

## Book review: Plugged In

***Plugged In: Connecting your faith with what you watch, read, and play*, Daniel Strange, Good Book Company, 160pp, (2019) £6.79**

While I think Timothy Keller's endorsement, "There really is nothing else like this book" may be a little overstated, I sympathise with his point. Daniel Strange has written a thought-through and accessible book that is worthy of consideration by any Christian who desires to wisely relate to contemporary culture.

### Exit or engage?

Christians face a battle as to how we can honestly and helpfully interact with the world around us. How are we to be "in the world but not of the world"? It can be very difficult to get the balance right. Strange helpfully introduces his book by listing various options the church has responded:

- "Look in" at culture, staying within our own Christian cultural "holy huddle"
- "Lash out" against culture, attacking the worst parts with judgmentalism and moralism
- "Look like" culture, adopting its changing fads and morality (16)

Strange submits an alternative, better way, urging us to meaningfully engage with culture. In the pages that follow, he defines culture as "the stories we tell that express meaning about the world" (23) and presents a biblical basis and model for effectively analysing and approaching the world around us.

### Confronting and connecting

Strange states that the gospel transcends culture but that we can often assume that our own context (in the author's case, English and middle-class) does Christianity best. Pointing to the beauty of diversity in Christian community, he desires that Christians should find that their engagement with culture "results in us loving Christ more and more, and telling others to follow him with more and more clarity and persuasive power" (95). This is accomplished through *confrontation* that challenges societies' plausibility structures with the miraculous gospel of Christ, *connecting* Christ's cross to the culture in front of us (100-101).

Drawing from Paul's ministry in Athens (Acts 17) and 1 Corinthians 1, *Plugged In* presents a model of confronting and connecting culture with Christ via a process that Strange calls "subversive fulfilment".

*"The gospel is the subversive fulfilment of culture... compared to the idolatrous stories that the world tells, the gospel both subverts and fulfils... it subverts in that it confronts, unpicks and overthrows the world's stories. It calls for new ways of looking at the world because the old ways are so useless and harmful... The gospel fulfils in that it connects and is shown to be worthy of our hopes and desires. The gospel is appealing in that it is a call to exchange old hopes and desires for new ones, because these new ones are the originals from which our false stories are smudged and ripped fakes." (102)*

Strange spends a significant amount of time unpacking this in theory before showing what it means practically in a series of four steps:

- *Enter* – patient observation of the world or a specific item of culture (e.g. a film, book, play) leading to careful (as opposed to caricatured) descriptions of what we are engaging with.
- *Explore* – searching for elements of grace, while acknowledging idolatrous components that detract from worship of God.
- *Expose* – show people's idols to be "destructive frauds" (125) by highlighting their spiritual bankruptcy.
- *Evangelise* – show off the good news of Jesus Christ. Strange says: "The gospel has something to say about anything and everything because the gospel impacts anything and everything."

He cautions against a one-size-fits-all gospel presentation and gives examples of meaningful engagement.

In what is certainly a unique and helpful feature, *Plugged In* concludes with some fascinating, if somewhat random, exemplar essays that model how to go about Christian cultural analysis. Looking at adult colouring books, birdwatching, zombie-culture, and Japanese toilets, the author does a remarkable job of showing how the gospel can quite literally engage with anything!

### **Is this helpful?**

Church planting and pastoring is difficult, responsible work. Meaningful engagement with one's local community – inside and outside the church body – is essential. Such relevant engagement is not possible without attempts to understand what is going on around us.

Over the years, I have taken great joy in following very similar steps to Dan Strange in taking works of our culture and engaging with them as a Christian in attempting to reach people with the gospel. I have often seen fruitful conversations develop as a result with some more meaningful relationships developed and, in quite a few cases, people professing or growing in their faith. That said, this has not always been without difficulty or misunderstanding.

Someone once challenged me on the evils of television and urged me to not watch any movies or use illustrations from them in my preaching. On another occasion I was told that "The Avengers are evil and no Christian should watch the films or read the comics, because God says 'vengeance is mine' and so he is the only Avenger." While I disagreed with the method and motives of these individuals, I accepted that entertainment is a matter of conscience for Christians and sought to move on – but that did not mean they did!

Entertainment aside, our church once held a series of special outreach Bible studies where other religions were analysed and assessed from a biblical perspective, their beliefs and behaviours appraised and exposed via a similar model to Strange's subversive fulfilment. One person made it clear his attendance was reluctant, because "we don't need to know anything about anyone else or what they believe because it's all lies and all we need is the gospel". On another occasion, I was asked to address the topic of tolerance from a Christian perspective. As part of this, in looking at the western cultural climate, I considered gender confusion, identity and freedom of speech issues from a scriptural lens. One individual commented, "Just preach the gospel. There is no need to tell us about philosophy".

Unfortunately, anyone who attempts to illustrate how the gospel subversively fulfils the culture's deepest desires and needs will face challenges. Many, like the Pharisees of Jesus' day who questioned his interactions with certain people, just won't see the point of Strange's book. And yet what he offers is a biblical model for engaging an increasingly hostile environment. As Paul proclaimed the gospel to Athenian philosophers with a contextually appropriate and clear message so should we be equipped to effectively confront this world.

### **Engagement is worth it**

For every negative reaction to Christian cultural engagement, I have seen so many more equipped and helped to reach out who would otherwise not have done so. I have seen and had gospel conversations started out of discussions on other religions, superhero movies, Arsenal football, veganism, Lord of the Rings, clowns and graphic t-shirts. It has sometimes taken me out of my normal interests or comfort zone (the discussion of flat earth theory with an acquaintance and his brother in their flat while they smoked weed can't be erased from my mind), but in every case God has given me the words to speak to the hope that is in Christ.

I am confident Strange's book can and will inspire the reader to reach out in more fresh and effective ways with the truth of Jesus Christ, who is the power and wisdom of God.

*Regan King*

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