A Conversational Theology for a Conversational Church

Frank Rees*

An organization called 'Conversation Café' seeks, through the use of the internet, to foster many forms of conversation as a medium of constructive social change. Their website asks: 'Tired of small talk? Try some big talk.' Conversation Café aims 'to help create social spaces where empowered citizenship might emerge.' The objective is to encourage and educate people towards active participation in society, enabling them to be agents of social change. The image of a café is used in recognition that historically coffee houses were places where people learned about what was happening and together explored its meaning for their lives and discussed possible courses of action. One commentator suggests that such places were hotbeds of revolutionary thinking in England in the eighteenth century that the government closed them down. Today we receive 'the news' through public media and we respond to it, if at all, in mostly private or individual ways. 'Conversation Café' hopes to facilitate a re-emergence of community engagement with what is happening around us and thus to facilitate informed choices and more active participation in society. It is not only about talk, it sees conversation as a form of talk which enables action.

In this paper I wish to propose that the church might be thought of as a community of conversation, not only for people to develop as more active

* Prof. Dr. Frank Rees is teaching in the Whitley College, Australia.
participants in society, but also to engage in what I have termed the divine-human conversation. The church might be seen as that part of the world in which this conversation comes into focus and is intentionally embodied. In short, the church might be something like the ‘conversation café.’

To explore this theme, I will first introduce the idea of the divine-human conversation and then consider several specific aspects and implications of this conversation for the church: the topic of conversation, the making of conversation and how this conversation might be embodied in the life of the church.

**Divine Conversation**

In a number of my published works I have tried to set out what I call a theology of divine conversation. At the heart of almost all Protestant theology is an emphasis upon God’s address to us, God’s self-giving as Word. However, it seems to me as I read the Bible that we have often limited this expression of God to some particular forms of speech and so too have limited our own response to God’s word.

Mostly we assume that when God speaks, God addresses us with statements, which we should believe or commands which we should obey. From these ideas we derive the basic idea that faith is about believing and obeying; and so it is, but that is not all it is.

I suggest that faith is about engaging, at the invitation of God, in divine conversation. I have put the view that God invites us into genuine conversation with Godself and this can be seen in the Scriptures where God asks questions, real questions, and invites us to explore and propose our own responses, answers, directions in the conversation.

If we look at the biblical texts, I think it is false to imply that the word of God always comes to us as statements which we must believe, or commands we must obey. In the Bible, I find many invitations into conversation, including many genuine questions. It begins with God calling in on friends, in the cool of the evening: ‘Are you there? Where are you?’ Then comes God’s question to Cain, ‘Where is your brother – what have you done?’ The attempt to say that he is not his brother’s keeper will not do. God asks the people, in Isaiah 1, why
Asia Journal of Theology

they persist with the pretences of worship, but will not do justice and care for the widows and the fatherless.

In the gospel stories of Jesus we find such confronting questions as: Have you any bread? Or, Are you still sleeping, can you not wait with me a while? Or, why do you seek the living among the dead? And the ultimate: Who do you say I am? Again, these are not simply questions in a grammatical sense. They are genuine questions, proposed as an invitation for people to engage in conversation with Jesus and as response to God. God in Christ actually invites us to participate in who God is, in relating with us. This is genuine relationship, genuine invitation to conversation. It is not only talk; it evokes a way of living and acting together.

Theology sees God’s creative activity as inviting: setting the context, creating the space for conversational community.

In Jesus, I see the divine-human conversation lived out: here the conversation is embodied, and the potential for this conversation is explored – in relationships with those thought to be outside, in redeeming, provoking, inviting, encouraging, illumining: God in Christ opens out the possibilities and responds to the human contributions, good and bad.

In the Spirit, I see God the conversationalist further evoking and gathering. The Spirit moves within the human community to draw us to awareness of God, to call forth faithful engagement, and to evoke a consensus, an engagement with each other as also with God. The Spirit enables a community of conversation, earth to heaven and heaven to earth.

What’s It All About? The Topic of Conversation

In Luke 24 there is a story in which the risen Jesus draws alongside two disciples who are trudging home from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Jesus asks them what they have been discussing as they walk along – what is the topic of conversation? In the following story, they offer their account of the death of their hopes, while Jesus seeks to re-interpret these events ‘beginning with Moses and all the prophets ... (and) the things about himself in all the scriptures’ (v. 27).
Asia Journal of Theology

The story serves as a prototype for the situation of the church today, as I see it. We are engaged in a conversation, but we do not see beyond our own immediate concerns to what God is doing. We need someone to draw alongside us, to pose the inviting question, 'What are you discussing?' and to offer us a wider perspective in which to see the things which concern us.

The church in every period of time is in constant danger of losing its identity through mistaking the basis and purpose of its existence. My conviction is that in many respects the contemporary church is in acute danger of losing this focus, ironically because it has become pre-occupied with itself and its place in the world. Church leaders are concerned with falling numbers of attendants (in many countries) and with numerous approaches to 'renewal.' These issues are mixed, however, with the emerging stories of abuse of women, children and young people in the church's care. Some genuine efforts have been made to provide care and redress for those harmed, while some at least have attempted also to establish preventive measures to try to ensure that such things never happen again. Quite apart from the absolute horror of what has been done to people in the name of God and the consequent devastation of communal respect for the church and its leaders, the result of all this is a further reinforcing of the church's self-preoccupation.

Other elements in church life have also drawn the churches into a basic focus upon themselves. In many places there are struggles about the form of public worship. The media happily report on doctrinal disputes within or between various denominations. Still another contributing factor here is the difficulty the churches have in coping with change – the 'parish' system of churches still imagines that people live and work and worship all within walking distance of where they sleep, when in reality our lives are worked out in many different localities, of which our 'home' is just one.

The pre-occupation of the church with internal 'church' issues is just part of the problem, however. The fundamental difficulty I see is that the church is unsure about its reason for being, the purpose towards which its life and faith is directed. The church has for many centuries acted as if the purpose of God in creating the world is that all the world and all its peoples should be drawn into and become the church. This is fundamentally a categorical mistake.
Asia Journal of Theology

The opening section of the Gospel of Mark announces that Jesus came preaching the reign of God. God’s rule is announced, God’s ‘kingdom.’ There is, here, no mention of the church at all. Frequently in its history the church has confused itself with the Kingdom of God. Still today many people speak of coming into the church as entering the Kingdom of God. The implication that God is ‘King’ and that the leaders of the church are God’s princes and lords is not very far beneath the surface. It is necessary to recall the argument of Hans Küng, that the church is to be associated with the reign of God, but is not identical to that kingdom.

For the church to regain an appropriate sense of its place in the world, it is necessary to ask in a new way just what it is that God is doing in the world and how, in the light of which the church is to be related to this life and purpose of God. In what ways does the church relate to God’s life with and for human beings and indeed all God’s creation? It is here that the metaphor of divine conversation can help us. We need to begin with the question of the ‘topic’ of conversation. If the church is to find its identity as a participant in the divine conversation, what is this conversation about?

The idea of the topic of conversation concerns the place or point at which the conversation is centred or comes into focus. The ‘topic’ of the divine-human conversation concerns who and where this conversation is taking place. Addressing these seemingly simple questions will allow us to find a new focus for the church’s identity and mission.

Who are the participants in the divine-human conversation? The simple answer is ‘God and people;’ but the critical question is, ‘Which people?’ I wish to argue that the people engaged in divine-human conversation are all people, or at least potentially all people. It is important to being at this point for two reasons. First, I do not presume that the people most engaged in the divine-human conversation are the leaders or ‘ministers’ of the church. To make this assumption is to beg the question right from the outset. My contention will be that the central focus of the divine-human conversation is the ordinary life of ordinary people, as we go about working, eating, sharing friendship, family and community life. In these many aspects of life, including commerce, industry, education and health care, home and leisure, we are engaged with the questions God asks and the possibilities of living with God. I do not pretend, however,
that all people see their lives in this way. This is why I say that the participants in the divine-human conversation are all people 'potentially.' I do not wish to claim that people believe in God or are 'deep-down' followers of Jesus when in all good conscience they say they are not, or indeed they may be followers of another faith tradition altogether. My intention here is simply to invite all such people to consider the idea of a divine purpose within our life in the world, an invitation to engage with questions and explore possibilities in a conversational relationship.

In focusing on the life of the conversational church upon the people, rather than upon the gathered life and activities of the institutional church, I am seeking to draw upon the historic idea of the 'priesthood of all believers.' This idea, formulated in the teaching of Martin Luther, sees the whole life of all the people as a priestly offering to God. In particular, it emphasized the significance of all work as 'vocation.' In this way, Luther sought to shift the emphasis from the sacraments of the church as the exclusive focus of piety and the meaning of salvation. Rather, the lives of the people are to be a continuing offering of thanks and service to God. Today, this idea survives but with a reduced focus in many instances. The priesthood of all believers is often understood as the priesthood of each believer, with a stress upon the individual as 'competent' to interpret the scriptures for themselves or, in some places, a stress upon the capacity of any and all Christians to fulfill various functions within the church.

My contention is for a return to the Reformation emphasis upon the whole life of the people, within the wider community of life, as participants in the work of God in the world. I am suggesting that we see the whole of our lives, in work, home, leisure and citizenship, in terms of engagement in a continuing conversation with God. Later I shall suggest how this conversation may come into focus in the gathered life of the church. First, however, it is necessary to offer some further detail of what we might mean by the 'topic' of conversation. To do this, we need to set aside one possible misleading implication and then to explain a little further the idea of a conversation as such.

When I suggest that there is a divine-human conversation already taking place, into which we are drawn, just as Jesus joined a conversation already taking place on the Emmaus road, I am not suggesting that God has pre-determined an agenda or a set of topics or issues which are to be discussed.