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The Power of the Points: A Review of Making Faith Magnetic

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Abstract

"Listening to culture means listening patiently and lovingly, always seeking to discern where God is already at work."

Posting about the book *Making Faith Magnetic* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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The Power of the Points: A Review of *Making Faith Magnetic*

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Title: ***Making Faith Magnetic: Five Hidden Themes Our Culture Can't Stop Talking About… And How to Connect Them to Christ***
Author: Daniel Strange
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In case you missed it, Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) is having a bit of a moment. Buoyed by new translation projects, a critical biography, and the energetic work of younger scholars, Bavinck is quickly approaching Abraham Kuyper's stature as a theological luminary whose work transcends his Dutch context. This increased attention to Herman Bavinck has made others wonder whether there might be more untapped riches in the Neo-Calvinist family. I mean *family* literally in this sense, as Herman Bavinck had a lesser-known nephew, Johan Herman Bavinck (1895-1964), whose work is also worthy of consideration.

As a missiologist and missionary to Indonesia, the younger Bavinck (all subsequent references will be to J.H. Bavinck) wrestled with a religiously pluralistic world, offering theological reflections deeply rooted in the Reformed tradition while also being provocative and creative. But although significant pieces of Bavinck's work have been translated, it has not generated significant interest outside Dutch circles.

British theologian Daniel Strange is doing his part to change that in his new book, *Making Faith Magnetic: Five Hidden Themes Our Culture Can't Stop Talking About and How to Connect Them to Christ.* In a short and accessible volume, Strange introduces readers to Bavinck's "magnetic points." The magnetic points are fundamental human questions that exert their gravity on us no matter where we live. As Bavinck writes, they "irresistibly compel human religious thought. Human beings cannot escape their power but must provide an answer to those basic questions posed to them" (26).

From Strange's lengthy subtitle we can note some distance between Bavinck and our present day (Bavinck's title was "Religious Consciousness.") But though he does re-package Bavinck's themes for a contemporary audience, Strange does not dilute them. Here are his descriptions:

- Totality: is there a way to connect?
- Norms: is there a way to live?
- Deliverance: is there a way out?
- Destiny: is there a way we control?
- Higher power: is there a way beyond? (26-27)

In the first half of the book, Strange explains each magnetic point, offering everyday examples from contemporary culture. Following Bavinck, he shows how we both seek God and flee God, suppressing the truth and substituting more manageable idols in God's place. And yet, since we are creatures in God's world, we long to feel connected to something larger than ourselves, we make claims for the way we (and others) should live, we look for hope in the face of intractable problems, and all of this leads us to wonder whether the "something more" we intuit might have a face and a name. Whereas Bavinck reflected on an explicitly religious context (specifically Islam), Strange finds these magnetic points throughout secular societies: on the lips of politicians, in pop culture, and in social media posts about Premier League football clubs.

In the second half of the book, Strange offers a model of "subversive fulfillment," in which the gospel subverts our "idolatrous stories" calling us to "exchange old hopes and desires for new and more attractive ones," pointing us ultimately to Jesus Christ, "the magnetic person." For Strange, the apologetic enterprise requires both demonstrating Jesus's "magnetic appeal" alongside "how appalling idolatry is" (88-90).

Strange's book is a compelling example of what is known as "cultural apologetics": apologetic approaches that concentrate on giving Christian interpretations of culture rather than making logical proofs, which find their precedent in thinkers like Augustine, Pascal, and Schaeffer. While not replacing more analytic accounts (which defend the *truth* of Christianity), cultural apologetics remind us that people are not "brains on a stick," who simply need to be exposed to the right ideas. Since humans are embodied, affective, cultural beings, we need more than just a demonstration of truth. We also need to see the *relevance* and *resonance* of Christian faith.[1]

As someone who works in cultural apologetics and who has also learned much from Bavinck's work, I found this book to be illuminating and helpful, especially for preachers and Christian cultural commentators. It is not for nothing that Tim Keller wrote the foreword! One of our greatest privileges is to share the good news about Jesus, and that requires understanding why it doesn't always sound like good news to those around us. Strange's book helps uncover the deep questions people ask, how we look for answers in the wrong places, and how God finds us all the same.

The book did leave me wondering about the unique character of the magnetic points, and if there is any significant difference between them and other ways of framing our existential investment in the world, like N.T. Wright's idea of "broken signposts," (e.g., justice, beauty, and truth).[2] Here it might have been fruitful to include a bit more of Bavinck's writing in each chapter to place them in a distinctive theological frame, though that might have made for a different, more academic sort of book.

I want to register two cautionary footnotes, neither of which necessarily undermines Strange's project. The first is a caution about the ways we might be tempted to use apologetic ("how to") handbooks. We are always seeking new techniques for mastering the world, which leads us to turn people into projects or problems to be solved (Strange is aware of this, noting the need to engage religious others holistically and humanely, see 93ff). But I worry that the sort of listening commended in cultural apologetics often fails to take culture seriously. What I mean is that we treat culture superficially, failing to discern the ways that every person is already in a wrestling match with ultimate reality, which generates dynamic, paradoxical results.

Philosopher Jacob Klapwijk reminds us, "Self-sufficient thought, closed as it is to the truth of God, receives that truth anyway; yes, it derives its life and dynamism from its wrestling with and against that truth…. We must listen until we are able to hear—behind the experiences of the wrestling personality—the voice of God, who makes an appeal to the one so engaged and in and through him or her speaks to us."[3]

Listening to culture means listening patiently and lovingly, always seeking to discern where God is already at work. This sort of listening requires the humility to learn as well as the willingness to be surprised by what we find. The gospel calls every culture into question, including (and perhaps especially) *Christian* cultures.

This leads to my second caution, which has to do with the way the gospel confronts cultural idolatries. Praise God that it does. But those who proclaim the gospel need to begin by naming our own idolatries, the things from which we need Jesus to set us free. The temptation for Christian cultural critics is to try to "see through" cultural artifacts to the idolatry underneath, without realizing the ways that we ourselves have re-made God in our image.

Listen to C.S. Lewis: "My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of his presence? The incarnation is the supreme example; it leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins. And most are 'offended' by the iconoclasm; and blessed are those who are not."[4]

The best kind of iconoclasm is the sort that majors on presenting the beauty of Jesus Christ and minors on exposing idols. Both are necessary; but only one is primary. The one can show us our misery, but the other sets us free. Similarly, cultural apologetics is at its best not when it pokes

at culture to expose its inadequacy, but when it points to “the magnetic person,” the one who calls us all to repent and believe the good news.

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1. See my contributions to the conversation: *Reimagining Apologetics* (IVP Academic, 2020) and the forthcoming *Interpreting Your World* (Baker Academic, 2022).
2. N.T. Wright, *Broken Signposts: How Christianity Makes Sense of the World* (Harper One, 2020).
3. Jacob Klapwijk, “Antithesis and Common Grace,” in *Bringing Into Captivity Every Thought* (University Press Of America, 1992), 140.
4. C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*. (Harper Collins, 2001), 66.