

Teaching the Cause of God: A Two-Edged Sword

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In one of his letters Shoghí Effendí has explained to us that one of the distinctive features of our Faith is that we cannot separate the spiritual life of the individual from the spiritual life of the community. Mutual reactions exist between the two. Under the influence of the divine teachings, the hearts of the individual believers bring into being and shape the community. In turn, the community provides an atmosphere where the individual believers develop and grow spiritually. Our teachings are designed so that the spiritual life of the individual Bahá'í, and the collective life of the community, complement each other. Let us look at some examples:

- Bahá'u'lláh calls on Bahá'ís to observe individual obligatory prayers, but at the same time He ordains that Houses of Worship for community prayers be established.
- We see that Bahá'u'lláh calls on parents to be the first educators of their children, but at the same time He anticipates that every local Bahá'í House of Worship will have a school, and He praises the work of teachers.
- He calls on the individual believer to teach His Cause and protect Its interests, but simultaneously Bahá'í institutions are given parallel assignments to provide for the teaching and protection of His Faith.

Lights of ‘Irfán Book Twelve

In the messages of the Universal House of Justice we read that the time has come for all Bahá'í communities to develop with greater confidence and self-reliance a culture of thinking which is fundamentally different from the community activities of other religions. Unlike other religions, there is no professional clergy in the Faith to lead the community. Leadership and authority are vested in elected institutions. Thus leadership is self-generated and home-grown through democratic methods, and every individual member of the community should be concerned with its welfare and healthy growth.

In 1996 when the Universal House of Justice was working on the goals and objectives of its New Plan, which became the Four Year Plan, it became clear that the percentage of individual Bahá'ís active in the teaching field was very low; that teaching activities were almost entirely the work of individuals, and very little resulted from group collaboration among local Bahá'ís; that opportunities for collective study of the teachings, apart from summer schools, were too few and were randomly organized; and that by and large, because of these facts on the ground, a methodical and workable system of training and education, especially for collective action, was necessary in order to meet these needs. Future Teaching Plans issuing from the World Centre, therefore, had to address these problems progressively, thoroughly and effectively.

In other words, the Bahá'í world had to realize that while the two duties of studying the Faith and teaching the Cause, as personal responsibilities, will always remain vital concerns of individual Bahá'ís, a simple and easy program had also to be adopted by Bahá'í communities everywhere that would encourage group study of the teachings as well as joint and collaborative efforts to teach the Cause.

Among the initial directives that the Universal House of Justice issued was that every National Spiritual Assembly should endeavour, in consultation with the Counsellors on each Continent, to create a

Teaching the Cause of God: A Two-Edged Sword

Training Institute, which it described as an “engine of growth.” This was followed by the creation of a new institution, which was named the Regional Bahá'í Council, to be established, as the Universal House of Justice deemed it necessary, either as an appointed body or an elected one, to be an intermediary administrative body between the National Assembly and Local Assemblies and their communities. Detailed advice from the World Centre was then issued for the initiation of core activities, such as study circles, devotional meetings, home visits, children and junior youth activities, as well as the division of each country into clusters, with the aim of raising up Bahá'í communities soundly and evenly throughout each territory.

Today after over fourteen years what do we see? My purpose is not to give you statistics. Any observer will testify that it is true that similar needs continue to exist, but the world-wide community has made a great deal of progress. A new culture has come into being in the hearts and minds of the friends. We have become a stronger community, the number of new believers has increased, our Nineteen Day Feasts are better attended, and the activities of the Faith have become more consolidated and united. Under the guidance of the Supreme Body all these activities are being conducted with dignity and in a spirit of moderation and friendliness.

Bahá'u'lláh makes a clear distinction between methods of teaching and the obligation to teach. Methods of teaching change with conditions and circumstances, and such changes are formulated and directed by the institutions. While such methods are being implemented, the duty of the individual to teach has not been ignored or under-rated. It has been supplemented by group activities. The teaching work has been designed like a two-edged sword. One edge is for individual activity, and the other edge is for group and collaborative activity.

We need now to consider the guidance we find in the writings on how we should approach our individual duty to teach the Cause. In one of

Lights of 'Irfán Book Twelve

his letters to the friends in the East, Shoghí Effendí likens the individual isolated believer to a point, a group less than nine to a letter, a local Spiritual Assembly to a word, a National Spiritual Assembly to a sentence, and the Universal House of Justice to the Book.

Let us each consider ourselves to be a point. Bahá'u'lláh in one of His Tablets has written that each devoted and sincere believer should consider himself or herself to be the only and sole believer in the world. In other words there is no one else, each one of us should consider himself or herself to be a Mullá Husayn, the only believer on the planet having embraced God's Holy Faith for today. What do we do? How can we become each an instrument in God's hands? Where do we find receptive souls and how do we introduce the Faith to them? With what attitude should we teach the Cause? These are the points that I will deal with briefly, based on the explicit teachings of our Faith.

I have gleaned for you from Bahá'í Writings 18 major themes and subjects which give us guidance in our independent efforts individually to teach the Faith. Group teaching has its own dynamics; individual teaching also has its own principles. If we allow these personal guidelines to sink into our hearts and souls, they will transform our spiritual lives under the shadow of the Covenant. None of the points I will present to you are my own. They are all based on exhortations found in the inspired Writings of our Faith.

1. We should teach with detachment and with a pure and radiant heart, and when speak we should do so with tact and wisdom. When we show our love to others we should do so because we are true lovers of God and of humanity, not because we are expecting others to accept the Faith through us. Our love for others must be pure, true and selfless.

Teaching the Cause of God: A Two-Edged Sword

2. We must remember that God has created all of us, He loves all of us, and He would want all of humanity to accept

His Cause, but, alas, the inner eyes of a large majority are at this time veiled and do not see the truth, nor are there too many ready ears to appreciate His divine melody.

3. We should not deliver the message if we clearly see that the hearer is uneasy, apprehensive or uncomfortable to listen to us on the subject of the Faith.

4. When we speak about Bahá'u'lláh and His Cause we should speak with confidence, courage, enthusiasm and with a tone which conveys our own convictions.

5. We should associate with people in all walks of life and mix and mingle with them with sincere love and in a kindly manner, as such attitudes enable them to have confidence in us. We should be willing to develop friendly relationships with our associates, our neighbours, and acquaintances.

6. We should try to associate with members of societies which are non-political but are known to be social, cultural, humanitarian, charitable, and educational associations and organizations, in order to find among them receptive souls.

7. In our conversation we should encourage the hearer to express his general thoughts and beliefs, and we should listen carefully and patiently to them before we start expressing gradually our own views and opinions. We should speak with humility, without giving proudly the impression that the seeker is ignorant and we are the learned.

8. There is a difference between being blindly fanatical and being faithful to principle. When speaking we should never appear to be fanatical in any sense of the word. As Bahá'ís we should be seen as liberal enough to listen to and consider the other person's point of view.

Lights of 'Irfán Book Twelve

9. We should remember that every Bahá'í is a potential teacher. If we wait until we are fully qualified, the teaching work will stop. We should forget ourselves, and put our trust and reliance upon God. When we act in this way, we will see how eloquence and the power to change human hearts will come to us in a very natural way. We become like an empty reed, and the Holy Spirit will use us to quicken and confirm souls.

10. Quoting sentences or brief extracts from the Words of Bahá'u'lláh that would be useful in teaching has a tremendous effect on the hearers. Therefore it will be very

helpful if we could memorize a few such sentences from His Writings and use them in our teaching work.

11. There are very few souls who become Bahá'ís immediately, as soon as they hear of the Faith. There are other precious souls, however, who are seeking after the truths of our Faith, but for them it may take a little longer to become Bahá'ís. And then in the majority of cases, we must remember, conversion to a new Faith is a slow process, and therefore we should not lose heart quickly, but instead persevere in our efforts.

12. We can of course show the inadequacy and inability of existing religions in bringing about world unity and peace, but we should not attack past religions, nor should we be drawn into hair-splitting and unnecessary discussions and arguments.

13. Devotional meetings with Bahá'ís and their seekers are important. At such meetings, appropriate extracts from the Writings could also be shared.

14. We should pray that Bahá'u'lláh may assist and guide us when teaching the Faith. In addition we should also pray that God may send us the souls that are ready.

Teaching the Cause of God: A Two-Edged Sword

15. Teaching in the atmosphere of our own homes and offering hospitality has a great effect. Living the Bahá'í way of life greatly influences the minds and hearts of observers. We should have such meetings in our homes once every nineteen days.

16. We should never allow a day to pass without sharing some aspect of the Faith with some soul. Nor should we allow a year to pass without guiding at least one soul to accept the Faith.

17. We should not only engage ourselves in teaching the Faith, but we should wisely and lovingly be a source of inspiration to our fellow believers, so that they too would be encouraged by us radiantly to carry out their spiritual obligation in the teaching work.

18. Teaching the Cause should become the dominating passion of our lives. We must be aware that if we do not teach, divine confirmations will be cut off, and we will be depriving ourselves from seeing the signs of divine assistance guiding us and enriching our spiritual lives.