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## THE INTERNET

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### EXTRACTS FROM THE WRITINGS OF BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

Whatsoever hath led the children of men to shun one another, and hath caused dissensions and divisions amongst them, hath, through the revelation of these words, been nullified and abolished.... Through the power released by these exalted words He hath lent a fresh impulse and set a new direction to the birds of men's hearts, and hath obliterated every trace of restriction and limitation from God's holy Book.

(Tablets of Baha'u'llah, pages 87-88)

We can well perceive how the whole human race is encompassed with great, with incalculable afflictions. We see it languishing on its bed of sickness, sore-tried and disillusioned. They that are intoxicated by self-conceit have interposed themselves between it and the Divine and infallible Physician. Witness how they have entangled all men, themselves included, in the mesh of their devices. They can neither discover the cause of the disease, nor have they any knowledge of the remedy. They have conceived the straight to be crooked, and have imagined their friend an enemy.

(Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, page 214)

We exhort mankind in these days when the countenance of Justice is soiled with dust, when the flames of unbelief are burning high and the robe of wisdom rent asunder, when tranquillity and faithfulness have ebbed away and trials and tribulations have waxed severe, when covenants are broken and ties are severed, when no man knoweth how to discern light and darkness or to distinguish guidance from error.

(Tablets of Baha'u'llah, page 137)

Know assuredly that just as thou firmly believest that the Word of God, exalted be His glory, endureth for ever, thou must, likewise, believe with undoubting faith that its meaning can never be exhausted. They who are its appointed interpreters, they whose hearts are the repositories of its secrets, are, however, the only ones who can comprehend its manifold wisdom. Whoso, while reading the Sacred Scriptures, is tempted to choose therefrom whatever may suit him with which to challenge the authority of the Representative of God among men, is, indeed, as one dead, though to outward seeming he may walk and converse with his neighbors, and share with them their food and their drink.

(Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, pages 175-176)

Admonish, then, the people to lend a hearing ear to the words which the Spirit of God hath uttered in this irradiant and resplendent Tablet. Say: Sow not, O people, the seeds of dissension amongst men, and contend not with your neighbor. Be patient under all conditions, and place your whole trust and

confidence in God. Aid ye your Lord with the sword of wisdom and of utterance. This indeed well becometh the station of man. To depart from it would be unworthy of God, the Sovereign Lord of all, the Glorified. The people, however, have been led astray, and are truly of the heedless.

(Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, page 296)

Beware lest ye contend with any one, nay, strive to make him aware of the truth with kindly manner and most convincing exhortation. If your hearer respond, he will have responded to his own behoof, and if not, turn ye away from him, and set your faces towards God's sacred Court, the seat of resplendent holiness.

(Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, page 279)

Therefore, it hath been said: 'To seek evidence, when the Proof hath been established is but an unseemly act, and to be busied with the pursuit of knowledge when the Object of all learning hath been attained is truly blameworthy.'

(The Kitab-i-Iqan, page 147)

Time and again have We admonished Our beloved ones to avoid, nay to flee from, anything whatsoever from which the odor of mischief can be detected. The world is in great turmoil, and the minds of its people are in a state of utter confusion. We entreat the Almighty that He may graciously illuminate them with the glory of His Justice, and enable them to discover that which will be profitable unto them at all times and under all conditions. He, verily is the All-Possessing, the Most High.

(Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, pages 97-98)

O FRIEND! In the garden of thy heart plant naught but the rose of love, and from the nightingale of affection and desire loosen not thy hold. Treasure the companionship of the righteous and eschew all fellowship with the ungodly.

(The Hidden Words, Persian #3)

[T]owards such a station that they can readily distinguish every foul smell from the fragrance of the raiment of Him Who is the Bearer of Thy most lofty and exalted name, that they may turn with all their affections toward Thee, and may enjoy such intimate communion with Thee that if all that is in heaven and on earth were given them they would regard it as unworthy of their notice, and would refuse to cease from remembering Thee and from extolling Thy virtues.

(Prayers and Meditations, pages 159-160)

#### EXTRACTS FROM THE UTTERANCES AND WRITINGS OF 'ABDU'L-BAHA

Let us not keep on forever with our fancies and illusions, with our analysing and interpreting and circulating of complex dubieties. Let us put aside all thoughts of self; let us close our eyes to all on earth, let us neither make known our sufferings nor complain of our wrongs. Rather let us become oblivious of our own selves, and drinking down the wine of heavenly grace, let us cry out our joy, and lose ourselves in the beauty of the All-Glorious.

(Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha, page 236)

Although the reality of Divinity is sanctified and boundless, the aims and needs of the creatures are restricted. God's grace is like the rain that cometh

down from heaven: the water is not bounded by the limitations of form, yet on whatever place it poureth down, it taketh on limitations-dimensions, appearance, shape- according to the characteristics of that place. In a square pool, the water, previously unconfined, becometh a square; in a six-sided pool it becometh a hexagon, in an eight-sided pool an octagon, and so forth. The rain itself hath no geometry, no limits, no form, but it taketh on one form or another, according to the restrictions of its vessel. In the same way, the Holy Essence of the Lord God is boundless, immeasurable, but His graces and splendours become finite in the creatures, because of their limitations... (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha, page 161)

O ye beloved of the Lord! In this sacred Dispensation, conflict and contention are in no wise permitted. Every aggressor deprives himself of God's grace. It is incumbent upon everyone to show the utmost love, rectitude of conduct, straightforwardness and sincere kindness unto all the peoples and kindreds of the world, be they friends or strangers. So intense must be the spirit of love and loving kindness, that the stranger may find himself a friend, the enemy a true brother, no difference whatsoever existing between them. For universality is of God and all limitations earthly. Thus man must strive that his reality may manifest virtues and perfections, the light whereof may shine upon everyone. The light of the sun shineth upon all the world and the merciful showers of Divine Providence fall upon all peoples. The vivifying breeze reviveth every living creature and all beings endued with life obtain their share and portion at His heavenly board. In like manner, the affections and loving kindness of the servants of the One True God must be bountifully and universally extended to all mankind. Regarding this, restrictions and limitations are in no wise permitted.

(Will and Testament of 'Abdul-Baha, pages 13-14)

In brief, O ye believers of God! The text of the divine Book is this: If two souls quarrel and contend about a question of the divine questions, differing and disputing, both are wrong. The wisdom of this incontrovertible law of God is this: That between two souls from amongst the believers of God, no contention and dispute may arise; that they may speak with each other with infinite amity and love. Should there appear the least trace of controversy, they must remain silent, and both parties must continue their discussions no longer, but ask the reality of the question from the Interpreter. This is the irrefutable command!

(Tablets of the Divine Plan, page 56)

It is incumbent upon the loved ones of God to exercise the greatest care and prudence in all things, whether great or small, to take counsel together and unitedly resist the onslaught of the stirrers up of strife and the movers of mischief. They must endeavour to consort in a friendly spirit with everyone, must follow moderation in their conduct, must have respect and consideration one for another and show loving-kindness and tender regard to all the peoples of the world. They must be patient and long-suffering, that they may grow to become the divine magnets of the Abha Kingdom and acquire the dynamic power of

the hosts of the realm on high.

(Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha, page 233)

... One of the greatest and most fundamental principles of the Cause of God is to shun and avoid entirely the Covenant-breakers, for they will utterly destroy the Cause of God, exterminate His Law and render no account all efforts exerted in the past.

(Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Baha, page 20)

O ye beloved of the Lord! On one side the standard of the One True God is unfurled and the Voice of the Kingdom raised. The Cause of God is spreading, and manifest in splendour are the wonders from on high

On the other side the faithless wax in hate and rancour, ceaselessly stirring up grievous sedition and mischief. No day goeth by but someone raiseth the standard of revolt and spurreth his charger into the arena of discord. No hour passeth but the vile adder bareth its fangs and scattereth its deadly venom.

"The beloved of the Lord are wrapped in utter sincerity and devotion, unmindful of this rancour and malice. Smooth and insidious are these snakes, these whisperers of evil, artful in their craft and guile. Be ye on your guard and ever wakeful! Quick-witted and keen of intellect are the faithful, and firm and steadfast are the assured. Act ye with all circumspection!

Beware lest any soul privily cause disruption or stir up strife. In the Impregnable Stronghold be ye brave warriors, and for the Mighty Mansion a valiant host. Exercise the utmost care, and day and night be on your guard, that thereby the tyrant may inflict no harm."

(Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha, page 314)

#### EXTRACTS FROM THE WRITINGS OF THE GUARDIAN, SHOGHI EFFENDI

Every outward thrust into new fields, every multiplication of Baha'i institutions, must be paralleled by a deeper thrust of the roots which sustain the spiritual life of the community and ensure its sound development.

(Shoghi Effendi, quoted in Wellspring of Guidance, page 77)

Let no one, while this System is still in its infancy, misconceive its character, belittle its significance or misrepresent its purpose. The bedrock on which this Administrative Order is founded is God's immutable Purpose for mankind in this day.

(World Order of Baha'u'llah, page 156)

But let us be on our guard--so the Master continually reminds us from His Station on high--lest too much concern in that which is secondary in importance, and too long a preoccupation with the details of our affairs and activities, make us neglectful of the most essential, the most urgent of all our obligations namely, to bury our cares and teach the Cause, delivering far and wide this Message of Salvation to a sorely-stricken world.

(Baha'i Administration, page 42)

It is our primary task to keep the most vigilant eye on the manner and character its (the Baha'i Cause) growth, to combat effectively the forces of

separation and of sectarian tendencies, lest the Spirit of the Cause be obscured, its unity be threatened, its Teachings suffer corruption; lest extreme orthodoxy on one hand, and irresponsible freedom on the other, cause it to deviate from that Straight Path which alone can lead it to success. (Baha'i Administration, page 42)

The resistless march of the Faith of Baha'u'llah viewed in this light, and propelled by the stimulating influences which the unwisdom of its enemies and the force latent within itself, both engender, resolves itself into a series of rhythmic pulsations, precipitated, on the one hand, through the explosive outbursts of its foes, and the vibrations of Divine Power, on the other, which speed it, with ever-increasing momentum, along that predestined course traced for it by the Hand of the Almighty.

(Messages to America, page 51)

Viewed in the light of past experience, the inevitable result of such futile attempts, however persistent and malicious they may be, is to contribute to a wider and deeper recognition by believers and unbelievers alike of the distinguishing features of the Faith proclaimed by Baha'u'llah. These challenging criticisms, whether or not dictated by malice, cannot but serve to galvanize the souls of its ardent supporters, and to consolidate the ranks of its faithful promoters. They will purge the Faith from those pernicious elements whose continued association with the believers tends to discredit the fair name of the Cause, and to tarnish the purity of its spirit. We should welcome, therefore, not only the open attacks which its avowed enemies persistently launch against it, but should also view as a blessing in disguise every storm of mischief with which they who apostatize their faith or claim to be its faithful exponents assail it from time to time. Instead of undermining the Faith, such assaults, both from within and from without, reinforce its foundations, and excite the intensity of its flame. Designed to becloud its radiance, they proclaim to all the world the exalted character of its precepts, the completeness of its unity, the uniqueness of its position, and the pervasiveness of its influence.

(World Order of Baha'u'llah, pages 15-16)

#### EXTRACTS FROM LETTERS WRITTEN ON BEHALF OF GUARDIAN

What the Master desired to protect the friends against was continual bickering and opinionatedness. A believer can ask the Assembly why they made a certain decision and politely request them to reconsider. But then he must leave it at that, and not go on disrupting local affairs through insisting on his own views. This applies to an Assembly member as well. We all have a right to our opinions, we are bound to think differently; but a Baha'i must accept the majority decision of his Assembly, realizing that acceptance and harmony--even if a mistake has been made--are the really important things, and when we serve the Cause properly, in the Baha'i way, God will right any wrongs done in the end." (From a October 19, 1947 letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) 34 "Vicious criticism is indeed a calamity. But its root is lack of faith in the system of Baha'u'llah (i.e. the administrative order)

and lack of obedience to Him - for He has forbidden it. If the Baha'is would follow the Baha'i laws in voting, in electing, in serving, and in abiding by assembly decisions, all this waste of strength through criticizing others could be diverted into cooperation and achieving the Plan.

(From a letter dated 18 December 1949 written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, cited in Arohanui: Letters to New Zealand, page 53)

When criticism and harsh words arise within a Baha'i community, there is no remedy except to put the past behind one, and persuade all concerned to turn over a new leaf, and for the sake of God and His Faith refrain from mentioning the subjects which have led to misunderstanding and inharmony. The more the friends argue back and forth and maintain, each side, that their point of view is the right one the worse the whole situation becomes.

When we see the condition the world is in today, we must surely forget these utterly insignificant internal disturbances, and rush, unitedly, to the rescue of humanity. You should urge your fellow-Baha'is to take this point of view, and to support you in a strong effort to suppress every critical thought and every harsh word, in order to let the spirit of Baha'u'llah flow into the entire community, and unite it in His love and in His service.

(From a letter dated February 16, 1951 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

Regarding the matter of ... and the inharmony that seems to exist among certain of the friends...: when Baha'is permit the dark forces of the world to enter into their own relationships within the Faith they gravely jeopardize its progress; it is the paramount duty of the believers, the local assemblies, and particularly the National Spiritual Assembly to foster harmony, understanding and love amongst the friends. All should be ready and willing to set aside every personal sense of grievance-- justified or unjustified--for the good of the Cause, because the people will never embrace it until they see in its community life mirrored what is so conspicuously lacking in the world: love and unity.

(From a letter dated May 13, 1945 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

At such a time when the political world is chaotic and society seems to be on the verge of death, as a result of the activities of societies that contain only half-truths, the friends of God should be united and act as one single organism. The greater their unity the surer they can be of winning the day. And this unity cannot be achieved save through obedience to the Assemblies. It is true these are still immature and may at times act unwisely. But supporting them will help more their advance towards an administration that is truly representative of the Cause, than by criticizing them and ignoring their advice. Baha'u'llah has not only advocated certain principles, but has also provided a mechanism whereby that ideal can be established and perpetuated. Both of these phases are essential for the realization of His goal of world unity.

(From a letter dated 27 February 1933 written on behalf of the Guardian to an

individual believer)

... you had asked whether the believers have the right to openly express their criticism of any Assembly action or policy: it is not only the right, but the vital responsibility of every loyal and intelligent member of the Community to offer fully and frankly, but with due respect and consideration to the authority of the Assembly, any suggestion, recommendation or criticism he conscientiously feels he should in order to improve and remedy certain existing conditions or trends in his local Community, and it is the duty of the Assembly also to give careful consideration to any such views submitted to them by any one of the believers. The best occasion chosen for this purpose is the Nineteen Day Feast, which, besides its social and spiritual aspects, fulfills various administrative needs and requirements of the Community, chief among them being the need for open and constructive criticism and deliberation regarding the state of affairs within the local Baha'i community.

But again it should be stressed that all criticisms and discussions of a negative character which may result in undermining the authority of the Assembly as a body should be strictly avoided. For otherwise the order of the Cause itself will be endangered, and confusion and discord will reign in the Community.

(From a letter dated 13 December 1939 written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer)

The Guardian believes that a great deal of the difficulties from which the believers in ... feel themselves to be suffering are caused by their neither correctly understanding nor putting into practice the administration. They seem-many of them-to be prone to continually challenging and criticizing the decisions of their Assemblies. If the Baha'is undermine the very bodies which are, however immaturely, seeking to co-ordinate Baha'i activities and administer Baha'i affairs, if they continually criticize their acts and challenge or belittle their decisions, they not only prevent any real rapid progress in the Faith's development from taking place, but they repel outsiders who quite rightly may ask how we ever expect to unite the whole world when we are so disunited among ourselves!

There is only one remedy for this: to study the administration, to obey the Assemblies, and each believer seek to perfect his own character as a Baha'i. We can never exert the influence over others which we can exert over ourselves. If we are better, if we show love, patience, and understanding of the weaknesses of others; if we seek to never criticize but rather encourage, others will do likewise, and we can really help the Cause through our example and spiritual strength. The Baha'is everywhere, when the administration is first established, find it very difficult to adjust themselves. They have to learn to obey, even when the Assembly may be wrong, for the sake of unity. They have to sacrifice their personalities, to a certain extent, in order that the community life may grow and develop as a whole. These things are difficult--but we must realize that they will lead us to a very much greater, more perfect, way of life when the Faith is properly established according to the administration.

(From a letter dated 26 October 1943 written on behalf of the Guardian to an

individual believer)

The believers should have confidence in the directions and orders of their assembly, even though they may not be convinced of their justice or right. Once the assembly, through a majority vote of its members, comes to a decision the friends should readily obey it. Specially those dissenting members within the assembly whose opinion is contrary to that of the majority of their fellow-members should set a good example before the community by sacrificing their personal views for the sake of obeying the principle of majority vote that underlies the functioning of all Baha'i assemblies.

(From a letter dated October 28, 1935 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

He fully appreciates the spirit which has prompted you to abide whole-heartedly and without any hesitation by the instructions of the National Assembly, and he strongly feels that your attitude in the whole matter constitutes an example which the friends will gladly learn to follow. You have, and must indeed continue to sacrifice some of your personal opinions and views regarding the teaching work for the sake of upholding the authority of the N.S.A. For such a sacrifice on your part does not involve submission to any individual, but has the effect of strengthening the authority of the community as a whole as expressed through the medium of its duly recognized representatives. We should, indeed, learn to curb our individualism when we are confronted with problems and issues affecting the general welfare of the Cause. For Baha'i community life implies a consciousness of group solidarity strong enough to enable every individual believer to give up what is essentially personal for the sake of the common weal.

(From a letter dated May 31, 1934 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

... It is a pity that some of the Western friends, with remarkable naivete, do not grasp the fact that there is absolutely nothing keeping those who have broken the Covenant, whether Baha'u'llah's or the Master's, out of the Cause of God except their own inner spiritually sick condition... Unfortunately a man who is ill is not made well just by asserting there is nothing wrong with him! Facts, actual states, are what count. Probably no group of people in the world have softer tongues, or proclaim more loudly their innocence, than those who in their heart of hearts, and by their every act, are enemies of the Center of the Covenant. The Master well knew this, and that is why He said we must shun their company, but pray for them. If you put a leper in a room with healthy people, he cannot catch their health; on the contrary they are very likely to catch his horrible ailment

(From a letter dated April 11, 1949 written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States; cited in Lights of Guidance #618)

With regard to avoiding association with declared Covenant-breakers. Shoghi Effendi says that this does not mean that if one or more of these attends a non-Baha'i meeting any Baha'is present should feel compelled to leave the

meeting or to refuse to take part in the meeting, especially if that part has been prearranged. Also if in the course of some business it should become necessary to negotiate with one of these people, in order to clear up the business, that is permissible, provided the association is confined to the matter of the business in hand. It is different if one of these people should come to Baha'i meetings. Then it would become necessary to ask him in a most tactful and dignified way to leave the meeting as Baha'is are forbidden to associate with him.

(From a letter dated May 16, 1925 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer; cited in Lights of Guidance, #610)

Regarding Mr. ...'s question about the Covenant-breakers, Baha'u'llah and the Master in many places and very emphatically have told us to shun entirely all Covenant-breakers as they are afflicted with what we might try and define as a contagious spiritual disease; they have also told us, however, to pray for them. These souls are not lost forever. In the Aqdas, Baha'u'llah says that God will forgive Mirza Yahya if he repents. It follows, therefore, that God will forgive any soul if he repents. Most of them don't want to repent, unfortunately. If the leaders can be forgiven it goes without saying that their followers can also be forgiven. "Also, it has nothing to do with unity in the Cause; 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 should be reintroduced into the otherwise healthy organism. On the contrary, what was once a part of him has so radically changed as to have become a poison.

(From a letter dated November 28, 1944 written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer; cited in Principles of Baha'i Administration, pages 22-23)

No one has any right to see the Covenant-Breakers without the permission of the N.S.A., and Mrs. ... in doing so should realize she is putting herself in contact with a dangerous, contagious, spiritual disease, as the Master pointed out over and over again! She is also disobeying express instructions of the Master and the Guardian by contacting Covenant-Breakers.

(From letter dated May 5, 1947 written on behalf of the Guardian to two individual believers)

#### EXTRACTS FROM LETTERS WRITTEN BY THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

As it is beyond the scope of this letter to expatiate upon these principles, let it suffice to recall briefly certain of the requisites of consultation, particularly for those who serve on Spiritual Assemblies. Love and harmony, purity of motive, humility and lowliness amongst the friends, patience and long-suffering in difficulties- these inform the attitude with which they proceed 'with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views,' each using 'perfect liberty' both in so doing and in 'unveiling the proof of his demonstration.' 'If another contradicts him, he must not become excited because if there be no investigation or verification of questions and matters, the agreeable view will not be discovered neither understood.' 'The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions.'

(From a letter dated 29 December 1988 written by The Universal House of Justice to the Baha'is in the United States)

If Baha'i individuals deliberately ignore the principles imbedded in the Order which Baha'u'llah Himself has established to remedy divisiveness in the human family, the Cause for which so much has been sacrificed will surely be set back in its mission to rescue world society from complete disintegration. May not the existence of the Covenant be invoked again and again, so that such repetition may preserve the needed perspective? For, in this age, the Cause of Baha'u'llah has been protected against the baneful effects of the misuse of the process of criticism; this has been done by the institution of the Covenant and by the provision of a universal administrative system which incorporates within itself the mechanisms for drawing out the constructive ideas of individuals and using them for the benefit of the entire system. Admonishing the people to uphold the unifying purpose of the Cause, Baha'u'llah in the Book of His Covenant, addresses these poignant words to them: 'Let not the means of order be made the cause of confusion and the instrument of union an occasion for discord.' Such assertions emphasize a crucial point; it is this: In terms of the Covenant, dissidence is a moral and intellectual contradiction of the main objective animating the Baha'i community, namely, the establishment of the unity of mankind.

(From a letter dated 29 December 1988 written by The Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Baha'u'llah in the United States of America)

...individual interpretation is considered the fruit of man's rational power and conducive to a better understanding of the Teachings, provided that no disputes or arguments arise among the friends and the individual himself understands and makes it clear that his views are merely his own. Individual interpretations continually change as one grows in comprehension of the Teachings.

(From a letter dated 27 May 1966 written by The Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

...although individual insights can be enlightening and helpful, they can also be misleading. The friends must therefore learn to listen to the views of others without being overawed or allowing their faith to be shaken, and to express their own views without pressing them on their fellow Baha'is.

(From a letter dated 27 May 1966 written by The Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

The Baha'i Faith is the Revelation of Baha'u'llah: His Own Words as interpreted by 'Abdu'l-Baha and the Guardian. It is a revelation of such staggering magnitude that no Baha'i at this early stage in Baha'i history can rightly claim to have more than a partial and imperfect understanding of it.

...when searching after the facts of any matter, a Baha'i must, of course, be entirely open-minded, but in his interpretation of the facts and his evaluation of evidence we do not see by what logic he can ignore the truth of the Baha'i Revelation which he has already accepted....

(From a letter written by The Universal House of Justice, published in Baha'i

News, June 1979)

Some of the protagonists in the discussions on the Internet have implied that the only way to attain a true understanding of historical events and of the purport of the sacred and historical records of the Cause of God is through the rigid application of methods narrowly defined in a materialistic framework. They have even gone so far as to stigmatize whoever proposes a variation of these methods as wishing to obscure the truth rather than unveil it. "The House of Justice recognizes that, at the other extreme, there are Baha'is who, imbued by what they conceive to be loyalty to Baha'u'llah cling to blind acceptance of what they understand to be a statement of the Sacred Text. This shortcoming demonstrates an equally serious failure to grasp the profundity of the Baha'i principle of the harmony of faith and reason. The danger of such an attitude is that it exalts personal understanding of some part of the Revelation over the whole, leads to illogical and internally inconsistent applications of the Sacred Text, and provides fuel to those who would mistakenly characterize loyalty to the Covenant as 'fundamentalism'.

It is not surprising that individual Baha'is hold and express different and sometimes defective understandings of the Teachings; this is but an evidence of the magnitude of the change that this Revelation is to effect in human consciousness. As believers with various insights into the Teachings converse--with patience, tolerance and open and unbiased minds--a deepening of comprehension should take place. The strident insistence on individual views, however, can lead to contention, which is detrimental not only to the spirit of Baha'i association and collaboration but to the search for truth itself.

(From a letter dated 8 February 1998 written by The Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

While constructive criticism is encouraged, destructive criticism, such as the pattern of 'continually challenging and criticizing the decisions' of the Assemblies, prevents the rapid growth of the Faith and repels those who are yet outside the community. Indeed 'all criticisms and discussions of a negative character which may result in undermining the authority of the Assembly as a body should be strictly avoided. For otherwise the order of the Cause itself will be endangered, and confusion and discord will reign in the community.' 'Vicious criticism is indeed a calamity,' the root of which is 'lack of faith in the system of Baha'u'llah' and failure to follow the 'Baha'i laws in voting, in electing, in serving, and in abiding by Assembly decisions.'

(From a letter dated 2 July 1996 written by The Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

The questions of how criticism is expressed and acted upon in the Baha'i community, and how the Spiritual Assemblies administer justice in regard to individual believers, are but elements of far greater concepts and should become second nature in the social discourse of Baha'is. The Baha'i community is an association of individuals who have voluntarily come together, on recognizing Baha'u'llah's claim to be the Manifestation of God for this age, to establish certain patterns of personal and social behavior and to build the

institutions that are to promote these patterns. There are numerous individuals who share the ideals of the Faith and draw inspiration from its Teachings, while disagreeing with certain of its features, but those who actually enter the Baha'i community have accepted, by their own free will, to follow the Teachings in their entirety, understanding that, if doubts and disagreements arise in the process of translating the Teachings into practice, the final arbiter is, by the explicit authority of the Revealed Text, the Universal House of Justice.

It is the ardent prayer of the Universal House of Justice that any friends who find themselves at odds in this endeavor will have confidence in the guidance it provides for them, will renew their study of the Teachings and, for the sake of Baha'u'llah, strengthen their love for one another. As the beloved Guardian's secretary wrote on his behalf to an individual believer on 25 October 1949: 'Without the spirit of real love for Baha'u'llah, for His Faith and its Institutions, and the believers for each other, the Cause can never really bring in large numbers of people. For it is not preaching and rules the world wants, but love and action.' The worldwide undertakings on which the Cause of God is embarked are far too significant, the need of the peoples of the world for the Message of Baha'u'llah far too urgent, the perils facing mankind far too grave, the progress of events far too swift, to permit His followers to squander their time and efforts in fruitless contention. Now, if ever, is the time for love among the friends, for unity of understanding and endeavor, for self-sacrifice and service by Baha'is in every part of the world. (From a letter dated 2 July 1996 written by The Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

The individual's relation to society is explained by Shoghi Effendi in the statement that, 'The Baha'i conception of social life is essentially based on the principle of the subordination of the individual will to that of society. It neither suppresses the individual nor does it exalt him to the point of making him an anti-social creature, a menace to society. As in everything, it follows the 'golden mean'.

This relationship, so fundamental to the maintenance of civilized life, calls for the utmost degree of understanding and cooperation between society and the individual; and because the need to foster a climate in which the untold potentialities of the individual members of society can develop, this relationship must allow 'free scope' for 'individuality to assert itself' through modes of spontaneity, initiative and diversity that ensure the viability of society. Among the responsibilities assigned to Baha'i institutions which have a direct bearing on these aspects of individual freedom and development is one which is thus described in the Constitution of The Universal House of Justice: 'to safeguard the personal rights, freedom and initiative of individuals.' A corollary is: 'to give attention to the preservation of human honour.'

How noteworthy that in the Order of Baha'u'llah, while the individual will is subordinated to that of society, the individual is not lost in the mass but becomes the focus of primary development, so that he may find his own place in

the flow of progress, and society as a whole may benefit from the accumulated talents and abilities of the individuals composing it. Such an individual finds fulfillment of his potential not merely in satisfying his own wants but in realizing his completeness in being at one with humanity and with the divinely ordained purpose of creation.

The quality of freedom and of its expression-indeed, the very capacity to maintain freedom in a society-undoubtedly depends on the knowledge and training of individuals and on their ability to cope with the challenges of life with equanimity. As the beloved Master has written: 'And the honour and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world's multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight.'

(From a letter dated 29 December 1988 written by The Universal House of Justice to the Baha'is in the United States)

The House of Justice understands and appreciates your concern for the proper functioning of the Baha'i community. It urges you to contemplate the issues you have raised in the light of the Teachings themselves, and not to the fundamental assumptions of which differ in many respects from those of Baha'u'llah's divinely conceived Order.

(From a letter dated 2 July 1996 written by The Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Beyond contention, moreover, is the condition in which a person is so immovably attached to one erroneous viewpoint that his insistence upon it amounts to an effort to change the essential character of the Faith. This kind of behaviour, if permitted to continue unchecked, could produce disruption in the Baha'i community, giving birth to countless sects as it has done in previous Dispensations. The Covenant of Baha'u'llah prevents this. The Faith defines elements of a code of conduct, and it is ultimately the responsibility of the Universal House of Justice, in watching over the security of the Cause and upholding the integrity of its Teachings, to require the friends to adhere to standards thus defined.

(From a letter dated 8 February 1998 written by The Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

It is natural that the friends would discuss such matters among themselves, as you and your correspondent have been doing on your Internet discussion group; how otherwise are they to deepen their understanding of the Teachings? But they should recognize that the resolution of differences of opinion on such fundamental questions is not to be found by continued discussion, but in referring to the Universal House of Justice itself, as you have done.

Prolonged, unresolved, public discussion of these fundamental questions can do nothing but breed confusion and dissension.

(From a letter dated 3 June 1997 written by The Universal House of Justice to

an individual believer)

Baha'u'llah warns us that 'the tongue is a smoldering fire, and excess of speech a deadly poison.' 'Material fire consumeth the body,' He says in elaborating the point, 'whereas the fire of the tongue devoureth both heart and soul. The force of the former lasteth but for a time, whilst the effects of the latter endureth a century.' In tracing the framework of free speech, He again advises 'moderation.' 'Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation,' He states, adding: 'As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure. As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets.'

Also relevant to what is said, and how, is when it is said. For speech, as for so many other things, there is a season. Baha'u'llah reinforces this understanding by drawing attention to the maxim that, 'Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it.'

Speech is a powerful phenomenon. Its freedom is both to be extolled and feared. It calls for an acute exercise of judgment, since both the limitation of speech and the excess of it can lead to dire consequences. Thus there exist in the system of Baha'u'llah checks and balances necessary to the beneficial uses of this freedom in the onward development of society. A careful examination of the principles of Baha'i consultation and the formal and informal arrangements for employing them offer new insights into the dynamics of freedom of expression. (From a letter dated 29 December 1988 written by The Universal House of Justice to the Baha'is in the United States)

We have your letter of 14 March 1970 asking whether it is forbidden for the friends to associate with non-Baha'is who are in close association with Covenant-Breakers. There are no hard and fast rules about such things. Under some conditions the involvement of the non-Baha'i party may be superficial and harmless, in which case no action should be taken. For example, Baha'is have at times used non-Baha'is, such as lawyers, to contact Covenant-breakers in certain matters of business. If, however, the Covenant-breaker is using the non-Baha'i party to spread his ideas among the friends, the matter should be reported to the Continental Board of Counsellors, and whatever they decide in such cases in consultation with the National Spiritual Assemblies concerned should be unreservedly accepted by the friends.

(From a letter dated April 2, 1970 written by The Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Ecuador; cited Lights of Guidance, pages 183-184, #605)

To read the writings of Covenant-breakers is not forbidden to the believers and does not constitute in itself an act of Covenant-breaking. Indeed, some of the Baha'is have the unpleasant duty to read such literature as part of their responsibilities for protecting the Cause of Baha'u'llah. However, the friends are warned in the strongest terms against reading such literature because

Covenant-breaking is a spiritual poison and the calumnies and distortions of the truth which the Covenant-breakers give out are such that they can undermine the faith of the believer and plant the seeds of doubt unless he is fore-armed with an unshakable belief in Baha'u'llah and His Covenant and a knowledge of the true facts.

(From a letter dated October 29, 1974 written by The Universal House of Justice; cited in "Developing Distinctive Baha'i Communities." page 5.10)

You will want to resist any temptation to be drawn into discussions or consideration of the arguments which they [Covenant-breakers] may advance.

(From a letter dated 28 March 1998 written by The Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

As the stature of the Cause of God increases in the eyes of the world, the process of its emergence into the limelight of public attention ... is accelerated, and the Faith, gradually and inevitably, is projected into the next stage of its divinely propelled development.

Now, with the entrance of the Faith on the world scene, we call upon the believers everywhere not to allow themselves, even for one moment, to be perturbed by any increase in opposition to the Cause. Rather let them deepen their understanding of the creative interaction between crisis and victory in the evolution of the Faith, and increase their awareness of the power inherent in the Cause to surmount all obstacles that threaten its progress. Armed with this knowledge, let them seize the opportunities that arise and embrace the God-given challenges, confident in the invincibility of the Faith and the steady onward march of its Institutions."

(From a letter dated 27 October 1987 written by The Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies)

We return to the phenomenal characteristics of speech. Content, volume, style, tact, wisdom, timeliness are among the critical factors in determining the effects of speech for good or evil. Consequently, the friends need ever to be conscious of the significance of this activity which so distinguishes human beings from other forms of life, and they must exercise it judiciously. Their efforts at such discipline will give birth to an etiquette of expression worthy of the approaching maturity of the human race. Just as this discipline applies to the spoken word, it applies equally to the written word; and it profoundly affects the operation of the press.

(From a letter dated 29 December 1988 written by The Universal House of Justice to the Baha'is in the United States)

#### EXTRACTS FROM LETTERS WRITTEN ON BEHALF OF THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

The opportunity which electronic communication technology provides for more speedy and thorough consultation among the friends is highly significant.

Without doubt, it represents another manifestation of a development eagerly anticipated by the Guardian when he foresaw the creation of 'a mechanism of world intercommunication ... embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity.'

(From a letter dated 19 May 1995 written on behalf of The Universal House of Justice to an individual Baha'i)

As you well appreciate, the extent to which such technology advances the work of the Faith depends, of course, on the manner in which it is used. As a medium for Baha'is to exchange views, it imposes on participants the same requirements of moderation, candour, and courtesy as would be the case in any other discussion.

"The ease and relative impersonality of the electronic medium require in some ways an even higher level of self-discipline than is the case in situations where a spirit of unity is reinforced by the opportunity for direct personal contact and social interaction. In the pursuit of such a spirit of unity, Baha'is will, without doubt, wish to assist the consultative processes by sharing and discussing relevant Baha'i texts. This will itself have the further effect of drawing attention back to the framework of Baha'i belief.

(From a letter dated 19 May 1995 written on behalf of The Universal House of Justice to an individual Baha'i)

The House of Justice notes that you have been disturbed by some of the postings made to the email discussion group of which you have recently been a member. Email discussion groups are a new phenomenon; they can provide immense benefits for communication between people and for the teaching of the Faith, but, as you have seen, they can also give rise to far-reaching problems. The use of email requires an adjustment of perception. In the past, discussions among Baha'is would take place orally among groups of friends in private, or at summer schools and other Baha'i events, or in letters between individuals. Inevitably, many erroneous statements were made; not all comments were as temperate as they should have been; many statements were misunderstood by those who heard them. After all, not all Baha'is have a profound knowledge of the teachings, and it is clear that even academic eminence is no guarantee of a correct understanding of the Revelation of God. Before email such extravagances had a limited range and were of an ephemeral nature. Now, the same kind of discussion is spread among a hundred or more people, who often do not know one another, in a form more durable than speech, and can be disseminated to a vast readership at the touch of a button. A new level of self-discipline, therefore, is needed by those who take part. Such discussions among Baha'is call for self-restraint and purity of motive as well as cordiality, frankness and openness.

(From a letter dated 18 February 1996 written on behalf of The Universal House of Justice to an individual Baha'i)

Most important of all, as with any exploration by Baha'is of the beliefs, and practices of their Faith, electronic discussion will serve the interests of the Cause and its members only as it is conducted within the framework of the Baha'i Teachings and the truths they enshrine. To attempt to discuss the Cause of God apart from or with disdain for the authoritative guidance inherent in these Teachings would clearly be a logical contradiction.

(From a letter dated 19 May 1995 written on behalf of The Universal House of Justice to an individual Baha'i)

The central, unifying element of the Faith is the Covenant. This is the institution which guarantees that the Faith and its teachings will remain true to the Revelation brought by Baha'u'llah and expounded by His divinely guided Interpreters. It is the one agency which can protect the Faith against the distortion and disruption to which all previous Revelations have been subjected by the efforts-whether well-intentioned or not-of the self-opinionated and ambitious among their followers to force the Cause of God into patterns which they personally favoured.

(From a letter dated 18 February 1996 written on behalf of The Universal House of Justice to an individual Baha'i)

The combination of absolute loyalty to the Manifestation of God and His Teachings, with the searching and intelligent study of the Teachings and history of the Faith which those Teachings themselves enjoin, is a particular strength of this Dispensation. In past Dispensations the believers have tended to divide into two mutually antagonistic groups: those who held blindly to the letter of the Revelation, and those who questioned and doubted everything. Like all extremes, both these can lead into error. The beloved Guardian has written that 'The Baha'i Faith...enjoins upon its followers the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth....' Baha'is are called upon to follow the Faith with intelligence and understanding. Inevitably believers will commit errors as they strive to rise to this degree of maturity, and this calls for forbearance and humility on the part of all concerned, so that such matters do not cause disunity or discord among the friends.

(From a letter dated 7 October 1980 written on behalf of The Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

The House of Justice agrees that it is most important for the believers, and especially those who hold positions of responsibility in the Administrative Order, to react calmly and with tolerant and enquiring minds to views which differ from their own, remembering that all Baha'is are but students of the Faith, ever striving to understand the Teachings more clearly and to apply them more faithfully, and none can claim to have a perfect understanding of this Revelation.

(From a letter dated 18 July 1979 written on behalf of The Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

At the same time all believers, and scholars in particular, should remember the many warnings in the Writings against the fomenting of discord among the friends. It is the duty of the institutions of the Faith to guard the community against such dangers.

(From a letter dated 18 July 1979 written on behalf of The Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Thus, if any participant in an email discussion feels that a view put forward appears to contradict or undermine the provisions of the Covenant, he should be free to say so, explaining candidly and courteously why he feels as he does. The person who made the initial statement will then be able to re-evaluate his opinion and, if he still believes it to be valid, he should be able to explain

why it is not contrary to either the letter or the spirit of the Covenant. The participants in such a discussion should avoid disputation and, if they are unable to resolve an issue, they should refer the point to the Universal House of Justice since, in accordance with the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Baha, 'By this body all the difficult problems are to be resolved....' and it has the authority to decide upon 'all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure, and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book.' In this way the Covenant can illuminate and temper the discourse and make it fruitful.

(From a letter dated 18 February 1996 written on behalf of The Universal House of Justice to an individual Baha'i)

Not surprisingly, the abuse of Internet discussions on the Faith and its teachings has had just the effect of greatly distressing friends who become aware of it. That the response has included, as your letter suggests, a degree of intemperate criticism, inappropriate comment and unjust accusation is lamentable, but also not surprising, for contentiousness begets contention. You should be confident that the Universal House of Justice will not permit a climate of intolerance to prosper in the Baha'i community, no matter from what cause it arises.

(From a letter dated 20 July 1997 written on behalf of The Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

...the House of Justice understands that you desire to find ways of conveying spiritual truths in logical ways and demonstrating their validity through scientific proofs. There can be no objection to such an attitude. 'Abdu'l-Baha Himself used such a method. The danger Baha'i scholars must avoid is the distortion of religious truth, almost forcibly at times, to make it conform to understandings and perceptions current in the scientific world. True Baha'i scholars should guard against this.

(From a letter dated 7 June 1983 written on behalf of The Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Just as there is a fundamental difference between divine Revelation itself and the understanding that believers have of it, so also there is a basic distinction between scientific fact and reasoning on the one hand and the conclusions or theories of scientists on the other. There is, and can be, no conflict between true religion and true science: true religion is revealed by God, while it is through true science that the mind of man 'discovers the realities of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities and effects, and of the qualities and properties of beings' and 'comprehendeth the abstract by the aid of the concrete.' However, whenever a statement is made through the lens of human understanding it is thereby limited, for human understanding is limited; and where there is limitation there is the possibility of error; and where there is error, conflicts can arise.

(From a letter dated 26 December 1975 written on behalf of The Universal House of Justice, quoted in the Compilation on Scholarship, Feb. 1995, quote #48)

In the application of the social laws of the Faith, most of the difficulties

can be seen to arise not only from outright disobedience, but also from the actions of those who, while careful to observe the letter of the law, try to go as far as it will permit them away from the spirit which lies at its heart. A similar tendency can be noted among some Baha'i scholars. The great advances in knowledge and understanding in the vital field of Baha'i scholarship will be made by those who, while well versed in their subjects and adhering to the principles of research, are also thoroughly imbued with love for the Faith and the determination to grow in the comprehension of its teachings.

(From a letter dated 27 March 1983 written on behalf of The Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

There have, however, been cases of believers who look upon themselves as scholars, and may even be such in an academic sense, who have considerable expertise in certain aspects of the Faith but are lamentably ignorant or misinformed about other aspects of the Cause and the Teachings. Others have expressed biting critical views with a quite unscholarly intemperance.

(From a letter dated 8 October 1980 written on behalf of The Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

You are free at any time to refer to the Continental Boards of Counsellors and the Auxiliary Board members for protection in any matters about which you are not clear involving the security of the Faith in your area and you will always find them willing to assist you in dealing with such problems.

(From a letter dated October 1, 1979 written on behalf of The Universal House of Justice; cited in "Developing Distinctive Baha'i Communities", page 5.11)

As the Baha'i community continues to emerge inexorably from obscurity, it will be confronted by enemies, from both within and without, whose aim will be to malign and misrepresent its principles, so that its admirers might be disillusioned and the faith of its adherents might be shaken....

(From a letter dated 19 October 1993 written on behalf of the House of Justice to an Association for Baha'i Studies, quoted in a letter to an individual Baha'i)

...the House of Justice will continue to encourage use of the greatly expanded opportunities for the discussion of Baha'i concepts and ideals, which Internet communication so marvellously provides.

(From a letter dated 20 July 1997 written on behalf of The Universal House of Justice to an individual)