

Excerpts From
North Branford Congregational Church Records
Volume 3
1809-1867

Transcribed and Digitized
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Introduction:

In the early days of the Church it was the duty of parishioners to watch over and care for their church brethren. All members signed a covenant to that effect. They had a duty to report misbehavior and transgressions of other members to the pastor. The church would then send a letter to the “sinner” and require them to confess their sins before the church body. If they did not, they might be removed from the church rolls. This was a serious situation as it was essentially shunning.

These excerpts were transcribed from copies of the original church documents. One must remember that in early 1800s the church basically controlled the lives of its members. Pastors had much power as people essentially lived in a theocracy. If a person was removed from the rolls of the church, they were basically ostracized. It was much to the offender’s advantage to confess their offence and remain in good standing.

It appears that individuals were routinely called before the church to confess their sins and gain the approval of the church body.

The confessions below are from three women accused of intoxication. They are written in the flowery language of the time.

It seems that the confessions were read to the entire church body.

A transcription of the original covenant is shown on the next page.

T. G.

Church Covenant

Under a humble sense of your own unworthiness with dependence on Divine assistance you do, in the presence of the great holy and every living God and before these his people, give yourself up to the God the Father in and through Jesus Christ the so Space him to be your guard into Christ is your redeemer, into the Holy Ghost is your site the fire, guide and benefactor, - you do also give yourself up to this church as a church of Christ, to walk together with that thankful attendance 20 the ordinances and duties that are to be attended, and in the enjoyment of all the privileges that are to be enjoyed in a particular visible church of Christ – promising to submit do the discipline of Christ in this church till regularly dismissed thereupon. This you covenant and promise as God shall help give by his grace.

We do there for receive you as a fellow member of this church into the enjoyment of all the privileges of God's house end promise, as God shall enable us by his grace, walk toward you as such in all things. This we covenant, and pray God to watch over him and us. Amen.

The first accusation and confession:

At meeting of the church on 5th July, 1811 the following complaint was read whereupon the church voted that a copy of it be transmitted to the offending sister and that she be suspended from communion until complaint be satisfied and that they will attend to her answer immediately after the next preparatory lecture.

To the church of Christ in North Branford.

Reverend Pastor and beloved Brethren

No church can flourish unless its individual members are faithful and exercising particular watch and care over each other. Indeed, so far as I suffer sin upon a brother or sister, we become partakers of their guilt. It is much against one's Christian character and a mark of a graceless state for any to be offended at the notice taken by a brother of their improper conduct. How different from this were the feelings of pious David, when he said, "Let the righteous smite me, it be a kindness and let him reprove me, sent it shall be an excellent oil which shall not break my head." Sensible of our solemn promises to walk towards each other in all Christian watchfulness, we feel bound brethren to make mention to you of the case of our sister (name removed). Her deportment has been such on various occasions as to be a reproach to herself and a dishonor to the cause of religion, but particularly is she chargeable with the intemperate use of a spiritous liquor. The stigma thus cast upon her profession, and the view of the word, the injury done to the interest of the Redeemer's kingdom among us, and the lamentable state of piety which her conduct manifests, in her own soul all induce us to believe, that we are in conscience bound to take measures for her reformation. We have repeatedly visited her as the gospel directs but she does not acknowledge her fault nor give us any satisfactory reason for her conduct, we therefore tell it to the church.

**David Russell
Benjamin Page**

The church tarried after the Lecture August 30, 1811, to attend to an answer which the offending sister might give to the above complaint, but she was not ready to reply to it and desired to be waited up on a longer time. The church voted to postpone the business one month from this time. But on the following

Sabbath the following confession was presented, read and accepted and she was admitted to communion.

August 31, 1811

To the church of Christ to North Branford.

Beloved brothers and sisters. I acknowledge the receipt of a letter from you, through the medium of the pastor, signed by two of the brethren. I fully agree with you in the sentiment which you express that no church, can flourish unless it's individual members are faithful in exercising particular watch and care over each other and that so far as we suffer sin upon a brother or sister, we become partakers of their guilt. I hope and trust I take it kindly, that you have endeavored to fulfill your engagements toward me and have been pleased in this instance to watch over me and manifest your displeasure at my conduct as contained in the complaint presented to the church. I thank you for having taken gospel measures for my reformation. I am fully convinced that my life and conversation in a number of incidences have been contrary to what God requires and that herein I have violated my covenant vows as I solemnly promised before God, through His strength of divine grace, to make it my endeavor to walk worthy of the Christian vocation. I confess particularly, through infirmity and distress of body, I have at certain times been guilty of intemperance and on these occasions have conducted in a very unbecoming manner, so as to dishonor the cause of religion, wound the feelings of my brethren and sisters and more especially to incur the divine displeasure for all which I desire to be deeply humbled before God, and to abhor myself and repent as in dust and ashes. At the same time, I ask your forgiveness and request your prayers that I may be enabled to deny all ungodliness and worldly lusts and to live soberly and piously in this present evil world. Submitting myself to the church, I would beg leave to be restored to my former standing and be permitted to join with you in the enjoyment of gospel ordinances.

(name removed)

A second confession from a different woman:

The following confession was voluntarily made by (name removed) on the Sabbath of December 29, 1811.

To the church of Christ in North Branford

Beloved Brethren and Sisters.

It is with Shame and confusion of face that I appear before you with deep humility to acknowledge my sin and guilt. As if it was not enough for those who make no pretensions to religion to live in open and scandalous sin, through my misconduct, Christ is wounded in the house of a professed friend. I have given occasion to His enemy to speak reproachfully of me and Christians judging of the tree by its fruit, have had reason to suspect me of hypocrisy. Particularly, I confess myself at times to have been so lost to a single reason, duty and every moral obligation, as repeatedly to have indulged in intoxication and thus exposed myself to obloquy and contempt. Oh the baseness and madness of my conduct, in that I have, by it, put myself on a level with the ungodly and profane, caused a dreadful desolation to be spread over my whole soul, the wall of separation to be set up between God and my heart and subjected myself to his awful sentence which God has left on record, that drunkards shall not inherit the kingdom of heaven. I acknowledged that God might justly cast me from his preference and number me among the signal instances of his vengeance and thus teach me what evil and bitter thing it is, that I have forsaken Him and have been delivered over to such abominations, the aggravating circumstances attending my offense, which arise from abused mercy and goodness, and from my solemn vows and engagements to Him. My only hope thro Christ is that in the divine declaration "That there is forgiveness with God that He may be feared." At the same time, I improve this opportunity to beg pardon of this church for having wounded their feelings dishonored religion. I request your prayers in my behalf that henceforth I may walk circumspectly not as a fool but as a wife and having made the solemn confession of my sin, that I may be not be left, like some others, to be guilty of the same again. Submitting myself to the church indeed for their continued watch and care over me, I now subscribe myself your unworthy sister.

(Name removed)

At a meeting of the church immediately after the preparatory lecture on Friday, January 31, 1812 voted that (name removed) for the repeated crime of intoxication, be suspended from communion for the term of three months from the above date.

C. Atwater (pastor)

Jan y 1, 1813

At a meeting of the church immediately after lecture voted that (name removed) be suspended from communion for the term of two months and that in the mean time Deacon Baldwin and Mr. William Wheaton as a committee from the church examine into her conduct and report the results at the next meeting after lecture.

A third confession:

The following confession was made voluntarily, and the aggravating circumstances mentioned in it, are expressed in the subscriber's own language - July 24, 1823. (lecture day after the usual services).

To the Pastor and church of Christ in North Branford.

Brethren and Sisters

Having covenanted and promised to make it my endeavor to walk worthy of the Christian vocation and put myself under your Christian watch and care, and having in a manner which now fills me with the bitterest grief and shame, done dishonor to my Christian prophecies in consequence of the sin of drunkenness, which led me to improper speech and behavior in my family and afflicted my dearest friends. I cannot rest until I make this my acknowledgment for this my misconduct. I shall while I live, lament that I should have been left to grieve the members of the church and injure the cause of religion in this place. I beg the pardon of the church, which I am sensible I do not deserve, and if they can, forgive me. I desire an interest in your prayers that I may be enabled hereafter to live a sober and godly life. Wishing for your continued watch and care over me I subscribe myself your unworthy sister.

(name removed)

The meeting was then closed with prayer