. 165, 213)

Thus we see that the Covenant was not only for the twenty-nine years of the Master's Ministry, but was bequeathed by Bahá'u'lláh to "posterity." (GPB 239) It is in this light that we could understand Bahá'u'lláh's statement when He described His Dispensation as "*a Day which shall not be followed by night.*" (GPB 245)

### **Who is a Covenant-Breaker?**

We should now have a quick look at Covenant-breaking to see what our texts say on this subject, to understand what are the reasons and motives that lead people to break the Covenant, and why we must shun them. The law of Succession is one of the most important ordinances revealed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas by Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'u'lláh says that in connection with the subject of endowments, the Supreme Authority in the Cause is the Manifestation of God. After Him and in accordance with His written covenant, specifically appointed "Aghsans" or Branches of the sacred Lote Tree will be the Centres of the Cause. After them, the focal point of the Covenant will be the Universal House of Justice. (KA 42)

In this same Most Holy Book and in the very first sentences, Bahá'u'lláh clearly stipulates that the acceptance of the manifestation and adherence to the laws revealed by Him are twin inseparable duties. One is not accepted without the other. (KA 1) Thus any person who denies and disregards the links in the chain of succession is regarded as a Covenant-breaker. The decision as to who is considered a Covenant-breaker rests always with the Authority or Central institution of the Cause which acts as Head of the Faith, at any given time. As stated earlier the Covenant leads to unity, as well as to differences. Bahá'u'lláh advised us to ignore the differences and to fix our gaze on the unifying power of the Covenant. The main body of the Faith of God, we should be well assured, will remain united, as has been designed by Almighty God to unify the world. The Hand of the Cause, A.Q. Faizi, used to say that in past Dispensations, when broken branches of the Tree of the Cause were planted, they grew and thrived; but in this Cause, such

broken branches, even if planted with care, are destined not to grow, but to wither away, leaving the Tree of the Cause, a single, matchless, and impregnable Entity. Thus we must be certain that Covenant-breaking cannot and will not create a breach or schism in the Cause.

### Why do we shun Covenant-breakers?

As to why we should shun Covenant-breakers 'Abdu'l-Bahá gives the example of contagious diseases such as leprosy and consumption. It is as simple as a scientific fact. Shoghi Effendi has given this matter further clarification. Shoghi Effendi described such crises as “blessings in disguise” and says “when viewed in their proper perspective, each of them is an agency for the purification and revitalization of the life of the community” and “is a compelling evidence of the indestructibility of its cohesive strength.” (GPB 61)

'Abdu'l-Bahá describes Covenant-breakers as “*mischief-makers*” who “*seek leadership*” (SWAB 214) and “*promote discord.*” (WT 9) Other motives mentioned by 'Abdu'l-Bahá include “*ambition,*” “*envy,*” and “*hate.*” (SWAB 163) He advises us that such people are “*sweet in words*” and “*appear as sheep*” yet inwardly they are “*ravens wolves.*” (SWAB 315) In His Will and Testament He warns us “*no doubt every vain glorious one that purposes dissension and discord will not openly declare his evil purposes.*” (WT 12) Shoghi Effendi amplifies this subject by adding other motives for Covenant-breaking. He describes such persons as “self-seeking adventurers” driven by such whims and inclinations as “unbounded presumption,” “abject perfidy,” “delusion,” “malice,” and, ironically enough, “incredible folly.” (TDH 65-66) “If a man cuts a cancer out of his body to preserve his health and very life, no one would suggest that for the sake of unity it would be reintroduced into the healthy organism. On the contrary, what was once a part of him has so radically changed as to have become a poison.” (LG 184) This does not mean that Covenant-breakers cannot be reinstated. Indeed we are told to pray for them, because such souls are not lost forever. They should be left, however, on their own. If they repent and the Head of the Faith is convinced that their repentance is sincere, they are joyously reinstated.

## 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Shoghi Effendi's Passing

The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (KA 42) does not seem to envisage that an appointed Branch, that is, the Guardian of the Cause, would co-exist with the Universal House of Justice. This would seem to contradict with the first part of the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. However, Shoghi Effendi has stated that the Master's Will was a "supplement" (WOB 19) to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and therefore could not "contradict" (WOB 4) the Most Holy Book. When we study 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament, we see that it is in three parts. Part one provides for the Guardian's participation in the Universal House of Justice as its member, and indeed, as its "sacred Head." Part two, however, envisages a divinely guided House of Justice without the presence and participation of the Guardian. Part three is relatively brief and does not deal with this issue.

The question before us is this: How can the Will of the Master be a "supplement" to, and in fact, "confirm" (WOB 19) the Most Holy Book, and yet in of its parts appear to contradict the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*? This is both an obscure matter and a mystery. This may well be why Shoghi Effendi kept telling the friends in the East and the West, in several letters, that the Will of the Master contained mysteries which they presently could not understand. In His Will and Testament, the Master has added that "obscure" (WT 20) matters in the Cause will arise, and it devolves upon the Universal House of Justice to elucidate them. In confirmation of this clause in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will, Shoghi Effendi wrote in 1924: "We must trust to time and the guidance of the God's Universal House of Justice to obtain a clearer and fuller understanding of its ['Abdu'l-Bahá's will's] provisions and implications." (BA 62) The manner in which the events unfolded in 1957 onwards, left certain facts on the ground, which created a situation that was clearly in full harmony with the text of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. As Shoghi Effendi had not appointed a successor, as Guardian and Authorized Interpreter, there was automatically no co-existence between any Appointed Branch and the Universal House of Justice.

After its election in 1963, the Universal House of Justice gradually lifted the veil on some of the mysteries. In three letters available to the friends in the compilation entitled

*Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-1986* (Letters numbers 5, 23, and 35), the Supreme Institution gave its elucidations of this “obscure question.” (WT 20)

These three letters clearly demonstrate that the provisions of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* are supreme, and obviously will remain inviolable and immutable, that the Universal House of Justice is independently and divinely guided by the Twin Manifestations of this Revelation, and that the beloved Guardian had even anticipated that the Universal House of Justice be formed in 1963. Three secondary questions arise which we need to address. They are:

1. Why did Shoghi Effendi refer to future Guardians?
2. Was he conscious of his imminent death and aware that he would not live to see the formation of the Universal House of Justice?
3. Why did the Guardian not write a Will and Testament?

### **Future Guardians?**

Regarding the first question and the reference of Shoghi Effendi to future Guardians, we must remember that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had incorporated this possibility in the first part of His Will. During Shoghi Effendi’s lifetime, there were living Aghsans who could have been chosen by him, if, as stipulated in the Will, he had decided that they were qualified for such a high office. And even then, his appointment had to be ratified by nine hands elected from the Body of the Hands of the Cause worldwide. Only the Guardian was authorized to set this process in motion. We could well conclude that by referring to future Guardians, he was doing so in the context of the first part of the Master’s Will.

Shoghi Effendi has given us a key to the resolution of this quandary. He wrote that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was following the same pattern adopted by Bahá’u’lláh in His own *Kitáb-i-’Ahd*. He indicated that Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had used an “identity of method” in the manner of succession. (WOB 4)

Bahá’u’lláh certainly knew that Muḥammad-‘Alí would be disloyal to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Rúhíyyih Khánum, in her *Priceless*

*Pearl* (pp. 11-12), tells us of an experience which a German woman doctor had one day in the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Her name was Dr. Fallscheer who was serving as a medical doctor in the Master's household and was present when a young teenager entered the room and approached 'Abdu'l-Bahá very reverently. After the Master told him something quietly, the teenager backed out with the same degree of respect and reverence. 'Abdu'l-Bahá then told Dr. Fallscheer that this young boy was His Elisha. He then added that Bahá'u'lláh had told Him that in the future He ['Abdu'l-Bahá] would have to appoint one of His own sons or grandsons to succeed Him. Yet Bahá'u'lláh ostensibly appointed Muḥammad-'Alí, in His Will, as the one to succeed 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Is this not a mystery? Was this designed by Bahá'u'lláh to protect 'Abdu'l-Bahá? Could He have done this to test the believers and at the same time to put Muḥammad-'Alí to test?

Shoghi Effendi has clearly stated in his "Dispensation" that 'Abdu'l-Bahá possessed "superhuman knowledge and perfection." (WOB 134) We must be sure, therefore, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá must have known that the two brothers and five male cousins of Shoghi Effendi, who were all Aghsans, would not be faithful to Shoghi Effendi. Could He have included this option in HIS Will possibly to keep these potential appointees within the pale of the Faith? Did He have other purposes, as Bahá'u'lláh might have? As we know, these seven Aghsans disobeyed Shoghi Effendi through their own pride and folly and disqualified themselves, by dropping out of the Faith just as Muḥammad-'Alí had done before.

### **How the texts on succession prove to be a major test?**

In the *Kitáb-i-Iqán* Bahá'u'lláh states: "*From time immemorial, even until eternity, the All-Mighty hath tried, and will continue to try, His Servants, so that light may be distinguished from darkness, truth from falsehood, right from wrong, guidance from error, happiness from misery, and roses from thorns.*" (KI 8) In the same book Bahá'u'lláh says that such tests appear in "every season" (KI 53) or stage in the evolution of each Dispensation. It is reasonable therefore to assume that there are undoubtedly mysteries deposited in God's Grand Scheme of World Order. We might also draw a conclusion as

stated earlier that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had included the possibility of future Guardians, in order to encourage His grandsons to remain loyal and not break the Covenant.

### **Was Shoghi Effendi aware of his imminent passing?**

Some light is shed on this issue in Violette's "Tribute to Amatu'l-Bahá." Two incidents are recorded which help us to understand this matter more clearly. In one case, towards the end of his life, the Guardian asked Rúhíyyih Khánum what would become of her, once he had gone. Of course, Rúhíyyih Khánum was disturbed and shocked by the question. He then proceeded to answer his own question, by saying that he assumed that she would travel and encourage the friends. As we all know, this is precisely what Amatu'l-Bahá did after the election of the Universal House of Justice.

The second incident is when, during his last few days, in the hotel in London, he told Amatu'l-Bahá that he did not want to go back to Haifa and that she should go alone. As Shoghi Effendi had just had a bad flu, Rúhíyyih Khánum thought that it was because of his physical condition that he had said what he did. Furthermore, on June 4, 1957 Shoghi Effendi wrote some five months before his own passing that the "destiny" and "security" of the Faith and the "spiritual health" of the Bahá'í community have now to depend on close collaboration between the Hands of the Cause and National Spiritual Assemblies. (MBW 123) In his last message to the Bahá'í world, Shoghi Effendi called for the appointment of a new Auxiliary Board whose specific function would be the protection of the Faith. In the same last general message he conferred upon the Hands of the Cause the title of "Chief Stewards of Bahá'u'lláh's Embryonic World Commonwealth." (MBW 126) It was on that account that the Hands of the Cause were able to rally the friends to complete faithfully the objectives of the Ten Year Crusade. It is highly significant in this connection to recall that in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas Bahá'u'lláh seems to have foreseen the possibility of the termination of the line of the Appointed Branches at a time when the Universal House of Justice was not yet formed. During such an interregnum "*the people of Bahá*" according to the Most Holy Book, who "*speak not except by his leave,*" (KA 42) would temporarily conduct the affairs of the

Cause, pending the establishment of the Universal House of Justice. It is truly significant that Bahá'u'lláh so clearly foreshadowed the future.

### **Why did Shoghi Effendi not write a Will and Testament?**

This very question was put to the House of Justice. Here is its response: "That Shoghi Effendi did not leave a Will cannot be adduced as evidence of his failure to obey Bahá'u'lláh. Rather should we acknowledge that in his very silence there is wisdom and a sign of his infallible guidance?"

This statement clearly implies that not leaving a will in a traditional way was a conscious act on the part of Shoghi Effendi. As indicated above, Shoghi Effendi gave advice to Rúhíyyih Khánúm regarding her activities after his passing. Is it conceivable that he who was the Guardian and Protector of the Cause of God would think about the future of his wife, but not consider the security of the Faith after his own passing? The Hand of the Cause Tarázu'lláh Samandari, after the passing of the Guardian, used to say that if Shoghi Effendi was not sure about the security of the Cause of God after his death, he would not have passed away at that time. How very perceptive was this Hand of the Cause? Indeed Shoghi Effendi had written that His "Dispensation" was to be considered as a "supplement" (LDG 65) to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament. He had actually told several Hands of the Cause and pilgrims that his "Dispensation" should be considered by the friends as his Will and testament. Furthermore, in his "Dispensation" he has written that the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá was a "link" (WOB 143-144) joining the Heroic Age to the Formative Age and similarly the link that will connect the Formative Age to the Golden Age. In this light we can understand why Shoghi Effendi described the Will and Testament of the Master as the "Charter of a future world civilization." (GPB 328)

Our minds should be assured that the Blessed Beauty is watching over the fortunes of His precious Faith, and that the Supreme Body that He has ordained for us is under His loving care and protection. We are living in a day which, because of the power of the Covenant, is a Day "which shall not be followed by night." (GPB 245)