

**A RESPONSE TO THE ELCA'S  
"A DECLARATION OF INTER-RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT:  
A POLICY STATEMENT OF THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA"**

-- Stephen Heath

The ELCA has once again shown that it stands outside of historic, orthodox Christianity. Most recently it has done so with its "A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment: A policy statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America." The statement relies on questionable "facts" and unsound reasoning. The following three-part response is an attempt to identify and expose at least some of the flawed and unsupportable assumptions, specious reasoning and illogical conclusions upon which the statement depends. The three parts are as follows:

PART ONE

THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

PART TWO

THE GREAT COMMISSION AND THE GREAT COMMANDMENT

PART THREE

"GETTING ALONG" WITHOUT REDEMPTION AND THE CUSTODIAN OF IT

Part One identifies the statement's purpose as setting forth how the church is tasked to relate to the world. The response gives a definition of religion and a summary of the two types of revelation: general revelation and special revelation as understood by Christianity. It then makes the case that the ELCA has taken off the mantle of being the steward of God's special revelation of the one intermediary of redemption between God and humanity, the man, Jesus Christ. The ELCA has done so in favor of being a part (along with those of other religions and worldviews) of God's supposed plan for a peaceful and just world neighborhood here and now brought about by mutual understanding and cooperation among all people of the world, or at least among all people who share the ELCA's vision (whatever it is) of "a peaceful and just world neighborhood here and now."

Part Two demonstrates the fallacious reasoning the ELCA uses to excuse itself from its responsibilities under the Great Commission and to appropriate for the Great Commandment a goal foreign to it.

Part Three continues to show how the ELCA, either by design or ignorance, uses logical fallacies and subversion of historical Christianity to recast the Church's role from being one of proclaiming the coming of the kingdom through the redemption wrought at the cross to one of imagining a "peaceful and just world neighborhood here and now" brought about by mutual respect for and cooperation among all peoples of the world, whether they consider themselves "religious" or not. The response concludes by arguing that, by determining to build its peaceful and just world neighborhood here and now through cooperation with the world and casting aside its role as the custodian of the special revelation of redemption, the ELCA has left the message of redemption without a messenger and somehow failed to realize that the peace it seeks has already been won by the one who said, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33 NIV)

## PART ONE

### THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

At its 2019 churchwide assembly the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America overwhelmingly adopted a policy statement called “A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment: A policy statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.” The statement sets forth how the church should relate to the world. It says:

In a deeply divided world, and as a faithful response to Christ’s message of reconciliation, we seek right, peaceful, and just relationships with all our neighbors, including those of other religions and worldviews. (p.3) [“‘Neighbor’... refers to all those who profess a religion, as well as those who do not, including those who consider themselves atheists or agnostics or ascribe to other worldviews that are not explicitly religious.” (p.2)]

The statement doesn’t characterize the matter as how the church should relate to the *world*. Instead, the statement sets up how the church should relate 1) to those who profess other religions (other than Christianity), and 2) to those who consider themselves “not explicitly religious.” The universe of souls outside the church is comprised entirely of those who profess other religions and those who claim no religion. There isn’t anyone else. The statement’s definition of religion is really nothing more than a representative list of various organized religions. More basically and generically, a “religion” is a set of understandings of or answers to the ontological questions of origins, purpose and destiny which understandings are held in common by a group and by which common understanding the group is bound together. (The root Latin meaning of “religion” is “to bind together.”) If so understood, the authors would realize that “religion” does not simply refer to answers to the ontological questions involving an afterlife, law and maybe creation, but to *any* answers to those questions.

Christianity has always seen humanity as divided into only two groups: the church and the world. Jesus prays that his followers might be “in the world, but not of it.” There is one realm submitted to the will of God and one other realm which is outside his lordship. There is the realm of God and the realm of this world, the realm of humanity. In Augustine’s terms, there are citizens of the city of God and citizens of the city of man. These two citizenries are characterized by two loves: the love of God and the love of self.

So, rather than suppose it was dealing with both the religious and the non-religious beyond the church, the statement might have more simply realized that it was dealing with how to relate to “the world.” The church’s answer has always been that it wants citizens of the city of man (the world) to be transformed into citizens of the city of God. The church has, itself, been admonished not to be conformed to the pattern of this world but to be transformed with renewed minds into humble servants of God. Transformation is meant both for the church and for “the world.” Transformation depends upon faith. As Jesus put it, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent” (John 6:29 NIV).

Christianity is not listed in the statement's list of organized religions. But, Christianity does have its own unique set of answers to those big ontological questions. Regarding origins Christianity teaches that the universe, life and law all have their beginning in the creative act of an all-powerful God who spoke the universe into being, breathed life into otherwise lifeless matter and imbued humanity with self-awareness and a conscience. Regarding why we're here, Christianity teaches that our purpose is to love God above all else and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. And, regarding destiny Christianity teaches that our essential selves, our souls (body, mind and spirit), have been made for eternity, and that those who put their trust in God will spend eternity with him. Those who put their trust in the flesh, in themselves, will be separated from him. Those who put their trust in God are able to enjoy the destiny God has prepared for them thanks to the redemption that has been made available to all through the work of his son, Jesus Christ. This redemption is necessary for us to warrant the destiny planned for us because "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." "But for" that redemption wrought by Christ's sacrifice, we would all be lost in our sin. It is only thanks to the redemption that has been made available to all through the work of God's son, Jesus Christ, that heaven's door is open to any of us.

On the other hand, the materialists' answers to the ontological questions are entirely incompatible with Christianity's. According to them, the universe and life are a chance occurrence, our destiny is the extinction of death and there is no purpose except whatever purpose or purposes we make up for ourselves for so long as we're here. There is no "right and wrong" in this worldview; there is only strong and weak. Within the universe of worldviews that include supernatural, spiritual realities, there are varying degrees of commonality with Christianity's. There may be common understandings of "the universe, life and law." In fact, St. Paul says that people everywhere are without excuse for not acknowledging the truth that the universe, life and law are all God-given. Others may even sense their souls have an eternal destiny. But, outside of Christianity the eternal destiny of any soul is dependent upon either the fickleness of the judge, the ability of the judge to be bribed or upon the relative worthiness of the soul in question. The Christian church alone proclaims that "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." It can do this because it, alone, is the custodian of God's only answer to that problem: redemption.

The distinguishing hallmark of the Christian church is not that it alone has an understanding of what it means to love one's neighbor. The world doesn't need the church for that. The church also doesn't really know what life was like in Eden nor does it have the blueprints for any utopian neighborhood of "peace and justice" on earth. All it has is the sight of Christ, suffering death and tasting it for everyone (Hebrews 2:9). The distinguishing hallmark of the Christian church is that it alone is the custodian and steward of the special revelation of redemption—of Christ on the cross.

This is the point: it has been taught among us that what we know of God is what he reveals of himself. He does this in two ways: general ways and special ways. General revelation is the knowledge he reveals of himself that can be perceived directly, by any and all without the need of an intermediary. (This is the revelation of which Paul speaks in Romans chapter one.) There are two general revelations. They are (1) creation and (2) the conscience (the law written on the heart). Special revelation is revelation intended

for all, but which can only be perceived through an intermediary. There are also two special revelations. They are (1) redemption and (2) the law written in stone.

Moses brought us the law written on stone. The one and only intermediary of redemption is Jesus Christ: "God our Savior... wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. This has now been witnessed to at the proper time," (I Timothy 2:4-6 NIV).

It has also been taught among us that the history of Israel from Abraham until the coming of Christ foretells the coming of the intermediary and that, since that time, the telling of the story has been entrusted to the church. The mantle of special revelation has been passed to church, to those who bear witness to the resurrection. As the call of Israel was to foretell of the coming of the intermediary through the promise, so the call of the church is to tell the good news as related through the witness of the apostles.

It appears that the ELCA has decided that bearing witness to that "once for all" sacrifice on the cross is not its mission, its joy or its burden. If the church does not stand for the unique and specially revealed sacrifice of Christ, it stands for nothing. As one saint of the last century put it, "The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning. Without mission there is really no church."

The ELCA's statement acknowledges both a call to evangelize and a call to love. But, it doesn't relate these two calls. It treats them as if they were two separate, entirely unrelated matters, as if one could evangelize without loving or love without evangelizing. These are not unrelated matters. To love is to evangelize and to evangelize is to love. Nevertheless, that is where the ELCA ends up: "loving" without evangelizing. If it really loved the world, it would make disciples, baptize them and teach them. It would not suppose that there can be accommodation, that we can all get along, love and bring about anything good without the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. The focus cannot be on this world alone. There must be hope. The vision Christianity seeks to convey is not an approximation of the peaceable kingdom in the here and now. It is a vision that seeks to bring all nations along with it as disciples and as pilgrims on a journey toward that city that has foundations whose builder and maker is (not us, but) God.

The ELCA has evidently decided the world doesn't need its message of redemption. What it needs is peace and justice here and now. And, this can be achieved through cooperation with the world-- no matter what various ideas the world has of the "big questions," of the universe, life and law, of origins, purpose and destiny. The statement has faith that cooperation with the world will result in better understanding all around. Meanwhile the Holy Spirit is constantly present, judging the whole world according to God's impossible standard. Judgment is here and it is coming. In complete denial of this, the world with its accomplices in the ELCA go about their vain attempts to find peace and justice instead of enjoying the mercy and release that has already been won. Redemption is sacrificially won, but freely given, release from sin and freedom from death. It is the only way to the destiny God has planned. This destiny is possible because of the Father's love through which he gave his only son as a sacrifice for sin and thanks to the son's obedience to the Father's will. It is on account of that singular act of obedience

that “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:10-11 NIV).

Implicit, if not blatantly explicit, in the ELCA’s stance is that such a message cannot be true. There is nothing unique or needed by a dead and sinful world about the special revelation of God among us. Instead the ELCA seems to believe that a “just and peaceful world neighborhood” can be achieved, not necessarily through acts of repentance and submission to the lordship of Christ, but through acts of cooperation with others who put their trust elsewhere. As a result, the ELCA has no unique message to share with that world. It may think it has much to learn from other teachings about “God.” Ironically, none of those other teachings nor the adherents of them will believe that they have anything, let alone anything special or unique, to learn from the ELCA. It’s not the unique specially revealed message of God with us that is of consequence to the ELCA. It’s not something special to share, it is only what it can find in common with whatever faction of the world embraces its own parochial and ill-defined understanding of “peace and justice” here and now. The only result can be, not transformation to the image of Christ, but only conformity of the church to the world—salt without its savor.

## PART TWO

### THE GREAT COMMISSION AND THE GREAT COMMANDMENT

Amidst the serpentine abstruse ramblings of the statement, one can at least find an acknowledgment of two primary duties of the church:

Our calling is a dual calling: to be faithful witnesses to Christ and to love God by loving and serving our neighbors. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) stands alongside the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:34-40).

“Stands alongside” is one of those many inscrutable terms geared to hide the statement’s sophistry. But at least the two callings are acknowledged: the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. They both become twisted and abused through the use of the seemingly admirable concept of “goals.” In the case of the Great Commission its goals are put aside and determined not to be the ELCA’s responsibility to any appreciable extent. In the case of the Great Commandment the duties to love God and neighbor, as such, are not seen as their own goals or ends. Instead the commandment is appropriated to be the authority for the ELCA’s own goal of a “peaceful and just world neighborhood” here and now. In so doing the “goal” of simply loving is denigrated and lost.

The Great Commission is the name given to Jesus’ instruction to his followers just prior to his ascension into heaven:

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”  
(Matthew 28:18-20 NIV)

The ELCA’s statement understands that this instruction means to “share the good news.” It never deals forthrightly with the matter of “to what end” it engages in this sharing. At one point the statement says sharing the good news has something to do with its identity: “As the ELCA, we enter into inter-religious relations on the basis of our Christian identity...” (One might think that *whatever it did*, the church should and would do it on the basis of its identity, on account of what it is, but...) Ostensibly being identified by the Good News would mean that the church is not only created but also *redeemed*. Redemption has been specially revealed to the church through the death and resurrection of Christ. One must question the ELCA if its understanding is that this redemption is both a *special* revelation and a *private* one meant only for it, or a revelation meant for the whole world. That is, does it “share the good news” only to identify itself to outsiders, or is there some other purpose in sharing the good news with them?

The answer should be obvious from the Great Commission which it cites. The goal, the purpose, is to make disciples *of all nations*, to baptize them (baptism is the initiating rite and sacrament into the Christian church) and to teach them to obey. What comes across in the statement is that the ELCA could tell the world the story of Jesus without the follow-through of leading its citizens to discipleship, baptism and obedience. It seems the ELCA would leave to the Holy Spirit whatever happens after it shares how important the story of Jesus is to it and its identity: “...we entrust to the Holy Spirit the work of turning that witness [i.e., the story of Jesus] into faith” (p.4) and (by turning the teaching of Luther’s Small

Catechism on its head), “We also rely on the Spirit, who alone creates faith” (p.9). So, the ELCA “shares the good news,” but leaves the discipleship, baptizing and teaching obedience to the Holy Spirit.

The statement calls the good news a “life-changing message.” But, does anyone’s life need to be changed? If all have sinned, then don’t all need the change that comes from repentance and trusting in the redemption wrought on the cross? Evidently the ELCA (for all the talk about dialog and engaging the world) has only to tell the story, but has no responsibility beyond that. Just get the message out there. Put it on a poster, in a tract or something and have done with it. Use the “send” mode, transmit, but, whether or not the message is received and understood, well, just leave confirmation of receipt and follow-through to the Holy Spirit. So much for evangelism.

More simply, here’s how the sophistry works: The “what” of the commission is “to make disciples, baptize and teach obedience.” The “how” is by “sharing the good news” (i.e., telling the story of Christ). The ELCA has taken the “how,” turned it into the “what” and pushed the stated “what” of making disciples, etc. to the side, using the trick of saying that bringing others to faith is really the Holy Spirit’s job. The Great Commission is clear: the task of Jesus’ followers is to make disciples, baptize and teach obedience. The ELCA states that the Great Commission means “to share the good news.” But, if “sharing the good news” is somehow different from “making disciples, baptizing and teaching obedience,” the ELCA has engaged in the logical fallacy of “bait and switch.”

The ELCA also uses the logical fallacy of the “false dichotomy.” It says because faith requires the Holy Spirit, it doesn’t require missionaries, or at least doesn’t need them to do what the Lord commissioned them to do. In a not-too-subtle way the ELCA limits the missionaries’ role to something far less than the role given to them by the Lord. Thus, the ELCA redefines the church’s traditional understanding of evangelism, taking out of it its very heart: making disciples, baptizing and teaching obedience. This frees the ELCA to follow its own goal of seeking right, peaceful and just relationships with all its earthly neighbors without having to bother them about the scandal of the cross.

The ELCA does a disservice to the commandment to love God and neighbor as well. It has determined that what this commandment means in operational terms is working together with the world toward the establishment of a peaceful and just world neighborhood here and now. The peaceful and just world neighborhood here and now becomes the purpose and goal of the Great Commandment. Somehow the ELCA missed the point that the commandment is its own goal. In terms of the ontological questions, it *is* the answer to the purpose question, “why we’re here.” It doesn’t require a peaceful and just world neighborhood in the here and now. We’re expected to love in the dirty and sinful world we’ve inherited. Every instance in which love is exhibited, the hungry are fed, the thirsty given drink, the stranger welcomed, the naked clothed, the sick cared for or the prisoner visited the “goal” of the commandment has been realized. The commandment is not a prop for some other imaginary goal of an earthly utopia (or an approximation of it). To repeat: *The commandment is its own goal*. If the goal is not each individual act of love but is perverted into a return to Eden or a heaven on earth, then the eternal significance of all those instances in which the goal was, in fact, realized is lost.

The goal of peace and justice in all the earth has a beguiling sound. But, there’s nothing transcendent about it. It is not the peaceable kingdom of the new heaven and the new earth made by God and to be revealed once this present veil of tears has been destroyed. The ELCA is talking about something it imagines in time and space, something that it imagines in the present, not in the future. The gnawing question is, if there could be “peace and justice” (however defined) in the present, why isn’t there? The

statement mentions certain shared views of creation among different religions. It happily notes that, as created, the world was “good.” What it never acknowledges is that creation is now fallen, there is no way back to Eden and the only way to the new heaven and the new earth is by way of the cross.

In words that the church has proclaimed ever since the death and resurrection of Christ, the root problems of the world are not hostility among us and injustice between us, but sin and death. Hostility and injustice are merely exemplary of our sin. Our faith teaches that there will be a judgment and all of us will stand wanting. Our faith also teaches that there will be a resurrection. As Job put it, “I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” (Job 19:25-27 NIV) Or, as put by Marianne Micks, “Christianity is not so much concerned with the immortality of the soul as it is with the resurrection of the body.”

If the root problem is the sin and death resulting from the fall, then the basic question is what to do about sin and death. The goal ought to be dealing with sin and death, not supposing that in a dead and sinful world there is any way to eradicate hostility or unfairness. Without compromising objectives, goals, safety, security, values or even truth, in the world there are only two ways to achieve peace: victory or defeat, conquest or surrender and one of the basic axioms of that world is that “life is unfair,” no matter how “fairness” is defined. Since, on its own, humanity can do nothing about sin and death, it can only succumb to despair or characterize the problem otherwise and devise its own vision and the means to bring it about. The ELCA has gone beyond this. It says that its vision of a peaceful and just world neighborhood here and now realized through mutual understanding and cooperation between the church and the world is not something it has made up but is actually God’s plan for his fallen, sinful and dead world. God has tasked the church to understand and cooperate with the world as the means to make peace and justice here and now a reality. (The ELCA never says what achieving this goal—or at least coming close to it—does about sin and death.) This is a perversion of the church’s role as understood from the beginning. The church’s goal has always been redemption and the means has always been the cross.

The ELCA has both cast aside the stated goals of its commission and has appropriated the great commandment, which is and has its own goals, to use as authority to put forth its stated goal of “peace and justice” (however defined) here and now. It is a sad attempt at sophistry and entirely backwards. Jesus called his followers to make disciples, baptize and teach obedience. He leaves to the Father the matter creating the new heaven and the new earth. In complete reversal of this, the ELCA tasks the Holy Spirit with making the disciples, etc. and appropriates for itself, along with likeminded people of other religions and worldviews, the business of creating heaven on earth, the peaceful and just world neighborhood here and now.

If Jesus’ work of redemption is our only hope, then it would seem that bringing that hope to the world would be, not only of primary importance, but of singular importance. Apparently, it is not. While no one really knows what it means for the Great Commission and the Great Commandment to “stand alongside” each other, what our faith teaches is that if the Great Commission’s goals of making disciples, baptizing them and teaching them were sought in earnest, then the church would find the goals of the Great Commandment being realized throughout the world presently wherever love is seen and shown and felt—not in a peaceful and just world neighborhood here and now, but in this present fallen world, sinful and dead as it is.



### PART THREE

#### “GETTING ALONG” WITHOUT REDEMPTION AND THE CUSTODIAN OF IT

Parts One and Two lead to the conclusion that the matter of bringing the message of redemption to the world is not central to the ELCA’s understanding of its *raison d’être*. What is of primary importance is its goal of a peaceful and just world neighborhood here and now. Through some fanciful reasoning the ELCA has concluded that the Great Commission and the Great Commandment instruct it that building a peaceful and just neighborhood in the here and now is the premiere task levied upon it by God. It is a heavy burden. Fortunately, it is not a heavy burden that the ELCA either can or desires to bear alone:

...we seek, to achieve mutual understanding among all people of different religions and worldviews and to inspire all to work together for the common good [i.e., the peaceful and just world neighborhood]. (p.8)

In fact, the ELCA actually *needs* the adherents of other religions and the insights of their teachings in order to bring about the goal of the peaceful and just world neighborhood here and now. More than that, it *needs* them and their insights in order really to understand its own creed:

When we engage our religiously diverse neighbors, we can expect both a new understanding of the other and a deeper understanding and appreciation of our own Christian faith. “Mutual understanding” involves moving from factual knowledge of commonalities and differences to grasping coherence and even glimpsing beauty. In discovering how others love and cherish their religious traditions, we more deeply love and cherish our own.... Mutual understanding opens the possibility of friendship and accepting responsibility for each other’s well-being. As such, mutual understanding does not diminish but rather deepens our own faith.... By engaging our neighbors, we learn to articulate our own faith more clearly and to see in it things we had not noticed or appreciated before. We learn to express what being a follower of Jesus really means to us. We learn that religious differences need not erect barriers....

Religious diversity, when accompanied by mutual understanding and cooperation, enriches the whole. Through inter-religious relationships, we receive the gifts of our neighbors and experience more fully the exquisite realization that all are made in the image of God. A deep appreciation of the similarities and differences among religions and worldviews enhances working together for the common good. At the same time, cooperation can enhance both mutual understanding and the self-understanding of each participant. Seeking mutual understanding and the common good are active steps we can take toward God’s vision of life abundant for all. (p.8)

So, according to the statement, the ultimate goal is “the common good” which means “justice and peace for all people.” Religious diversity (ostensibly different and mutually exclusive answers to the questions of origins, purpose and destiny) is not an impediment to achieving the common good. In fact, different and mutually exclusive understandings of origins, purpose and destiny and appreciating those differences actually “enhances working together for the [ultimate goal of] the common good.” This doesn’t even make good nonsense.

One wonders how Christianity made it through two millennia without partnerships with paganism, pantheism, dualism, Gnosticism, materialism and whatever other “isms” purport to explain existence in whatever ways. It must be that, because Christianity didn’t have the benefit of these partnerships, that “the common good,” the “peaceful and just world neighborhood in the here and now” has not been achieved during the two thousand years through which western civilization thought of itself as “Christendom” and after four thousand years since the call of Abraham. It is once we all get together and, in Rodney King’s prescient words, “just all get along” that the easily stated but ill-defined “peaceful and just world neighborhood” will be manifest.

So, the goal of the peaceful and just world neighborhood will be brought about through the mutual understanding and cooperation of people of a multitude of organized religions and other worldviews, both spiritual and materialist. But, ironically, while the ELCA seeks insight into its own creed from any and all of these other worldviews, it flatly states that it has nothing insightful to bring to them:

This declaration affirms and celebrates the gift of new life that comes from God but does not seek to explain God’s relationship with other religions. There are several reasons for this. Our Lutheran tradition has emphasized that God’s grace is given as a gift without any prerequisites. When God restores relations with us, it is entirely a result of God’s action, not something we have earned. As a result, we cannot know the limits of God’s grace and love. Any attempt to define a limit introduces a prerequisite. Because we do not know its limits, God’s remarkable generosity toward us frees us to engage in interreligious outreach, and in this way to embody for our neighbors God’s generosity. Our calling is to come to know our neighbors, to assist them, to work with them, and in doing so to see in them the image of God. (p.17)

Evidently Jesus’ death and resurrection is not a prerequisite for a fallen and sinful world to have a restored relationship with the Creator of the universe. The ELCA evidently doesn’t know what God has done, is doing, going to do or why.

There are two logical fallacies mixed up in the above quote: the appeal to ignorance and the fallacy of equivocation. Regarding its appeal to ignorance (“we cannot know the limits of God’s grace and love”), it is the case that even we who are entrusted with spreading the Good News do not know the extent of the grace of God. We do not know the limits of his infinite mercy. But, we do know its source: the blood shed at Calvary. We are called to bear witness to that act of redemption. And, we are called upon to focus on what we do know. It makes no sense to tout our ignorance. After all, we don’t know what we don’t know. That is not our responsibility. But, we are responsible for the revelation that has been given to us. It may be that we do not know who will be seated at the heavenly banquet. Many surprises await the Master’s guests. But, we do know that whoever is there will be there only because of the blood of Jesus Christ. That message and the special revelation which is that message cannot be put on par with any other understanding of the divine. And, the revelation, the *knowledge*, of that message has been entrusted to the church of Jesus Christ by God, himself.

In this case the fallacy of equivocation has to do with the use of the term “prerequisite.” The ELCA states that there are no prerequisites to a right relationship with God. But, if that is the case, why is the world so messed up? If there are no prerequisites, then the world as it is must be what God desires. (We shouldn’t think of it as messed up; it just is what it is.) But, the ELCA uses the phrase (as noted above) to claim ignorance regarding God’s terms. It seems to take it that the universe, life and law are

God-given, and it even quotes Scripture as teaching that “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” It might even agree that sin requires forgiveness. Does forgiveness require repentance? Is that a “prerequisite” to being forgiven? But, then, there are no prerequisites, so says the ELCA. It is one thing to use the phrase “there are no prerequisites” to mean that anything can be forgiven. It is another thing to use it to mean “God doesn’t require anything—ostensibly including repentance-- of the men and women he created in order for forgiveness to be received.”

By employing these two logical fallacies, the whole paragraph could be pared down to the nonsensical, “We don’t know what God requires; we just know that, because we do know he has no prerequisites, he doesn’t require anything.” Still, the ELCA does know that God wants a “peaceful and just world neighborhood here and now” and he wants it accomplished through everyone, regardless of religious persuasion (or supposed lack thereof), coming to mutual understandings of similarities and differences among them and all of them cooperating both on account of those similarities and in spite of those differences.

The ELCA believes it must be instructed by others in the deepest meaning and insight into its own Christian trinitarian creeds, and even protests ignorance when it comes to having anything worthwhile to share with the world. Nevertheless, without any basis for it whatsoever, it assumes that at least some of these other religions and worldviews share its vision of a peaceful and just world neighborhood in the here and now and are eager to work with it in building its vision of that peaceful and just world neighborhood. It is not a fair assumption.

If this neighborhood has not become the realm of the God and father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, it remains the realm of sinful and selfish humanity. No one really knows in any sort of operational terms what this neighborhood would look like or how it would be organized. It will not be a *religious* organization (i.e., bound together by common understandings of the ontological questions). Its assumption and going in proposition is that it is “religiously diverse,” as if that were possible. Is it a political organization? If so, of what sort? How does it deal with the corrupting influence of power? Is it that all this cooperation and mutual understanding is itself the cause of a unified brotherhood which simply breaks out and causes “peace and justice” to “self-manifest,” replacing faith and hope, rendering the ontological questions obsolete and the state a superfluous relic of the past?

It’s easy enough to paint a quaint picture of this imagined peaceful and just world neighborhood. But, even our best poets fall short. To us, a place where the lion lies down with the lamb is an ecological nightmare: a place overrun with sheep and where lions have nothing to eat without giving up their carnivorous ways to eat straw. But, it is not hard to imagine that once leaders of all these various worldviews sat down at the table and brought out paper and pencil to set forth in operational terms the constitution for their peaceful and just world neighborhood, it wouldn’t be long before the whole thing either fell apart entirely or became so riddled with compromises as to be unworkable. The world, the city of man, is still ruled by love of self. It can only be overcome by God’s love, and (the statement’s assertion notwithstanding) that love requires a cross. There is a prerequisite, a prerequisite which was known to our all-knowing Father before he spoke the words, “Let there be light” and before the Lord gave Adam and Eve a choice he knew they would make. But his love and his desire for their love, freely given in return, did not stop him from creating them and allowing them to go their own way, even knowing from “before” the beginning that giving them that choice would give him no choice but to give

his own son as a ransom for us all. The knowledge of this “prerequisite” and the faith that it was met at the cross is the special revelation that has been entrusted to the church.

So long as there is time, the peaceable kingdom remains a dream and an impossibility. So long as there is time it is the church’s sole mission to proclaim to the world that such a dream is wishful thinking, but, thanks be to God, there is a redeemer who loves us so much that, he will not deny us our choice to go our own way. He sets before us good and evil, and bids us to choose life and obedience with the assurance of his blessing at the resurrection of the just. Each temporal choice of life and obedience is the choice of love and by such daily choices the kingdom comes and is manifest here and now even though the ELCA’s peaceful and just world neighborhood isn’t. The ELCA has evidently decided the impossible dream of a peaceful and just world neighborhood here and now has priority over the redemption made manifest by the Word become flesh at the right time and the right place and by whose death we understand *he has made* our peace, once for all.