

Constitution of The Branch Church of Northeastern Ohio

John 15:5 Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

Article I - Name

The name of this assembly shall be called The Branch Church of Northeastern Ohio.

Article II - What We Believe

The Bible

We believe the Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to us. Therefore, the Bible is the perfect treasure of divine instruction that has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. All Scripture is completely true and trustworthy and is designed for our practical instruction in faith and conduct. (II Timothy 3:16; II Peter 1:19-21).

The Trinity

We believe in one sovereign God, existing in three persons. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are perfect in holiness, infinite in wisdom, unbounded in power and measureless in love. God is the source of all creation, and that through the immediate exercise of His power all things came into being. (Matthew 28:19-20; Luke 3:22; Colossians 1:15-17).

We believe that Jesus the Messiah was eternally pre-existent and is co-equal with God the Father; that He took on Himself the nature of man through the virgin birth, so that He possesses both divine and human natures. (John 1:1-3; John 14:9; John 1:14; Matthew 1:18-23).

We believe in His sinless life and perfect obedience to the Law; in His atoning substitutionary death, burial, bodily resurrection, ascension into heaven, high-priestly intercession and His personal return in power and glory. (Hebrews 4:15; II Corinthians 5:21; Luke 24:36-43; Hebrews 4:14-16; Acts 1:11; I Thessalonians 4:13-18; II Thessalonians 2:1-8).

We believe that the Holy Spirit is co-equal and co-eternal with the Father and the Son; that He was active in the creation of all things, providence and inspiration of the Holy Scriptures; that He regenerates, baptizes into the body of Christ, indwells, seals, fills, sanctifies, illumines, guides, enables acceptable worship, and bestows His gifts to all believers; that He restrains and convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. (John 14:16-18; John 16:7-11; Acts 2:1-3; I Corinthians 12:13; Acts 5:3-4; Romans 8:9; Ephesians 5:18; Acts 1:8; Galatians 5:22-23).

Man

We believe that God created man in His own image. Through Adam's sin all humankind inherited a sinful nature and became alienated from God. Humankind is dead in their sins, and of themselves, utterly unable to remedy their lost condition. (Genesis 1:26-27, Romans 3:22-23, 5:12, Ephesians 2:1-3).

Salvation

We believe that salvation is the gift of God brought to man by grace and received by personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, whose precious blood was shed on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. All who are thus saved are thereby born again of the Holy Spirit into the family of God, a relationship in which they have eternal life. There is no other name under heaven, other than Jesus Christ, by which mankind can be saved. (John 1:12; Ephesians 2:8-10; John 10:27-30).

We further believe that true faith results in believers seeking to live to please Christ in all areas of life because of their position in the relationship to the Lord Jesus. They should grow daily in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord resulting in the manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit. (Ephesians 4:1-7, Hebrews 4:14-16, 2 Peter 3:14-18, Galatians 5:22-23).

The Return of Christ & Eternity

We believe in the personal and visible return of the Lord Jesus Christ to earth. We believe in the resurrection of the body, the final judgment, the eternal joy of the righteous and the endless suffering of the wicked. (Matthew 16:27; John 14:3; Acts 1:11; Phil. 3:20; II Timothy 4:1; I Corinthians 4:5; II Thessalonians 1:7-10).

Christian Life Distinctive's

Gender & Marriage

We believe that God wonderfully and immutably creates each person as male or female. These two distinct and complementary genders together reflect the image and nature of God. (Genesis 1:26-27).

We believe that the term marriage has only one meaning: the uniting of one man and one woman in a single, exclusive union as defined in Scripture (Genesis 2:18-25, Matthew 19:4-6). We believe God intends sexual intimacy to occur only between a man and a woman who are married to each other. The Bible defines all sexual activity outside of that single, exclusive, male-female marriage union to be sin. (Hebrews 13:4)

Ordinances

We believe in the observance of the ordinances of our Lord Jesus Christ, which are (1) water baptism of believers as a public profession of faith in Christ, and (2) communion, which is a remembrance of Christ's death on our behalf until He comes again. (Matthew 28:18-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

Church

We believe in one true church, the body and bride of Christ composed of all true believers; and the organization of its members in local churches for worship, for edification of believers, and for worldwide gospel witness; each church being autonomous, but cooperating in fellowship and work. (Ephesians 1:22-23; Ephesians 5:25-32; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Matthew 28:18-20; Ephesians 4:11-16).

Article III - Government

Section 1:

This church acknowledges Jesus Christ as the head of the Church; the Holy Scriptures as the inerrant and sufficient guide in matters of faith, church order, and discipline; and it is neither accountable to, nor under jurisdiction or supervision of any other ecclesiastical body.

Section 2:

The government of this church shall be by a plurality of elders that the church shall submit to the leadership of those elders, as indicated throughout this constitution. Elders shall exercise authoritative and decisive leadership, but they shall do so as servants, not as lords. (I Peter 5:1-4; Matthew 20:24-28).

Article IV - Church Membership

Section 1:

Membership in the Church

While membership is not directly commanded in the Bible, we believe that local church membership plays a key role in the church. Membership is important in 3 ways -

- Membership is a public commitment to be under the spiritual authority of a local body of elders, and is an important part of church discipline.
- Membership provides the opportunity to serve within the local church and take an active part in the church's activities
- Members are also asked to confirm elder board decisions, and are given the opportunity to share their recommendations and perspective with leadership. Members are also able to vote on constitutional amendments.

To be a member you must be 18 years old, and affirm Article II of this constitution. Those who desire to be members will be interviewed by a member of the elder board and be asked to share their personal testimony of faith in Jesus. New members will be introduced before the congregation on a Sunday morning chosen by the elder board.

If a member is not present at church functions for 6-12 months, a letter will be sent by the elder board to ask whether the member would like to remove their name from the member list. If no response is given, the elders will remove the member from the list.

Section 2:

Congregational Meetings

Confirmation & Endorsement

- The Elder board shall exercise its discernment to prepare a list of elders and deacons to be confirmed by the members.
- A complete list of all offices and appointed positions for the new church year shall be prepared by the elder board, and made available to each member.

Annual Meeting

- The Annual meeting will be held in the month of December and moderated by the Elder Board to review and celebrate the past years ministries and vote for the upcoming Budget.
- Members will have the opportunity to confirm the budget for the upcoming year.

Article V - Member Discipline

Member discipline becomes necessary when a member or members:

- Persist in willful, unrepentant, sinful behavior.
- Espouse and attempt to influence others with Biblical views contrary to Article II.
- Become divisive and willfully, knowingly destroy the unity of the church.

The goal of discipline is:

- The glory of God - Jesus is honored when His body is pure and lives in unity.
- To protect the purity of the church.
- To restore the member to Christ and fellowship with the body.

While church discipline is never pleasant, the process of it should:

- Be carried out by the elders with Christlike humility.
- Never be mean-spirited or carried out in a 'holier-than-thou' way.
- Start privately and gradually become more public if necessary.
- Be done in love toward the individual, in obedience to God, and in godly fear for the sake of others in the church.
- Strive to maintain the unity of the church.

The goal is always restoration, if efforts toward restoration fail and the member is unrepentant:

- The church must pray diligently that God will grant the member repentance.
- The elders will remove the member. The congregation will use 1 Corinthians 5:9-18 as the guideline, should removal become necessary.
- Leave the door open for the member to return if they become repentant at some point in the future.

Article VI - Elders

Section 1:

General Statement

Jesus Christ alone is the head of the church (Colossians 1:18), and He governs His church through His elders who are designated by Him as **shepherds** (Acts 20:28; I Peter 5:1-4), **overseers** (I Timothy 3:1; Acts 20:28), and **stewards** (Titus 1:7), and to whom Christ commands submission (Hebrews 13:17). These are endowed by His spirit with gifts and graces needed to accomplish their work. It is the duty of the church to seek and discover among its members those whom Christ the Lord has imparted the necessary gifts for this ministry.

Section 2:

Plurality of Elders

- Whereas in new or small congregations only one man may have the gifts necessary to his being recognized as an elder, the evidence of the New Testament points to a plurality of elders in a given local church. (Acts 20:17; Philippians 1:1). These all are the “pastors and teachers” given to the church “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up . . .” (Ephesians 4:11-12). The Scriptural pattern is that pastoral responsibilities and authority be distributed among a “counsel of shepherds.”
- This plurality does not mean that all elders are equal in their work or position in the church. (I Timothy 5:17). While every elder should be “able to teach,” (I Timothy 3:2), some will be more engaged in formal and public teaching, while others will be more engaged in pastoring (that is, private teaching and admonishing) and governing. Some will occupy the office as a vocation and thus be able to devote their lives to shepherding, while others, because of outside employment, will shoulder only some of the shepherding responsibilities in the congregation. (I Timothy 5:17).

Section 3:

Responsibilities of the Elders

A. Since elders are commanded to shepherd the flock of God (Acts 20:28-31; I Peter 5:1-4), their duties include:

- Leading the congregation by modeling servant leadership.
- Guarding the flock of God against error and heresy (Acts 20:28-31; Titus 1:9, 10-11; II Timothy 2:24-26).
- Careful admonition, confronting sin, and teaching individuals and families as men who will have to give an account. (Hebrews 13:17).
- Counseling and private teaching and admonition (Acts 20:20; I Thessalonians 5:12; Colossians 1:28; Ezekiel 34).
- Praying for the congregation and the work of God. (Acts 6:3-4).
- Equipping others for ministry. (Ephesians 4:11-16; II Timothy 2:2).
- Preaching and teaching the Word of God. (Colossians 1:28; I Timothy 5:17; II Timothy 4:1-4).

B. Since elders are given the responsibility of oversight (Acts 20:28; I Timothy 3:1), directing the affairs of the church and managing them as a father would his family (I Timothy 3:4-5; I Thessalonians 5:12-13), their duties include:

- Establishing the policies and practices for the church.
- Leading in the discipline and reconciliation of erring members.
- Approve the selections and removal of all staff and employees of the church, prescribing duties for them and fixing the terms of their offices.
- Preparing and presenting an annual budget for review and confirmation by the congregation at the annual meeting.

- Appointing the needed ministry teams and task forces for the advancement of the church.
- Overseeing and appointing all volunteer positions needed for the function of the church.
- Overseeing the deacons. Deacons are directly accountable to these men.
- Listening to the members of the church. The elders must remember that they are not **lords** but **leaders**, and that the church is not composed of **subjects** but **gifted members**. To that end, the elders will actively seek input of the congregation when making decisions or setting policy. They shall receive, consider, and respond to any grievance, suggestion, or recommendation from any member or organization of the church.

Section 4: **Qualifications**

- The qualifications for a man chosen to fill the office of elder are clearly set forth in Scripture and agreed upon by the candidate. (I Timothy 2:12; 3:1-7; and Titus 1:5-9).
- The candidate must be a member of The Branch Church.

Section 5: **Interdependent Leadership**

We believe God calls a plurality of elders with complimentary gifts and abilities to labor side by side to equip God's people to fulfill His purposes in the world (Ephesians 4:11-12). No one man has more authority than the other, but instead, each mutually submits to and empowers the others to lead where they are most gifted. This provides a high level of accountability, cultivates humility and trust, and gives confidence to the body to know that the elders and pastors must collectively be convinced of God's will for the church before acting. We understand our model of not having a senior pastor or one primary leader is unique, however we believe that Interdependent Leadership can more effectively mobilize and disciple the church body to fulfill its purpose in the world.

Section 6: **Elder Discipline**

Elders are not above church discipline and if necessary will be subject to the same discipline as any other member.

Section 7: **Elder Board Appointment**

- The elder board is responsible to find qualified candidates from among the members, and train and equip them to serve on the elder board in the future.
- New members of the elder board will be appointed by the elders, and confirmed by the congregation.
- Each year the elder board will review and select elders to serve as the active members of the elder board, as well as choose an elder board member to serve as the chairman of the elder board.

- The chairman will be responsible for facilitating elder meetings, and overseeing communication between elders.
- Elders who are not actively serving will be a part of the elder council, and can be called upon to serve in future years, or in case of emergency.

Article VII - Deacons

Section 1:

General Statement

Deacons are called by God to a ministry of “assisting” or “helping” the elders and the congregation. The deacons serve the eldership by assuming responsibility for those tasks assigned by the elders; tasks that would interfere with the elder’s ministry of the Word. They serve the congregation by overseeing the temporal needs of the church and the ministries of mercy and benevolence. It is the duty of the church to seek and discover among its members those to whom Christ has imparted the necessary gifts and graces for this ministry. (Acts 6:1-7)

Section 2:

Responsibilities of the Deacons

- The deacons shall be responsible to prepare the elements of the Lord’s Supper and shall assist the elders in serving the same. They shall also make preparations for baptismal services.
- The deacons shall maintain a “Benevolence Fund.” The deacons shall be sovereign in giving from this fund, and they need not give account to the church or make public their use of these monies except to give a general disclosure of income and disbursements at the annual meeting of the church.
- The deacons are to care for the property of the church, repair, invest time and preserve the same.
- The deacons shall aid in the general spiritual care of the church, especially giving themselves to the ministry of mercy, and perform duties as assigned by the elders.
- The deacons must fulfill the duties of their office in cooperation with and guidance from the elders.

Section 3:

Qualifications

- The qualifications for a man chosen to fill the office of deacon are clearly set forth in Scripture and agreed upon by the candidate. (I Timothy 3:8-10, 12-13.).
- The candidate must be a member of The Branch Church.

Section 4:

Deaconess

In Romans 16:1 Paul refers to Phoebe with the same term used to refer to deacons in 1st Timothy 3, and while female deacons are not overtly commanded in scripture, we have chosen as a church to appoint deaconesses to work alongside of the deacons in the ministry of caring for the church.

- Deaconesses can be appointed by the elder board and confirmed by the congregation to serve alongside and under the authority of the deacon board.
- Deaconesses roles and responsibilities are the same as the deacons, and they will be able to dispense funds from the benevolence under the oversight of the deacons.
- Elders will look for women who are well thought of in the community, of godly character, and who have a heart to serve people.

Section 5:

Deacon Board Appointment

- The elder board is responsible to find qualified candidates from among the members, and train and equip them to serve on the deacon board.
- New members of the deacon board will be appointed by the elders, and confirmed by the congregation.
- Each year the elders will appoint deacons to serve on the active deacon board, and the deacons will select a member of the board to serve as the chairman.
- The chairman will be responsible for facilitating deacon meetings, and overseeing communication between deacons and elders.
- Deacons who are not actively serving will be a part of the deacon council, and can be called upon to serve in future years, or in case of emergency.

Article VIII - Other Ministries

Section 1:

General Statement

The Scriptures mandate only two biblical offices -- the office of elder and the office of deacon. The church has the liberty within the parameters of Biblical truth to appoint servants, and develop ministries that will meet the demands of the present time and culture. These shall be appointed to serve by the elders.

Section 2:

General Qualifications

Any person appointed must be a member of The Branch Church and exhibit growth, godly character, and a willingness to serve.

Section 3:

Legal Trustees

In order to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's," the elder board shall serve as the Board of Trustees of The Branch Church for legal purposes only.

Article IX - Amendments

This constitution lays no claim to perfection. Therefore, amendments may be necessary from time to time. Proposed amendments shall be published two weeks prior to a congregational meeting called for that purpose. Adoption of an amendment shall require a 2/3 majority vote of those present and voting.

Article X - Legal Provisions

Property:

It shall be our privilege to buy, own, sell, lease, mortgage, or improve the real estate and personal property of this church to fulfill its stated purpose.

Dissolution:

In the event of the dissolution of this church, all of its debts shall be fully paid. All finances, assets, and properties shall be given to a non-profit organization which is in agreement with the Articles of Faith, and in conformity with the requirements of the IRS. Should this church ever be dissolved, the elders shall propose a plan to the congregation. It shall be decided by majority vote.