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Even more, I do not suggest that God has determined in advance where the conversation will lead or what conclusion will be reached. These implications would negate the very nature and purpose of the conversation.

It is worth considering briefly the nature of a conversation and the values inherent in this activity. What makes for a good conversation and how is it different from a debate, a talk or other forms of human encounter?

A conversation implies a distinct quality of relationship between its participants. This is not to say that such relationship must precede the conversation. Indeed, many relationships are formed by and arise out of initial conversations. So perhaps it would be more accurate to say that conversation presupposes a quality of relationship either as already existing or as genuinely possible for its participants. Inherent in this idea of relationship is a fundamental openness to each other and to the conversation as such. A good conversation is one in which the participants are open to whatever each other has to say. This contrasts with the habit of many people of having already prepared what they wish to say once the other person has stopped speaking. If we are open to what the other person has to say, we may well not yet know what we would like to say next. That is the point of conversing. The openness inherent in conversation involves what we might call an open-endedness. A conversation is different from other forms of discussion which seek, for example, to resolve a dispute or to make a decision. With a conversation, there may be no ‘end’ in mind at all. There is nothing to be settled, proven or decided.

The quality of a conversation depends upon a fundamental respect between the participants. This respect shows itself both in a willingness to meet with and engage with the other participants, but most importantly in the quality of listening which makes the conversation possible. A conversation cannot proceed without such listening. On the other hand, a person who only listens is not genuinely a part of a conversation, even though at times one may mostly listen for a protracted period. The respect inherent in a conversation shows itself both in listening and in offering one’s reflections upon what others have said. The operative term here is ‘offering,’ for a conversation is markedly different from some other forms of talking which seek to correct, inform or persuade an audience. Sometimes people speak, in a conversation, as if the other people present are an audience. Their speech is more of the nature of sophistry or soliloquy, or even propaganda. These things undermine or destroy genuine conversation.
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On the other hand, a genuine conversation can take many ‘turns,’ some of which can include offering information and personal reflections, anecdotes, jokes and asides. These elements may enrich a conversation. Similarly, a good conversation can survive interruptions. It has a self-sustaining life arising from the intention and commitment of the participants. Indeed, it might be said that some interruptions are essential for a good conversation. Here I am alluding to the distinctive use of the term ‘interrupt’ in some critical literature, where the word is used to suggest ways of writing and speaking which intentionally challenge and ‘interrupt’ assumptions and value commitments implicit in what are taken to be uncontroversial words, names or phrases. Thus, for example, a writer may intentionally write the word ‘god’ with the lower case, in order to evoke a fresh consideration of the many assumptions in the regular use of the word ‘God’. Interruptions in this sense may seek both to disrupt some aspect of a conversation and to enrich and stimulate it. Another significant factor in enabling a conversation to move into new directions or depths is the posing of genuine and exploratory questions. These questions often take the form of ‘thinking out loud,’ simply wondering about the subject matter and sharing this with others. Part of the art of conversation includes the ability and willingness to ask such questions, without reticence or the fear of appearing ignorant, irreverent or disrespectful. Both the manner and timing of questions is crucial to the continuation and quality of a conversation.

These elements suggest a further crucial feature of a conversation, a **willingness to move**, on the part of the participants. By this I mean that the participants engage with such interest in the subject matter and such respect for each other that they may change their minds and indeed be personally changed as a result of the conversation. One cannot have such a conversation with a person who is never willing to change his/her mind. To participate in good conversation, one must be willing to learn, to discover new depths and dimensions of a topic and of oneself. This willingness to ‘move’ also implies a commitment to action. A genuine conversation cannot proceed on the basis that it is ‘just talk.’ The respect for one another implied in good conversation includes a willingness by each person to engage genuinely with opinions and ideas in a way that might affect the way we live. But this does not necessarily mean that a conversation must always be ‘earnest’. Indeed an excessive seriousness may indeed prevent that mutuality of engagement and listening which makes conversation possible. A good conversation includes and evokes
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A depth of mutuality because in some way it moves and in this sense it is always aware that the present 'point' or focus is not the whole of its subject, not the final word, not the arrival point. To this extent, then, a good conversation is always pointing beyond itself, aware that there are more things to consider and thus that the subject, the conversation itself, is unfinished.

A final element implied by all that has been said thus far is that conversation is possible only where there is difference. One cannot have a meaningful conversation if the participants assume that they all agree on all aspects of the subject already. The mutuality we have spoken of above does not mean agreement on all matters. Rather, it presupposes an openness to hearing and entertaining differing ideas, perspectives and values, precisely for the purpose of exploring their significance in relation to the subject at hand.

Engaging the Subject: What is God Doing in the World?

God invites a conversational church, engaged with the whole human community, exploring the questions God asks as well as the questions we ask and the answers we pose and the proposals and possibilities God sets before us.

Let us consider briefly one of the divine questions we find in the Bible. In Jeremiah 8:22 we find what Walter Brueggemann has called 'the haunting question,' "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my people been restored?"3

Here God seeks and expects healing for God's people. God asks: Is there no healing around the place? Isn't there anyone who can attend to my people? The implication is that there: are physicians and there is balm for the troubled soul; but for some reason the physician is not attending to the needy; for some reason the balm is being kept for someone else. The leaders of the people speak deceitfully, the prophet says.

These are profoundly challenging questions which God is asking here; and I suggest that they relate fairly directly to questions in our own society, like how expensive it is for many people with little children, or elderly folks or the chronically ill, to get the medicines they really need. How hard it is for someone to get to see a specialist? Is there no balm in Gilead?
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The prophet's question raises the issue of what we think God is doing in the world and what we think we ought to be doing as well. What did the leaders of the people think God was up to, and wanted them to be up to, if not heal the troubled ones? What other priorities did they have? This is the same issue posed by Jesus' story we call the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). What better things did the priest and the Levite think they have to do, serving God, than to care for the person in distress?

I would like to suggest five things that I think God is doing in the world. These things pose divine questions to us, which form the basis for an exciting conversation in which, the church, and indeed all humanity, might engage.

Philip Rosato wrote a small but a very powerful essay about the mission of the Spirit within and beyond the church. In drawing upon Rosato's paper, it is important to emphasize that the Spirit is God. So when we speak of the mission of the Spirit in the world we are talking about what God is doing in the world. This basic idea challenges the all too common assumption that the Spirit is especially, or uniquely, the spirit of the church.

Rosato speaks of four dimensions of the mission of God in the world and I plan to add a fifth. In each of his four sections, he makes three basic but important moves. First, he speaks of the Spirit's gifts to the church; but then he speaks of the Spirit giving also to people beyond the church or working within movements and activities beyond the church. Finally he speaks of the significance and challenge of these gifts, in the world, to and for the church. Rosato writes of the Spirit as Teacher, Unifier, Liberator and Vivifier. I would like to summarise these ideas briefly, before augmenting them further.

The Spirit as Teacher. Rosato sees the Spirit as evoking the search for truth thus teaching and guiding the faith of all Christians. Jesus promised that the Spirit would lead his followers into all truth (John 16:13). The Spirit teaches the church, leading us into knowledge of God, in Christ. This knowledge and truth, we might add, is not simply an intellectual or cognitive truth. Rather, the Spirit leads us into truthful living and being, individually and communally.

Rosato also sees the Spirit evoking the intellectual quests of all humanity, as scientists, philosophers and thinkers in many areas and disciplines. The
Spirit seeks “to extend and bestow elements of divine truth to all human beings in a way conducive to their salvation.”18 The church should pray for this, supporting and encouraging such quests, confident that all truth is God’s truth and that it will not lead us away from God’s purposes for the creation. Furthermore, such explorations and discoveries beyond the realms of the church can help the church’s own self-understanding, and enlighten our faith and our theology.

Second, Rosato speaks of the Spirit as Unifier. Here the mission of the Spirit is to renew the love of the church community and to evoke solidarity within the entire human community.

By virtue of their faith in Christ, Christians enter into a community of love. This community, Rosato explains, is not only the community of Christians. We are drawn into the divine love, insofar as we dwell in the Spirit and the Spirit dwells in and among us. This love can enable the different churches to receive a new unity, through the self-giving of the same Spirit. Such a gift and challenge might seem difficult enough for us, but Rosato presses his case further. The Spirit which invites us into unity in Christ also calls Christians to extend and share this love with all humanity. This is not, as he sees it, a one-way action, with the Spirit’s love flowing through Christians to others. Rosato sees the divine Spirit at work in all movements for solidarity and genuine community, all round the world.

Yet many Christians find themselves unable to see this or to welcome it. Rosato is quite definite about the implications here. He believes that if Christians are unwilling to see the Spirit’s unifying mission in contexts other than the church, we are refusing to allow God to be God, to allow the Spirit to move where it wills. To limit God in this way is to act as if we are in fact atheists.

Next our author writes of the Spirit as Liberator, ‘renewing the justice of the church and the moral energy of humanity.’ Again he begins with the mission of the Spirit to bring justice and liberation within the church. This is something we need but cannot achieve for ourselves in our own strength. “Only the Spirit can cause the unique message and ministry of Jesus to be an enduring means of liberating humanity by inspiring Christians in various social circumstances to resist the forces of disbelief, injustice and pride.” Christians should pray for the Spirit to renew the justice of the church, so that our own justification, freely
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established by God’s grace, may be expressed in a just manner of living in society. We who have received the justice of God’s grace must also work for the same justice in the world.

Yet, since many people who do not profess to be Christians also work for and advocate justice in the world, Christians should include in their prayer for the Spirit the moral strengthening of all such people. Rosato suggests that ‘genuine traces of the Spiritus Liberator are discernible in all who hunger and thirst for justice’ (Matt. 5:6). This is contested by many Christians, Rosato observes. Many Christians are especially unable to see movements for justice led by or involving Marxists as also being movements of God’s Spirit. But such movements remind the church of its mission for justice, and point unknowingly to the Spirit as ‘the source and goal of all ethical ideals, and as their mysterious and fruitful inner source.’ So while he draws back from any simplistic assertion of the Spirit’s mission within all liberation movements, Rosato sees in these movements a continuing challenge to the church. In some ways there may be a rebuke to the church, because others have taken the lead where Christians perhaps have been slow to act; but in any case there is a reminder to the church of the ‘source and goal’ of its mission with the Spirit, in living out the depth and consequences of our freedom in Christ.

Finally, Rosato speaks of the Spirit as Vivifier. With this difficult word he speaks of the mission of the Spirit to renew hope in the church and to encourage ‘the aspirations of humanity.’ Christians are brought to new life in the Spirit, through Christ, who is himself ‘a life-giving Spirit’ (1 Cor. 15:45). Such new life causes Christians to hope for the Spirit’s consummating of all things ‘in the glory that awaits us’ (2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5). The creation groans, and we too have the first-fruits of this hope (Rom. 8:23). Alive to hope, Christians also feel empathy with all those who also make courageous acts of hope, for justice, resisting oppression and seeking the healing of the creation. God’s Spirit of life seeks a community of creation, that is a life together. Thus the life-giving and enriching mission of the Spirit enables the church to welcome and celebrate the fecundity of life itself in all God’s creation.

If we gather together these four aspects of Rosato’s thought, what we have is an insightful and challenging sketch of what God is doing in the world: - in the quest for truth, in the search for community, in the struggle for freedom and