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Wanted: A Spiritual Pursuit Through Jail, Among Outlaws, and Across Borders (Book Review)

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illustrations of imaginative education in this chapter: the *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*,¹ a model of worship for young children that introduces them to the meaning behind the church liturgical calendar by means of capturing the imagination through play, and “Teaching for Transformation,” a model for Christian schools that provides a framework for curriculum based on the Biblical narrative, encouraging teachers to teach with a goal of “inviting their students into a better story” (155). As a mother with three children in a Christian school that is currently looking into implementing Teaching for Transformation, I was glad to see this so well explained and used as an illustration of what teaching to change a child’s desires by using the Biblical narrative might look like. As a former homeschool mother and a wife of a Christian school teacher, I found this chapter fascinating. While I understand the need for covering the subject with focus and brevity, Smith’s thoughts on education were some of my favorite parts of this book and I was left wishing for more on the subject.

The book ends on the topic of vocation, following the logical conclusion of Smith’s thesis: you are what you love, you might not love what you think, but

by restoring (“re-storying”) yourself to God’s desires through worship and Christian community and Godly practices, you will find that God will change your heart to desire what He desires. And that change of desire is to be worked out through our vocation—our calling. With hearts set in the direction of God’s desires, our vocation becomes a place in which the love of God drives everything we do. “Be careful what you worship,” warns Smith; “it will shape what you want, and therefore what you make and how you will work” (178).

Overall, *You Are What You Love* is easy to follow without being too simplistic, presents topics relating to worldview and philosophy in a way that is neither abstract nor unapproachable, and clearly makes points relevant to all who follow Christ and are part of His church: we are driven by what we love, and God has given us a way to recalibrate our desires through His church. I found *You Are What You Love* to be an engaging and challenging book, with wide-ranging applications.

Endnotes

1. More information on *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* can be found at <http://www.cgsusa.org>

Wanted: A Spiritual Pursuit Through Jail, Among Outlaws, and Across Borders. Hoke, Chris. New York: Harper One, 2015. 360pp. ISBN: 978-0-06-232136-7. Reviewed by Howard Schaap, Assistant Professor of English, Dordt College.

Not long ago, the picture of a man arrested in our community made the rounds on Facebook. The man’s face was entirely tattooed, not something you see every day in the small-town Midwest. Perhaps it was impossible not to judge this book by its cover. We were meant to read the symbols printed there, my wife reminded me, and those symbols were trying to tell a specific kind of story. Predictably, too, the comments on Facebook were fascinated with that tattooed surface and wouldn’t go beyond it. What kind of monster would tattoo his whole face?

Chris Hoke’s memoir *Wanted* is a book that explores the stories behind face tattoos, especially as Hoke comes to hear these stories from gang members as chaplain in Skagit County (WA) Jail. However, *Wanted* is not just a collection of shocking jail stories accumulated by a chaplain over the years. Rather, it’s a book that uses these stories as clues for what the Spirit of God is doing in the wider world. Hoke’s book takes seriously both the image of God and the Spirit of God, tracing the former as it pursues the latter. In *Wanted*, Hoke is on the trail of the Holy Spirit, following the Spirit’s leading among the marginalized, and the trail is clear and is often marked by blood.

One of the primary trails of the Spirit is Hoke’s

relationship to Richard, a young Latino gang member sentenced for thirty-four years for various felonies, including the part he played in the death of an 84-year-old woman, and for which he is sent to Walla Walla State Penitentiary. Through Richard, we inhabit the life of the unwanted. True to good prison stories, we have to face the questions that Richard faced in his life. What does it mean to be unwanted by your own mother at birth? What does it feel like to be a disposable member of society in one of the most massive prison cultures in the world? How distant do the Scriptures feel when you’re in prison?

It turns out not that distant. Reading Scripture through Richard’s eyes often transforms it. In one memorable scene, as Hoke reads the parable of the wedding banquet from Matthew 22 in a Bible study, Richard puts Hoke on the spot. In the parable, a man is thrown out for not having the right attire, and Richard feels the slight. “Better to stay in the streets with the bad people than be told you’re wanted and then find out you’re really not!” he exclaims (162). We as readers feel everything hanging in the balance along with Hoke, and as he finds his way through the challenge, we feel the miracle in it.

But *Wanted* is not just a prison story. As we learn

about Richard's life, we learn almost as much about Hoke through Richard's eyes as vice versa. The book follows the arc of Hoke's own wanting, from his falling out with both the institutional church and the university to his inner fears as he confronts men like Richard. (Full disclosure: Chris Hoke was a year ahead of me in the MFA program at Seattle Pacific University, where I got to hear about some of the backstory to *Wanted* firsthand.) As a writer, Hoke is a very contemporary example of faith: disenchanted with the evangelicalism of his youth, Hoke searches for something fuller in art and then in ancient Christian mysticism, which manifests itself in compassion for the suffering and the desire to transform the systems that destroy people. In this way *Wanted* is part memoir, part character study of men in Skagit County Jail, part adventure story, part investigation into the prison system.

It is all pilgrimage.

Wanted is also a page-turner, full of escapes, near misses, and back alley adventures. In one miraculous account, a prisoner calls Hoke in the middle of the night. Suffering from severe back pain, the man had tried to hang himself with bed sheets, but the jolt has instead worked like traction and relieved him of pain. He has called Chaplain Hoke and asked him to bring his guitar that he might sing a song to celebrate.

Many of the stories in *Wanted* don't end well, however, and this is one of them, as the man ends up in the middle of one of the heinous cartel crimes in Mexico.

In fact, Hoke is equally interested in confronting us with the dark stories behind face tattoos as he is in tracing the miraculous. If you're not up for the F-word, this book is not for you. In a chapter called "F--- the World," Hoke recounts the story of Michael Jenkins, who comes to Bible study and has exactly that tattooed on his neck. The Bible study leader and Hoke's mentor, Bob Ekblad, uses that tattoo as a way in to scripture: "I'm just looking at your tattoo here and thinking, That's something Jesus's disciples might have said" (166). Soon, Bob has Michael Jenkins reading from First John, "*Do not l-love . . . the world . . . or the things of the w-world. If, if anyone . . . l-loves the world, the love of the Father is [. . .] is not in him*" (168, italics original).

The chapter goes on to explore just what "the world" means to men and women in jails, in juvenile detention centers, on the streets. Michael Jenkins had been expelled from school prior to high school and could barely read. One street kid had been locked in a dumpster. Another lost his job when he let his friends use the bathroom at Starbucks. Person after person "gave examples of general procedures, policies put in place to deal with unwanted people," writes Hoke (171).

This is a different reading of First John, of course, than how "most respectable people" read it, and that is

precisely the point. "I began to wonder," writes Hoke, "whether those who had been to prison and back knew 'the world'—which Jesus and his disciples announced in the Gospels and New Testament letters—better than anyone. Better than people like me, at least, who more often *benefit* from the world as it is, who have never been locked inside a dumpster" (176).

By the end of the chapter, Michael Jenkins has a new tattoo, "TRIXTER," across his forehead. He's also been shot and killed in an armed conflict with law enforcement, but Hoke's vision of him has been transformed, and ours has been challenged. While "[Jenkins] looked the part: bad guy caught and killed," Hoke looks back over his life story and sees "a vulnerable youth cornered in a cell by two armed men; a boy climbing a tree and hissing empty threats from its branches; an addict fleeing the world on a bicycle and firing loose shots over his shoulder" (181).

Hoke's stories make you reconsider. What's the story a man has to live to tattoo his entire face? What stories is he trying to be a part of? What might the gospel offer him?

Wanted will make you see past face tattoos to the image of God as it's found in many different people and places. Hoke's prose spins and eddies as the Holy Spirit takes him off beaten paths and into a variety of experiences: to a trout stream, fly-fishing with ex-cons; to a hillside haunt of a Caracas, Venezuela, outlaw; through the ups and downs and institutional dispiriting of a mentally ill adolescent; to the dark corners of a Turkish social club. What Hoke does so well is take us into and past systems—both the prison system itself but also that system's moorings in wider culture—to see the human beings at the other side.

Wanted climaxes in a chapter near the end of the book, "Fire in the Hole." In it, Hoke recounts the "logic," history, and development of the practice of the solitary confinement. Hoke has strong words for the practice. "Solitary confinement is the greatest threat leveled at prisoners in our nation," he writes, "the cross of our age looming against the growing prison horizon, what happens when you go against the regime." Like the cross, too, Hoke wonders about the imaginative and transformative power of the hole, and it's in this visionary, prophetic imagination that *Wanted* is at its best. "I'm interested in how one thing can be used for another purpose," he says.

Like a Molotov cocktail: take a liquor bottle usually used for its subduing powers, empty it, fill it with a different substance, fuel, add fire, and when it breaks it becomes a bomb, a tool for subversion. This creative reuse ethic is the imagination behind all sacrament. Take this ordinary bread, this cheap juice or wine, this broken marriage,

these unglorious things, lift them to a mystery we can never fully understand, and you might have the substance of heaven disguised in crude form, something charged with possibility to toss into a mean world. (322)

Despite all the hellishness of the hole, Hoke wonders if it might be the Molotov cocktail of the prison system and of the societal system that would intern so many from the margins: “Could these cells be hollowed of their punitive power, filled with another more potent substance, lit with a divine fire, and so becoming something subversive deep within the human disposal system?” (323).

Hoke has just such a story, a story of Neaners, who, with a vision of Eucharist, tells Hoke how he goes “fishing” in solitary: in the midst of loneliness, prisoners make “lines” of string from whatever they can, attach

paper clips and end of combs, then “fish” by sending it out beneath their doors to “hook” onto lines from prisoners in other cells. Neaners says he’s using this practice to “break bread together, to share what I got” (340). And what does he have? Crushed atomic fireball candies. “These homies got *no one*,” says Neaners. “Sometimes, late at night, I can hear ’em cryin’ a lil’ . So when a fireball slides under his door, it’s not just candy, Babyboy. That’s *love* sliding into his cell. They can see it. Eat it, taste it. You know what I mean?” (341).

This is Hoke’s central thesis: there is fire—holy, divine fire—even in the hole, as the spirit of God even now is breaking out from that hole at the bottom of our society to melt an institution we should all be asking questions about. Seeking that fire as Hoke did, *Wanted* suggests, you will find it, and it will leave you dazzled, changed, and quite possibly burned.

And it will leave you wanting more.