**State of the Church Address**

**FBC Albemarle**

**January 4, 2015**

Every January, the President of The United States gives a State of the Union address to the joint session of the United States Congress. The address usually reports on the condition of the nation and also allows presidents to outline their legislative agendas and national priorities for the upcoming year. Every year, I try to make time to watch the State of the Union address to hear the President lay out the goals for the year and the hot topic debates that will be waged by both the Republicans and the Democrats. Some of the comments made by the President is supported by both sides of the aisle but most of the legislative comments are supported only by the chosen side of the President. Some of the pomp and circumstance and posturing are laughable but most of what happens on the night of the address is filled with history, heritage and passion.

As we begin a new year together, I thought I would carry on a tradition that I learned from my pastor and friend Jeff Roberts and use the first sermon of the year to give the State of the Church Address. I don’t expect any of you to stand and applaud if you hear something you would support of approve. However, I think it is important to share where we are headed as the Body of Christ as we seek to love and serve our Lord.

In his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren (the founding pastor of Saddleback Church) presents five purposes of the Christian life and thus the five purposes of the Church. Rick Warren wrote that we were created for worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry and mission as Christians and as a church. These five purposes are not groundbreaking. They are spelled out pretty clearly in Scripture. He just happen to author the book in a format that struck a chord with many in the world, selling over 30 million copies and becoming the second most-translated book in the world, right behind the Bible.

As I consider the five purposes, I am drawn to discipleship as a key focus for our church in the new year. Dallas Willard, in his book *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’ Essential Teachings on Discipleship*, wrote,” The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heartbreaking needs, is whether those who, by profession or culture, are identified as ‘Christians’ will become disciples – students, apprentices, practitioners – of Jesus Christ, steadily learning from him how to live the life of the Kingdom of the Heavens into every corner of human existence.” I believe Willard to be right in his assessment of the world today. The Church must commit itself to discipleship, being apprentices of Jesus, in order to make an impact on the community and the world. You see, being saved and attending church are different than being an apprentice of Jesus. Apprenticeship requires time spent with the master or mentor on a day-to-day basis. It requires a full commitment on the part of the apprentice to learn everything possible from the master. A profession of faith, saying “yes” to Jesus, is just beginning of this apprenticeship rather than the final destination. It is the beginning of a life-long journey to become more like Jesus in every way. So this State of the Church Address is the first installment in a six-week series that I’ve entitled, “Journey of Discipleship.”

Today’s text from Ephesians 1 is a synopsis of who we are in Christ as his apprentices. The early church was dealing with an identity problem. Paul’s intent in writing the letter to the church in Ephesus was to help connect the Judaic origins of the faith to the new Gentile converts. There was great tension between the Jewish converts and the Gentile converts. The Jewish converts believed that the Gentile converts should observe Jewish traditions since they were original to the faith. The Gentiles saw their faith in Christ as a new beginning, setting aside the traditions of the Jews. What Paul preached was that we were all the same in Jesus. We were all chosen by God, adopted to be his children and equipped to be saints in the kingdom.

First, Paul tells us that we were CHOSEN by God. In vs. 4, “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.” Being chosen by God is not like being chosen for the kickball team on the playground. We were not chosen because of our talent, our giftedness or our abilities. Nor is it like the NFL Draft where the most desired player is chosen first and the last person chosen in the draft is given the title Mr. Irrelevant. We were all chosen because God first loved us. God’s desire is for all of creation to be in right relationship with its creator. No one is left out. We are all number one picks. We are all relevant to God.

Think about this idea of being chosen by God. You were chosen by God to be in right relationship with him, holy and blameless in his sight. Most often when we look in the mirror, we do not see a person God would choose to be holy and blameless in his sight. We see all of the imperfections inside and out. Yet, Paul reminds us that the God of the universe, the Creator of the cosmos, chose you and me to be in perfect relationship with him. It is incomprehensible but yet true.

Second, not only were we chosen by God to be in right relationship with him, we were adopted to be his sons and daughters. In verse 5-6, Paul writes, “In love he predestined us to be adopted as sons and daughters through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.” What incredible words of encouragement for us!

Last July, I had the opportunity to partner with a ministry called Show Hope in Franklin, Tennessee. Show Hope is a ministry focused on orphan care and adoption aid started by Christian contemporary artist Stephen Curtis Chapman and his wife Mary Beth. Show Hope’s main focus is to care for orphans, restoring the hope of a family to orphans in distress around the world. It helps to provide adoption aid to many who are looking to adopt an international child and also have built many orphan care centers around the world to help children with special needs. Through this ministry the miracle of adoption for many orphans have come true. One of the reasons I was drawn to this ministry was the idea that we were all adopted by God to be his sons and daughters. Though I know nothing about being orphaned in my life or being adopted, I got a glimpse of the incredible joy the adoptive parents must feel when they are given the opportunity to give new life to a child or the love a child must feel to be wanted by someone else through this ministry. Though I imagine this joy to be completely exhilarating, it pales in comparison to being adopted as sons and daughters of the Creator of the universe.

Lastly, not only are we chosen and adopted by God, we are equipped by God to live out our salvation. In verses 13-14, Paul wrote, “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession – to the praise of his glory.” We have been equipped with the Holy Spirit, God himself, to live out our salvation in the world. Someone once said, “The Holy Spirit is not a blessing from God. He is God.” Let that soak in for a moment…we don’t have the power of God within us or the love of God, we have God himself within us. Period! God is in us and lives and works through us! We are fully equipped to live out God’s will for our lives, which is to love God and others.

So as we look ahead to 2015 as a church, we will place a special emphasis on discipleship or being an apprentice of Christ. Most often when we think of discipleship, more Bible studies, scripture reading, praying, conferences and the like come to our mind. We will certainly promote many of these things. However, being an apprentice is less of doing more and more of just being present. Just as an apprentice learns by being with his or her mentor, we learn more about being a Christian (translated as little Christ) by being present with Christ.

In his book, *The Good and Beautiful God*, James Bryan Smith reminds us that spiritual development takes time. He writes, “In our spiritual life we cannot do anything important in a hurry. When we are in a hurry – which comes from overextension – we find ourselves unable to live with awareness and kindness.” In order to grow as an apprentice of Jesus, we need to spend time with him. This time is not time spent in doing but just being with God. Sit in silence. Recognize the beauty of your surroundings. Discern the voice of God. Just be present with God.

As many of you know, this is a challenge for me. I am not good at just being present I am always focused on the next thing and what I need to accomplish in the day to stay on schedule. I am a list person and I try to make sure the items on the list get marked off. So as part of my spiritual growth and development, I need to work on being present with God and not allow “hurry” to direct my life. I need to be reminded daily that God has chosen me, adopted me and equipped me to live out my salvation in Christ. I believe we all need to reminded of this on a daily basis. Will you join me in the pursuit of being present with God and developing as his apprentice? Will you commit to spiritual growth in 2015? May this not become a New Year’s resolution that we give up on by next week but a commitment we make for a lifetime.