

Dear Brothers-

With grief I write this letter, but with the hope that God would be pleased to use it to usher in a better day at New Covenant. Let's consider the three marks of a true church, and in particular, how NCCC fares:

- 1) Faithful preaching of the Word
- 2) Right administration of the sacraments
- 3) Church discipline

On points 1 and 2-- impeccable. On point 3-- cause for great alarm. I am lumping in shepherding/ discipleship with church discipline- as they are of a piece. We have excellent teaching and preaching and receive the Lord's Supper twice monthly for our growth and nourishment. Beyond that, we scarcely receive oversight from the men charged to keep watch over our souls. Yes, I know there are nods and smiles on Sundays, and brief exchanges between the elders and the people on the Lord's Day. Robust discipleship, however, requires a good deal more than a few interactions with us on Sundays. The OPC Book of Church Order says ruling elders with the pastor(s) are to "watch diligently over the people committed to their charge to prevent corruption of doctrine or morals." (p.13) It cannot be said that there is a diligent watch over the people at NCCC as evidenced in:

-a profound lack of regular home visits across the span of many years

*-a slowness or reluctance to provide care/ ministry, **even upon a member's request**, which I have personally experienced more than once*

-not a few members who have been on the rolls for years who no longer attend, and neither have they been contacted by the session for years (some of whom are in open sin)

-serious sin known by the session in members' lives for which they are not held accountable

-women, in particular, not receiving appropriate care (via unkindness or negligence)

Enlarging on the last bullet point above-- a sizable component in this lack of shepherding is an egregious pattern that I have observed: women are devalued and inadequately protected at New Covenant. The very men charged to keep watch over them have at times failed to esteem them and shield them from harm. I will further elaborate on this in the 'reports' to follow.

Marcus asked me in a recent email (as regards these matters here) to pray for both a godly resolution and for an upholding of the unity of the church. I offer a resounding amen to that prayer request. Indeed, the essence of this letter is a desperate pursuit to achieve the unity and the purity of the church; to see our glorious Savior exalted in our midst. Unity exists when all God's people (both leaders and laity) strive to obey his Word. As we know, when there is disobedience to his Word, the unity and purity of the church are fractured and violated. It's precisely because I place the utmost value on the unity and purity at NCCC that

I found it necessary to write this letter. With lamentation, I must point out where I see you failing to obey God's Word.

"Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness;
let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head; let my head not refuse it."

Pastor [REDACTED]'s sermon on 3-6-22 in the evening was a beautiful confirmation of what Michael and I already believed- that writing that letter to [REDACTED] was a most loving and biblical action. "My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." (James 5:19-20) Brother emphasized that it was not only the job of the pastor or elder to bring back one who strays, but that we are ALL called to do such. We ARE our brother's keepers, indeed. We firmly believe that we, more than anyone else, have shown [REDACTED] the greatest love and concern. To quote JC Ryle, "If I say hard things, it is not because I do not love you. I write as I do, because I desire your salvation. He is your best friend who tells you the most truth. Truth must be spoken, however condemning it may be."

We believe that we have been the truest and best friend to [REDACTED] because we have not been shy about speaking truth to him. It's what he desperately needs in order to bring him back from his wandering, yet none has cared enough to tell him. You sat Michael and me down, treating us as children, and chastising us after we wrote that letter. Chastise us for what, I ask?? It was a perfectly lawful piece of communication to a brother in sin. Again, we did something that James 5:19-20 exhorts us to do, yet you treated our action as 'unbiblical.' No, my brothers, that is upside down thinking. The two hours we sat with Marcus and Jim had an eerily controlling aspect to it; censorship seemed to be the goal (particularly censoring our calling [REDACTED] to repentance, as that was so distasteful to you apparently). You wanted us to believe that such a letter required an apology to the [REDACTED]. An apology?? With *clear* consciences, we wrote a truthful letter in an attempt to persuade a brother to turn from his sin, yet you wanted to *bind* our consciences with your coercive arguments that what we did was unbiblical. (WCF Ch. XX section II) You overstepped your ecclesiastical authority in that meeting because no wrongdoing had been committed on our part, yet we were subjected to listen your "corrections" about it. **You**, in fact, were the ones not acting in accord with scripture by abusing your power. Cult leaders sit their members down to get them to fall into line with the leader's agenda, whereas, the Church of Jesus Christ has only the goal for its members to conform to scriptural precepts, which Michael and I carefully and zealously sought to do in writing to [REDACTED]. A healthy church leadership humbly welcomes and encourages input from the congregation, and is not threatened by it. Please recognize the cultish (ie, controlling) way you approached this whole situation, and seek to avoid treating others like that in the future.

There were other disturbing and insulting aspects to that meeting as well, I am sorry to report. Repeatedly, my God- given gift of engaging people well in conversation was spoken of disparagingly, almost as though it were sinful! That is shameful, brothers, that you would do that to a sister; that you would sit her down in a meeting and refer to her gift in a distorted, twisted way, ie, that I 'forcefully extract' information from people. I urge you to

repent of doing that to me. Michael later apologized to me for not having defended me during the meeting when both Marcus and Jim referred to my engaging of people in this demeaning way.

Furthermore, I mentioned to you the abusive way [REDACTED] treated me in the short conversation I had with him after we gave him the letter, and I was asking for your intervention- if only to speak a brief word of admonishment to him re: his manhandling of one of the sisters. Instead of desiring to protect a sister who had been mistreated by one of the brothers in the congregation and to properly defend her, what did you do? You told me, in essence, that I had it coming. After all, I had just done something unbiblical and, naturally, [REDACTED] was going to react angrily. Your response to me was repugnant. You had no desire to affirm the value of one of the women in the congregation. Rather, it seemed to matter little.

It was surreal and grievous, indeed, as I sat across the table from [REDACTED] as she quote, unquote 'repented' for having shared information with me over a long period of time about [REDACTED]'s sin. It was heartbreaking to listen to my close friend of many years say these things to me that I very much doubt originated from her, but I believed were rather a product of the voices around her who chided her for letting any of this get out. When Michael and I initially gave [REDACTED] that letter, [REDACTED] thanked us for doing what no one else was willing to do. I firmly believe she thought most according to truth in those early moments. Yes, I know, after her husband convinced her of the absurdity and falsehood of it, then she found the letter abhorrent. Of course he does not want her to see clearly on any of this. Does he want her to understand or believe that he is ensnared in drunkenness, or that he is an abusive husband? The answer is obvious.

The picture has been painted that I 'forced' information from [REDACTED]-- a distortion of reality that [REDACTED] especially pushes as truth. On the contrary, my friend freely shared her life with me across the years, without my coercion. In any case, how I received this information is totally irrelevant anyway. I urge you to take your focus off me, the mere messenger, and put it where it belongs- on Brother [REDACTED]. I didn't see it clearly until more recently, but her having told me of his sin was her cry for help. As I became aware that [REDACTED] was abusing alcohol and mistreating his wife, I confess I still did not lay hold of the gravity of the situation. If I had been keen, I would have said, "This is totally unacceptable and it needs to be addressed." It took years for me to conclude that his behavior was reprehensible and not to be tolerated in the Church of Jesus Christ. In other words, I only came to see in the last two years that the session had an absolute obligation to intervene and call him to repentance.

As [REDACTED] was confessing her so-called sin of sharing information with me, I was then backed into a corner to agree not to speak to her about this any further. What a beautiful scenario for her husband- his wife had now been silenced. Beautiful for [REDACTED], dangerous for [REDACTED]. It was nauseating for me to watch as she sat there and seemed to be both: *a)* convinced that I was now her opponent instead of the friend I had always been, and *b)* persuaded that she had been in the wrong to ever let any of this out. Well, I have no regrets

and am thankful that I have come to know these things, and to act as her advocate in any way I can.

Regretfully, the session has known about [REDACTED]'s serious drinking problem and has not striven to do anything of substance about it. You have said that you are closely attending to it, yet as of this calendar year 2022, there has been no change in his drinking. You cannot rightly say it is being dealt with adequately or biblically if things remain just as they always have, with neither repentance nor discipline having taken place. Furthermore, I am modifying what I said about not talking to [REDACTED]. I will always be ready to aid **any** sister who confides in me about distress or danger she may be experiencing. And, you have no place to insist that a woman tell **no one** (besides you) anything about such matters in her life. To isolate a woman in that way, and forbidding her to speak to others about such things, is nothing short of spiritual abuse. Your concern should be for her safety and well being, which may include her need to confide in a friend about it.

Now that our dear sister has been muted and is to speak to you only about the matter, you are more than ever obligated to swiftly come to her (and [REDACTED]'s) aid. The question is, are you really going to do that? Or, will this continue on as it has for so long? I beg of you to make no further delays, and to face it head on. Do you not love this brother? Then, tell him of his sin and warn him of the danger if he remains in it. Do you not care for this sister? Then, provide respite for her from all the years she has had to endure living with someone abusing alcohol, and mistreating her. Is not the purity of the church first and foremost in your mind? Then, seek to purge this kind of sin from our midst.

Response I seek from you...

Above, I have as much said it already, but I adjure you to deal promptly and appropriately with [REDACTED]'s serious sin of alcohol abuse and mistreatment of his wife, as the purity and unity of the church have suffered greatly by your failure to adequately address this. We have allowed that which the Bible clearly condemns as gross sin to remain unchecked within this local body for a very long time. How can I so confidently assert such a thing? Because if there had been sobriety and attentiveness applied to this situation, it could *never* have gone on for so many years. It fills me with dismay that this has continued for a prolonged period with seemingly little concern on your part.

You are obligated to **directly confront** him about his drinking, offer him all the help he needs, and hold him accountable for his sin. The hope is that he will receive your help and look to the Lord to deliver him from this. However, if after offering [REDACTED] your aid, and if he neither receives it, nor repents, then discipline must ensue. Please consider this for a moment-- [REDACTED]'s unbelieving children are well acquainted with [REDACTED]'s alcohol abuse, and yet they see that he is a trustee at our church, and has never been called to account for his sin. You are demonstrating to a watching world that we tolerate scandalous sin, and even elevate such a person to a corporate office. If you but ponder that thought, it should cause you to weep and repent.

It's a glorious development that in recent times the conversation about abuse has begun in the OPC- from Jennifer Greenberg to Aimee Byrd to the vote at General Assembly last year to determine whether to use an outside agency (GRACE) to help the denomination resolve issues of abuse. This dialogue is long overdue, and it gives me hope that our beloved denomination might act more in accord with God's Word as regards this matter. Research says that a staggering 25% of women are in abusive marriages, whether inside or outside the church. I repeat-- **1 in 4** women are in abusive marriages in our churches. It is imperative that our leaders be equipped to adequately minister to both the husbands and wives entangled in these grievous situations.

I am sorry to say that NCCC is not immune to this. As I mentioned in my intro section, I have witnessed too many times that our own women are neither valued nor protected. I am citing three women by name in our congregation whose cases represent examples of improper care and lack of protection by their overseers. I mention three, but there are others too, sadly, of whom I know specifically were not served by you when they needed your intervention (situations of which you were fully aware).

Obviously, I have talked much about [REDACTED] already, and am including her as one of the three whom you have failed to protect. I include [REDACTED] as the next example, and lastly, [REDACTED].

In each of these cases, it was known to the session that the husbands were in some way mistreating or abusing these sisters. Unfortunately, the men were never held accountable for their misdeeds, which left these beloved women vulnerable and in harm's way. I believe it's because there is a lack of understanding about what domestic violence/ abuse is, how to identify it, and how to provide aid to women in such situations.

Marcus mentioned to me that he has asked [REDACTED] something along these lines (I paraphrase)- "Do you feel you are in an abusive situation?" Here is the problem with that kind of question: women rarely self-identify as being abused women. Instead, it is up to her advocates to properly diagnose her situation; it cannot be left up to her to answer such a question and to make the determination herself if she is being abused. Here are the appropriate questions to ask a woman to rightly decide if she is in an abusive relationship: (I am omitting questions pertaining to obvious physical violence- hitting her, throwing things, etc. and am focusing on emotional abuse):

- Does he yell at you?
- Does he blame you for his abusive behavior?
- Does he have a bad or unpredictable temper?
- Do you feel you have to walk on eggshells for fear of triggering his temper? -Does he sulk or give you the silent treatment?
- Does he insult, criticize or call you names?

[REDACTED] has testified that [REDACTED] is guilty of some, if not all of the above. For goodness' sake, he frightened and mistreated *me* in the few minutes I was with him at church when we spoke of the letter from Michael and me. There leaves little doubt that this brother is abusing his

wife. It should also be noted that any time there is alcohol or substance abuse, it goes without saying that a man can't possibly be a fit husband to his wife. How can he fulfill the duty of loving her as Christ loved the church and who gave himself up for her if he isn't sober?

I will simplify this even further-- do you hear of a woman who does not feel her husband loves her or who feels he is mistreating her? Your antennae should immediately go up, and you should probe further to discover what is going on. You need to be there to intervene on her behalf and to call the brother in and hold him accountable for how he is treating his wife. Sorrowfully, that sort of scenario scarcely happens. Instead, when a woman speaks of ill treatment from her husband some inane suggestions are made about how the *wife* can improve the marriage. When Marcus counseled with [REDACTED] several years back about her marriage, he should have gone to the source of the problem-- [REDACTED]. Rather than calling out her husband on his obvious sin of alcohol abuse and of abusing her, he tells her to be more submissive or respectful to her husband, or some such shameful folly. A woman is *never* to submit to her husband's abuse.

Where there is abuse, it needs to be made *abundantly, unequivocally, unmistakably* clear that the woman has no fault in it whatsoever. She is not to be told how *she* can improve things, for things can never improve until the abuser repents. It is your utmost duty to reassure the woman in a thousand ways that she bears no blame in the matter, and that the guilt lays solely on the husband for his abuse. This cardinal truth seems to be lost on you, brothers. Or, if you do know it, you surely aren't acting in accord with it. I am unabashedly incensed, I am outraged at how Marcus handled our sister. He was fully aware of [REDACTED]'s drinking and abuse toward her. And, what was his remedy? He tells her how she can be a better wife. It is reprehensible to put it back on her. Instead, you are to hold the man accountable for his sin, and to seek his repentance. You are leading a woman in falsehood, not to mention laying a terrible burden on her, by insinuating that she has any responsibility for his sinful behavior, or that her actions can somehow stop or influence his abuse.

You must unambiguously convey to her that he *alone* is responsible for his base treatment of his wife. I have a holy fury about what you did to her (and have continued to do to her). You have communicated to her that she is to tolerate his abuse. How devaluing that is to a woman to be told, in so many words, that she must submit to her husband's ill treatment. By doing so you have failed altogether to see her as a loved and treasured daughter of the King, made in the image of God. If you were affirming her worth as you ought to, you would tell her that she is made for much more than this (ie, made for more than living with and submitting to a man given to drunkenness and abuse toward her). The Lord does NOT desire in any way for women to put themselves in harm's way, and to enable their husbands to persist in perpetrating wickedness against them. Rather, she is to refuse his abuse, and to hold her husband accountable. And, YOU, as the overseers of her soul are to be leading her in this thought pattern. You are to be affirming her worth as a child of God and providing a safe haven for her if the man does not repent.

Scripture is clear that men are to be the servant leaders to their wives. I am aghast that there seems to be such reluctance on your part to hold our brothers accountable when they fail to love their wives and to be those servant leaders. Why are you so hesitant? What is this seeming cowardice on your part that you fail to admonish our men to love their wives, and to truly hold them accountable when they do not?? It appears that you find it easier to tell the woman how she needs to change. I boldly challenge that mentality because scripture emphasizes that the **husband** is first and foremost to take responsibility in the marriage- to love, nurture, and to protect her. Pastor Strange put it nicely in his marriage conference series- the man is to give, and the woman is to receive. Precisely! If a husband is not giving of his love and tenderness, what does the woman have to work with? Nothing. Brothers, hold Don accountable for his sin, and stop looking at the wife. I take that back-- look at her, *in pity*, and start protecting her as you should have done long ago.

By the way, the ideas set forth above can largely be credited to a book NCCC leadership (Pastor Strange, to be precise) personally recommended to me back in 2019 on this topic entitled, "*Is It My Fault? Hope and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence*" by Justin S. Holcomb and Lindsey A. Holcomb. You purportedly endorse this book I just mentioned, so I merely ask that you follow the biblical wisdom the authors articulate.

I mentioned the [REDACTED] as well. In my many conversations with her, it's beyond the shadow of a doubt that she was another victim of your inaction and insensitivity to women in clearly abusive situations. Additionally, last year [REDACTED] testified about [REDACTED] mistreatment toward [REDACTED] across the years.

[REDACTED] As I stated, I know of other sisters whom you have also failed to protect against their abusive husbands within our congregation. Your negligence to diligently watch over women in these situations communicates to us that we are of little value; you are denying the God-given worth we possess when you take such a cavalier approach.

How long must this go on, my brothers? How many more women must endure with their husbands who profess Christ, yet disdain their wives? The Lord does not look lightly upon this. If you do not act, he himself will bring justice and relief to the vulnerable and oppressed.

Response I seek from you...

I plead with you to become sensitive to women's needs and to our particular vulnerabilities, and especially to learn how to help those in abusive marriages. It would benefit our session immensely if you would seek to educate yourselves (be it through seminars, conferences, books) on the topic of abused women within the church. As it stands, our women are not safe in your care, as has been evidenced over and over. Therefore, I urge you to repent of how you have failed your sisters, and seek to aggressively put a plan of action into place wherein our safety will be ensured and our value as women will also be affirmed. Again, please seek some formal "training" in the area of handling abuse that will enable your care for us to be in much better accord with scripture.

You need to be able to: *a)* recognize the signs of abuse *b)* take swift and appropriate action to protect the woman upon discovering and confirming such *c)* hold perpetrators accountable and seek to bring them to repentance.

Women are fellow heirs of Christ with you and you are to endeavor to live out the fullness of that reality, with its many implications...

** I was encouraged to see this 'Open Letter' from ministers and elders in the OPC pertaining to reviling language used toward sisters in the OPC. It is a refreshing example of our leaders not tolerating sins against women in the church. Please take a look at it if you have not seen it, and even add your name to it if you feel so moved. **

<https://aimeebyrd.com/2020/06/22/an-open-letter-from-concerned-ministers-and-elders-in-the-opc/>

I include these instances as examples of grossly insensitive/ negligent care:

- My attempt to seek out care/ counsel from Marcus in October 2020, to no avail (he and I did discuss his failure to minister in this instance, and I granted forgiveness. It still needs to be mentioned, however, as evidence to bolster my argument that there is a lack of shepherding at NCCC)

-Preliminary letter I wrote to Pastor Strange in the last few weeks re: my marriage (he may elaborate to you on that letter) Forgiveness granted here too, but this instance still needs to be cited as evidence for my argument here in this broader letter

-Preliminary letter wrote to both Pastor Strange and Marcus re: a meeting the three of us had in May 2021 (on which they may elaborate as well)

It has been at a tremendous personal cost to me to craft and deliver this correspondence to you. The contemplation, preparation, and final execution of it required great expenditures of mental energy, and produced considerable angst and emotional upheaval. To go up against my session? To pour out my heart and to put myself in such a place of vulnerability to the very men who have wounded me (and others)? Am I a glutton for punishment? What would possess one to do what I have done here when there is a very real possibility that what I have brought to you will be dismissed, or worse, scorned?

I could have continued sitting in the pews week after week and smile politely as is the custom for all of us to do. I could have taken my ease and made a strong argument that it isn't my responsibility to bring matters like these to the session. After all, are they not capable, intelligent men who are scrupulously directing God's people in the ways of righteousness? The problem is that my eyes and ears and experiences have not deceived me. Roughly, over the last three years I believe I have begun to see accurately the state of affairs (which I have taken pains to describe in the preceding pages). After all that had come to my knowledge, how could I in good conscience remain silent? The answer is, of course, that my conscience would in no way allow me to do anything **but** speak. To restate

what I said above, coming forward to you has been grueling and mentally and emotionally exhausting. At times, I have been afraid I would break under the strain of it all. The Lord has sustained me, though, and I am fully persuaded that he takes pleasure in my having presented this writing to you.

I would have considered myself to be acting unfaithfully to the Savior if I had remained silent. He is the one to whom I must answer, and all my efforts have been fueled by my burning passion for both God's glory and the purity of Christ's bride. I am content to know that I am storing up treasures in heaven by bringing all this to you, though it has involved much discomfort. In fact, the words of King David resonate with me, "I will become even more undignified than this." Yes, I will further abase myself if needed, so long as God provides me the strength and resources to do his bidding in this matter.

Why am I providing you with a glimpse into what lead me to write this letter and the effects it has had on me? Perhaps I want give you a sober reminder of the position of power you hold as pastors/ elders, either for good or harm, and of the far reaching effects of leadership's actions. God says you will be held to a stricter judgment. Therefore, please consider the anguish I have endured in recent years due to:

- a)** the callous treatment rendered to me at times
- b)** seeing leadership sweep sin under the carpet
- c)** witnessing the suffering of other sheep due to your negligence/ insensitivity.

My desperate hope and prayer is that my testimony throughout this letter will shake off the session's lethargy; that you will endeavor to much more carefully attend to the sheep, with the tenderness of Christ. Could the faltering words of this feeble servant move NCCC leadership to repentance and reform in how they shepherd the ones for whom Jesus died? May our God be pleased to accomplish renewal in the session through my flawed and weak writings here.