

Consultation: A Compilation
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From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

The Great Being saith: The heaven of divine wisdom is illumined with the two luminaries of consultation and compassion. Take ye counsel together in all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding.

(“Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas” [rev. ed.], (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982), p. 168) [1]

Say: No man can attain his true station except through his justice. No power can exist except through unity. No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation.

(From a Tablet - translated from the Arabic) [2]

Consultation bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude. It is a shining light which, in a dark world, leadeth the way and guideth. For everything there is and will continue to be a station of perfection and maturity. The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation.

(From a Tablet - translated from the Persian) [3]

Such matters should be determined through consultation, and whatever emergeth from the consultation of those chosen, that indeed is the command of God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.

(From a Tablet - translated from the Persian) [4]

In all things it is necessary to consult. This matter should be forcibly stressed by thee, so that consultation may be observed by all. The intent of what hath been revealed from the Pen of the Most High is that consultation may be fully carried out among the friends, inasmuch as it is and will always be a cause of awareness and of awakening and a source of good and well-being.

(From a Tablet - translated from the Persian) [5]

It behooveth them to be the trusted ones of the Merciful among men and to regard themselves as the guardians appointed of God for all that dwell on earth. It is incumbent upon them to take counsel together and to have regard for the interests of the servants of God, for His sake, even as they regard their own interests, and to choose that which is meet and seemly. Thus hath the Lord your God commanded you. Beware lest ye put away that which is clearly revealed in His Tablet. Fear God, O ye that perceive.

(Cited in a letter dated 5 March 1922 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, published in “Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932” [rev. ed.] (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1977), p. 21) [6]

If in the first group of people who have gathered, unanimity is not achieved, new people shall be added, after which a group equal in number to the Greatest Name¹ or fewer or greater shall be

chosen from their midst by lots; whereupon the consultation shall be renewed; whatever is the result shall be obeyed. If the second time opinions again differ, repeat the process a third time. This time obey the majority vote. Verily He directeth whom He willeth to the straight Path.²

(From a Tablet - translated from the Arabic and Persian)

[7]

From the Writings and Utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

...It is incumbent upon everyone not to take any step without consulting the Spiritual Assembly, and they must assuredly obey with heart and soul its bidding and be submissive unto it, that things may be properly ordered and well arranged. Otherwise every person will act independently and after his own judgement, will follow his own desire, and do harm to the Cause.

(Cited in a letter dated 5 March 1922 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, published in "Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), p.21)

[8]

The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold. Should they be graciously aided to acquire these attributes, victory from the unseen Kingdom of Bahá shall be vouchsafed to them... The members thereof must take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. This can be attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions. If after discussion a decision be carried unanimously, well and good; but if, the Lord forbid, differences of opinion should arise, a majority of voices must prevail.

(Cited in a letter dated 5 March 1922 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, published in "Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932", pp. 21-22)

[9]

... The first condition is absolute love and harmony amongst the members of the assembly. They must be wholly freed from estrangement and must manifest in themselves the Unity of God, for they are the waves of one sea, the drops of one river, the stars of one heaven, the rays of one sun, the trees of one orchard, the flowers of one garden. Should harmony of thought and absolute unity be non-existent, that gathering shall be dispersed and that assembly be brought to naught. The second condition: they must when coming together turn their faces to the Kingdom on High and ask aid from the Realm of Glory. They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden. The honoured members must with all freedom express their own thoughts, and it is in no wise permissible for one to belittle the thought of another, nay, he must with moderation set forth the truth, and should differences of opinion arise a majority of voices must prevail, and all must obey and submit to the majority. It is again not permitted that any one of the honoured members object to or censure, whether in or out of the meeting, any decision arrived at previously though that decision be not right, for such criticism would prevent any decision from being enforced. In short, whatsoever thing is arranged in harmony and with love and purity of motive, its result is light, and should the least trace of estrangement prevail the result shall be darkness upon darkness... If this be so regarded, that assembly shall be of God, but otherwise it shall lead to coolness and alienation that proceed from the Evil One... Should they endeavour to fulfil these conditions the Grace of the Holy Spirit shall be vouchsafed unto them, and that assembly shall become the centre of the Divine blessings, the hosts of Divine confirmation shall come to their aid, and they shall day by day receive a new effusion of Spirit.

(Cited in a letter dated 5 March 1922 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, published in "Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932", pp. 22-23)

[10]

One consecrated soul is preferable to a thousand other souls. If a small number of people gather lovingly together, with absolute purity and sanctity, with their hearts free of the world, experiencing the emotions of the Kingdom and the powerful magnetic forces of the Divine, and being at one in their happy fellowship, that gathering will exert its influence over all the earth. The nature of that band of people, the words they speak, the deeds they do, will unleash the bestowals of Heaven, and provide a foretaste of eternal bliss. The hosts of the Company on high will defend them, and the angels of the Abhá Paradise, in continuous succession, will come down to their aid.

("Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá", (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982), sec. 39, p. 81)

[11]

If they agree upon a subject, even though it be wrong, it is better than to disagree and be in the right, for this difference will produce the demolition of the divine foundation. Though one of the parties may be in the right and they disagree that will be the cause of a thousand wrongs, but if they agree and both parties are in the wrong, as it is in unity the truth will be revealed and the wrong made right.

("Bahá'í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 411)

[12]

The question of consultation is of the utmost importance, and is one of the most potent instruments conducive to the tranquillity and felicity of the people. For example, when a believer is uncertain about his affairs, or when he seeketh to pursue a project or trade, the friends should gather together and devise a solution for him. He, in his turn, should act accordingly. Likewise in larger issues, when a problem ariseth, or a difficulty occurreth, the wise should gather, consult, and devise a solution. They should then rely upon the one true God, and surrender to His Providence, in whatever way it may be revealed, for divine confirmations will undoubtedly assist. Consultation, therefore, is one of the explicit ordinances of the Lord of mankind.

(From a Tablet - translated from the Persian)

[13]

Man must consult on all matters, whether major or minor, so that he may become cognizant of what is good. Consultation giveth him insight into things and enableth him to delve into questions which are unknown. The light of truth shineth from the faces of those who engage in consultation. Such consultation causeth the living waters to flow in the meadows of man's reality, the rays of ancient glory to shine upon him, and the tree of his being to be adorned with wondrous fruit. The members who are consulting, however, should behave in the utmost love, harmony and sincerity towards each other. The principle of consultation is one of the most fundamental elements of the divine edifice. Even in their ordinary affairs the individual members of society should consult.

(From a Tablet - translated from the Persian)

[14]

Every one of the friends should highly praise the other and each should regard himself as evanescent and as naught in the presence of others. All matters should be consulted upon in the meeting and whatever is the majority vote should be carried out. I swear by the one true God, it is better that all should agree on a wrong decision, than for one right vote to be singled out, inasmuch as single votes can be sources of dissension, which lead to ruin. Whereas, if in one case they take a wrong decision, in a hundred other cases they will adopt right decisions, and concord

and unity are preserved. This will offset any deficiency, and will eventually lead to the righting of the wrong.

(From a Tablet - translated from the Persian) [15]

The purpose of consultation is to show that the views of several individuals are assuredly preferable to one man, even as the power of a number of men is of course greater than the power of one man. Thus consultation is acceptable in the presence of the Almighty, and hath been enjoined upon the believers, so that they may confer upon ordinary and personal matters, as well as on affairs which are general in nature and universal.

For instance, when a man hath a project to accomplish, should he consult with some of his brethren, that which is agreeable will of course be investigated and unveiled to his eyes, and the truth will be disclosed. Likewise on a higher level, should the people of a village consult one another about their affairs, the right solution will certainly be revealed. In like manner, the members of each profession, such as in industry, should consult, and those in commerce should similarly consult on business affairs. In short, consultation is desirable and acceptable in all things and on all issues.

(Cited in a letter dated 15 February 1922 written by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Persia) [16]

Regarding thy question about consultation of a father with his son, or a son with his father, in matters of trade and commerce, consultation is one of the fundamental elements of the foundation of the Law of God. Such consultation is assuredly acceptable, whether between father and son, or with others. There is nothing better than this. Man must consult in all things for this will lead him to the depths of each problem and enable him to find the right solution.

(From a Tablet - translated from the Persian) [17]

The honoured members of the Spiritual Assembly should exert their efforts so that no differences may occur, and if such differences do occur, they should not reach the point of causing conflict, hatred and antagonism, which lead to threats. When you notice that a stage has been reached when enmity and threats are about to occur, you should immediately postpone discussion of the subject, until wranglings, disputations, and loud talk vanish, and a propitious time is at hand.

(From a Tablet - translated from the Persian) [18]

Settle all things, both great and small, by consultation. Without prior consultation, take no important step in your own personal affairs. Concern yourselves with one another. Help along one another's projects and plans. Grieve over one another. Let none in the whole country go in need. Befriend one another until ye become as a single body, one and all...³

(From a Tablet - translated from the Persian) [19]

Every meeting which is organized for the purpose of unity and concord will be conducive to changing strangers into friends, enemies into associates, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá will be present in His heart and soul with that meeting.

("Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas", vol. 2 (Chicago: Bahá'í Publishing Society, 1915), p. 553) [20]

In this Cause consultation is of vital importance, but spiritual conference and not the mere voicing of personal views is intended. In France I was present at a session of the senate, but the experience was not impressive. Parliamentary procedure should have for its object the attainment

of the light of truth upon questions presented and not furnish a battleground for opposition and self-opinion. Antagonism and contradiction are unfortunate and always destructive to truth. In the parliamentary meeting mentioned, altercation and useless quibbling were frequent; the result, mostly confusion and turmoil; even in one instance a physical encounter took place between two members. It was not consultation but comedy.

The purpose is to emphasize the statement that consultation must have for its object the investigation of truth. He who expresses an opinion should not voice it as correct and right but set it forth as a contribution to the consensus of opinion, for the light of reality becomes apparent when two opinions coincide. A spark is produced when flint and steel come together. Man should weigh his opinions with the utmost serenity, calmness and composure. Before expressing his own views he should carefully consider the views already advanced by others. If he finds that a previously expressed opinion is more true and worthy, he should accept it immediately and not willfully hold to an opinion of his own. By this excellent method he endeavors to arrive at unity and truth. Opposition and division are deplorable. It is better then to have the opinion of a wise, sagacious man; otherwise, contradiction and altercation, in which varied and divergent views are presented, will make it necessary for a judicial body to render decision upon the question. Even a majority opinion or consensus may be incorrect. A thousand people may hold to one view and be mistaken, whereas one sagacious person may be right. Therefore, true consultation is spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love. Members must love each other in the spirit of fellowship in order that good results may be forthcoming. Love and fellowship are the foundation.

The most memorable instance of spiritual consultation was the meeting of the disciples of Jesus Christ upon the mount after His ascension. They said, "Jesus Christ has been crucified, and we have no longer association and intercourse with Him in His physical body; therefore, we must be loyal and faithful to Him, we must be grateful and appreciate Him, for He has raised us from the dead, He made us wise, He has given us eternal life. What shall we do to be faithful to Him?" And so they held council. One of them said, "We must detach ourselves from the chains and fetters of the world; otherwise, we cannot be faithful." The others replied, "That is so." Another said, "Either we must be married and faithful to our wives and children or serve our Lord free from these ties. We cannot be occupied with the care and provision for families and at the same time herald the Kingdom in the wilderness. Therefore, let those who are unmarried remain so, and those who have married provide means of sustenance and comfort for their families and then go forth to spread the message of glad-tidings." There were no dissenting voices; all agreed, saying, "That is right." A third disciple said, "To perform worthy deeds in the Kingdom we must be further self-sacrificing. From now on we should forego ease and bodily comfort, accept every difficulty, forget self and teach the Cause of God." This found acceptance and approval by all the others. Finally a fourth disciple said, "There is still another aspect to our faith and unity. For Jesus' sake we shall be beaten, imprisoned and exiled. They may kill us. Let us receive this lesson now. Let us realize and resolve that though we are beaten, banished, cursed, spat upon and led forth to be killed, we shall accept all this joyfully, loving those who hate and wound us." All the disciples replied, "Surely we will—it is agreed; this is right." Then they descended from the summit of the mountain, and each went forth in a different direction upon his divine mission.

This was true consultation. This was spiritual consultation and not the mere voicing of personal views in parliamentary opposition and debate.

("The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912", 2nd ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), pp. 72-73)

[21]

The first duty of the members is to effect their own unity and harmony, in order to obtain good results. If there be no unity, or the Committee becomes the cause of inharmony, undoubtedly, it is better that it does not exist....

Therefore, when the unity of the members of the Committee is established, their second duty is to read the verses and communes, to be in a state of commemoration and mindfulness, that they may see each other as if in the presence of God.

(Published in "Star of the West", vol. 8, no. 9 (20 August 1917), p. 114) [22]

From the Writings of Shoghi Effendi

Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority, but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá'í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand and fellowship, candour and courage on the other.

(23 February 1924 to the Bahá'ís of America, published in "Bahá'í Administration", pp. 63-64) [23]

The duties of those whom the friends have freely and conscientiously elected as their representatives are no less vital and binding than the obligations of those who have chosen them. Their function is not to dictate, but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the friends whom they represent. They must regard themselves in no other light but that of chosen instruments for a more efficient and dignified presentation of the Cause of God. They should never be led to suppose that they are the central ornaments of the body of the Cause, intrinsically superior to others in capacity or merit, and sole promoters of its teachings and principles. They should approach their task with extreme humility, and endeavour by their open-mindedness, their high sense of justice and duty, their candour, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interests of the friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they should serve, but also their esteem and real affection. They must at all times avoid the spirit of exclusiveness, the atmosphere of secrecy, free themselves from a domineering attitude, and banish all forms of prejudice and passion from their deliberations. They should, within the limits of wise discretion, take the friends into their confidence, acquaint them with their plans, share with them their problems and anxieties, and seek their advice and counsel. And when they are called upon to arrive at a certain decision, they should, after dispassionate, anxious, and cordial consultation, turn to God in prayer, and with earnestness and conviction and courage record their vote and abide by the voice of the majority, which we are told by our Master to be the voice of truth, never to be challenged, and always to be whole-heartedly enforced. To this voice the friends must heartily respond, and regard it as the only means that can ensure the protection and advancement of the Cause.

(23 February 1924 to the Bahá'ís of America, published in "Bahá'í Administration", p. 64) [24]

Not infrequently, nay oftentimes, the most lowly, untutored, and inexperienced among the friends will, by the sheer inspiring force of selfless and ardent devotion, contribute a distinct and memorable share to a highly involved discussion in any given assembly....

(29 January 1925 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in "Bahá'í Administration", p. 79) [25]

Indeed it has ever been the cherished desire of our Master 'Abdu'l-Bahá that the friends in their councils, local as well as national, should by their candour, their honesty of purpose, their singleness of mind, and the thoroughness of their discussions achieve unanimity in all things....

(29 January 1925 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in "Bahá'í Administration", p. 80) [26]

Consultation, frank and unfettered, is the bedrock of this unique Order...

(In the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi, appended to a letter dated 18 November 1933 written on his behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada)

[27]

From Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi⁴

Concerning the attendance of certain individuals at the meeting of the Assemblies and at the invitation of that body: This Shoghi Effendi considers to be as expert advice, which is absolutely necessary for good administration. The members of the Assembly are not supposed to know everything on every subject, so they can invite a person, versed in that question, to attend their meetings and explain his views. But naturally he will have no right to vote.

(23 October 1926 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles, published in "Unfolding Destiny: The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to the Bahá'í Community of the British Isles" (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981), p. 59)

[28]

We are often told by the Master that under such circumstances we should consult our friends, especially the Assemblies, and seek their advice. It would be nice if you should follow that advice and take some of the friends into your confidence. Maybe God's will is best attained through consultation.

(12 November 1930)

[29]

With proper consultation some method is sure to be found. There is no need to wait until an Assembly is constituted to start consulting. The view of two earnest souls is always better than one....

(16 June 1932)

[30]

The principle of consultation, which constitutes one of the basic laws of the Administration, should be applied to all Bahá'í activities which affect the collective interests of the Faith, for it is through co-operation and continual exchange of thoughts and views that the Cause can best safeguard and foster its interests. Individual initiative, personal ability and resourcefulness, though indispensable, are, unless supported and enriched by the collective experiences and wisdom of the group, utterly incapable of achieving such a tremendous task.

(30 August 1933)

[31]

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 Bahá'í Assemblies.

But before the majority of the Assembly comes to a decision, it is not only the right but the sacred obligation of every member to express freely and openly his views, without being afraid of displeasing or alienating any of his fellow-members. In view of this important administrative principle of frank and open consultation, the Guardian would advise you to give up the method of asking other members to voice your opinion and suggestions. This indirect way of expressing your views to the Assembly not only creates an atmosphere of secrecy which is most alien to the spirit

of the Cause, but would also lead to many misunderstandings and complications. The Assembly members must have the courage of their convictions, but must also express whole-hearted and unqualified obedience to the well-considered judgement and directions of the majority of their fellow-members.

(28 October 1935)

[32]

Through the clash of personal opinions, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated, the spark of truth is often ignited, and Divine guidance revealed. The friends should therefore not feel discouraged at the differences of opinion that may prevail among the members of an Assembly, for these, as experience has shown, and as the Master's words attest, fulfil a valuable function in all Assembly deliberations. But once the opinion of the majority has been ascertained, all the members should automatically and unreservedly obey it, and faithfully carry it out. Patience and restraint, however, should at all times characterize the discussions and deliberations of the elected representatives of the local community, and no fruitless and hair-splitting discussions indulged in, under any circumstances.

(18 April 1939)

[33]

In your last question, concerning cases when those needed for consultation are not available and a person is uncertain on the course to be followed in an important matter, you ask whether it is permissible for him to resort to the practice of "istikhárîh"⁵ using the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. The Guardian has stated that in such cases what is necessary and essential is for the person to turn his heart wholly to God and to beseech aid from the Source of Grace and inspiration and nothing else. If it is possible to postpone the decision it would be preferable and more proper to do so, until the means for consultation are made available.

(23 April 1941 - translated from the Persian)

[34]

The remedy to Assembly inharmony cannot be in the resignation or abstinence of any of its members. It must learn, in spite of disturbing elements, to continue to function as a whole, otherwise the whole system would become discredited through the introduction of exceptions to the rule.

The believers, loving the Cause above all else and putting its interests first, must be ready to bear the hardships entailed, of whatever nature they may be. Only through such persistence and self-sacrifice can we ever hope to preserve on the one hand our divine institutions intact, and on the other force ourselves to become nobler, better instruments to serve this glorious Faith.

(20 November 1941)

[35]

The questions you ask in your letter about individual guidance have two aspects, one might say. It is good that people should turn to God and beseech His aid in solving their problems and guiding their acts, indeed every day of their lives, if they feel the desire to do so. But they cannot possibly impose what they feel to be their guidance on anyone else, let alone on Assemblies or Committees, as Bahá'u'lláh has expressly laid down the law of consultation and never indicated that anything else superseded it.

(25 January 1943)

[36]

The Guardian advises that you should refer to other doctors, and follow the majority vote.⁶

(14 February 1945, translated from the Arabic)

[37]

You have pointed out that on consultative bodies it may sometimes happen that in a given case the view of one of the members is better and has greater merit than that of the others, but

these members are not prepared to accept such a view. The Guardian stated that it is necessary and imperative to consult frankly and with pure motives before arriving at a decision. Once the decision is taken, it is incumbent upon all to follow the majority view, and to enforce and put it into effect, even if the decision is a wrong one.

(1 February 1946 - translated from the Persian)

[38]

We all have a right to our opinions, we are bound to think differently; but a Bahá'í 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 Bahá'í way, God will right any wrongs done in the end.

Bahá'ís are not required to vote on an Assembly against their consciences. It is better if they submit to the majority view and make it unanimous. But they are not forced to. What they must do, however, is to abide by the majority decision, as this is what becomes effective. They must not go around undermining the Assembly by saying they disagreed with the majority. In other words, they must put the Cause first and not their own opinions. He (a Spiritual Assembly member) can ask the Assembly to reconsider a matter, but he has no right to force them or create in harmony because they won't change. Unanimous votes are preferable, but certainly cannot be forced upon Assembly members by artificial methods such as are used by other societies.

(19 October 1947)

[39]

The Bahá'ís must learn to forget personalities and to overcome the desire—so natural in people—to take sides and fight about it. They must also learn to really make use of the great principle of consultation...

(30 June 1949 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Germany and Austria, published in "The Light of Divine Guidance: The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to the Bahá'ís of Germany and Austria" [vol. 1], (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1982), p. 152)

[40]

There are no dissenting votes in the Cause. When the majority of an Assembly decides a matter the minority, we are told by the Master, should accept this. To insist on having one's dissenting vote recorded is not good, and achieves no constructive end...

(19 March 1950)

[41]

The Guardian regrets that, in the light of the Master's statement that the deliberations of Assemblies must be secret and confidential, it is not possible to have a non-Assembly member in the National Spiritual Assembly meeting. You must always remember that, in matters of principle, there can be no deviation; in America it may be possible for you to find a wholly trustworthy believer; but if your Assembly is permitted to have non-Assembly secretaries present, then the same privilege must be accorded oriental and Latin American Assemblies; and can these other countries be assured of finding people of the calibre you have found? Highly personal subjects, damaging to the honour and happiness of others, are often taken up by National Assemblies, and the danger that confidence will be betrayed is already great enough with the 9 chosen representatives of the whole Community, let alone introducing non-Assembly members. You will just have to make your minutes a little more compact and sacrifice, if necessary, a certain amount of efficiency in order to follow this very important principle.

(5 July 1950 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States)

[42]

From Letters Written by the Universal House of Justice

Although Local Spiritual Assemblies are primarily responsible for counselling believers regarding personal problems, there may be times, when in the judgement of the National or Local Assembly, it would be preferable to assign counselling or advisory duties to individuals or committees. This is within the discretion of the Assembly.

(27 March 1966 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

[43]

It is important to realise that the spirit of Bahá'í consultation is very different from that current in the decision-making processes of non-Bahá'í bodies.

The ideal of Bahá'í consultation is to arrive at a unanimous decision. When this is not possible a vote must be taken. In the words of the beloved Guardian: "...when they are called upon to arrive at a certain decision, they should, after dispassionate, anxious and cordial consultation, turn to God in prayer, and with earnestness and conviction and courage record their vote and abide by the voice of the majority, which we are told by the Master to be the voice of truth, never to be challenged, and always to be whole-heartedly enforced".

As soon as a decision is reached it becomes the decision of the whole Assembly, not merely of those members who happened to be among the majority.

When it is proposed to put a matter to the vote, a member of the Assembly may feel that there are additional facts or views which must be sought before he can make up his mind and intelligently vote on the proposition. He should express this feeling to the Assembly, and it is for the Assembly to decide whether or not further consultation is needed before voting.

Whenever it is decided to vote on a proposition all that is required is to ascertain how many of the members are in favour of it; if this is a majority of those present, the motion is carried; if it is a minority, the motion is defeated. Thus the whole question of "abstaining" does not arise in Bahá'í voting. A member who does not vote in favour of a proposition is, in effect, voting against it, even if at that moment he himself feels that he has been unable to make up his mind on the matter.

(6 March 1970 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

[44]

Your letter of 14 February 1973 enquiring about the uses of Bahá'í consultation has been received.

This is, of course, a matter in which rigidity should be avoided.

When a believer has a problem concerning which he must make a decision, he has several courses open to him. If it is a matter that affects the interests of the Faith he should consult with the appropriate Assembly or committee, but individuals have many problems which are purely personal and there is no obligation upon them to take such problems to the institutions of the Faith; indeed, when the needs of the teaching work are of such urgency it is better if the friends will not burden their Assemblies with personal problems that they can solve by themselves.

A Bahá'í who has a problem may wish to make his own decision upon it after prayer and after weighing all the aspects of it in his own mind; he may prefer to seek the counsel of individual friends or of professional counselors such as his doctor or lawyer so that he can consider such advice when making his decision; or in a case where several people are involved, such as a family situation, he may want to gather together those who are affected so that they may arrive at a collective decision. There is also no objection whatever to a Bahá'í's asking a group of people to consult together on a problem facing him.

It should be borne in mind that all consultation is aimed at arriving at a solution to a problem and is quite different from the sort of group baring of the soul that is popular in some circles these days and which borders on the kind of confession that is forbidden in the faith. On the subject of confession the Guardian's secretary wrote on his behalf to an individual believer: "We are forbidden to confess to any person, as do the Catholics to their priests, our sins and shortcomings, or to do so in public, as some religious sects do. However, if we spontaneously desire to acknowledge we have been wrong in something, or that we have some fault of character, and ask another person's forgiveness or pardon, we are quite free to do so. The Guardian wants to point out, however, that we are not obliged to do so. It rests entirely with the individual."

(19 March 1973 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada)

[45]

From a Letter Written on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice

The statement which you quote⁷ in the second paragraph of your letter is taken from a Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá which was addressed by Him to the friends in Tíhrán at a time when, without the knowledge and permission of the Spiritual Assembly and contrary to government regulations, one of the friends undertook to print the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. The instructions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá which you quote were issued on that occasion and in that context.

The Universal House of Justice has pointed out that when Shoghi Effendi enumerates the functions of a Local Spiritual Assembly in "Bahá'í Administration" page 37, he indicates that the local matters to be referred to the Local Spiritual Assembly are those "pertaining to the Cause". This does not mean, of course, that personal problems may not be referred to Bahá'í Assemblies. The Local Spiritual Assembly, however, is not the only institution or agency to which the friends may turn for consultation on personal matters. Such consultation could be held with members of one's family, with friends, or with experts. For example in one of His Tablets 'Abdu'l-Bahá envisages the possibility of experts in one profession conferring together.

(8 April 1975 to an individual believer)

[46]

Notes

- 1 Nine ↵
- 2 “This statement appears in Questions and Answers, described by Shoghi Effendi as an appendix to The Kitáb-i-Aqdas. It was revealed before Spiritual Assemblies had been established and was in answer to a question about the Bahá’í teaching on consultation. The emergence of Spiritual Assemblies, to which the friends may always turn, in no way prohibits them from following, if they wish, the procedure outlined in the above passage when they desire to consult on their personal problems. The quotation clearly indicates Bahá’u’lláh’s preference for unanimity.” (From a letter dated 28 February 1978 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies) ↵
- 3 Cf. “Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” [rev. ed.] (Haifa Bahá’í World Centre, 1982), Sec. 102, pp. 128-29. ↵
- 4 To individual believers unless otherwise indicated. ↵
- 5 This is a process of divination, such as is done through bibliomancy, when a Holy Book is opened at random and guidance is sought for one’s problem by reading passages of the Book on the opened page. ↵
- 6 This advice was given by the Guardian in a case when the inquirer sought the Guardian’s counsel, since one doctor’s view was that an operation was needed, while another doctor did not consider such an operation necessary. ↵
- 7 See extract number 8. ↵