There are undercurrents in the ocean which act independently of the movements of the waters on the surface; far down too in its hidden depths there is a region where, even though the storm be raging on the upper waves, perpetual calmness and stillness reign. So there may be an under-current beneath the surface-movements of your life — there may dwell in the secret depths of your being the abiding peace of God, the repose of a holy mind, even though, all the while, the restless stir and commotion of worldly business may mark your outer history.

John Caird
“Religion in Common Life,”
_Sermons_
My commute to the college these days is short by any standard — something shy of twenty minutes. The car's headlights fan across highway 68 for eleven miles, switched off as the car comes to a stop in the faculty lot beside the Kinlaw Library. Usually, the time is seven or seven-ten. The library is closed, but the watchman has unlocked the classroom buildings. Before I enter Hughes' basement, I see the silhouettes of seminary buildings across the street. And above them, of course, the last stars of a winter night fading into the dawn.

But stars these days are just stars. They do not shine in some metaphysical firmament but only in local skies. Dante did not find it so. He lived in the days of the great medieval synthesis of thought and faith, art and piety — a day when astronomy and astrology were linked as common modes of discourse in a rock-solid conceptual system. When he speaks of his own creative gifts and of his majestic poem, he sees himself as a steward of the great gift.
I know that I grieved then, and now again
I grieve when I remember what I saw,
And more than ever I restrain my talent

Lest it run a course that virtue has not set;
For if *a lucky star or something better*
Has given me this good, I must not misuse it. (189)

For Dante, of course, *fortuna* is a providential, quasi-divine being under the control of God. Good fortune is a divine blessing; bad fortune is a divine opportunity to trust the God who appoints the measure of all things. Still, one can distinguish between a “lucky star” (the impersonal operation of a sort of fate) and “something better” (the personal initiative of an all-gracious God in the course of a human life).

By the nineteenth century, the Victorian “crisis of faith” had all but torn the stars from their familiar sky. Darwinian biology and higher criticism of biblical texts had made the claims of orthodox faith improbable to many people. When George Frederic Watts, one of the greatest of the Pre-Raphaelite artists, painted his canvas entitled “Hope,” he could see only a defeated woman sitting atop a mammoth globe, eyes bandaged, fingers gripping a useless lyre of which only one frayed string remains in place. She seems weary, as if she has collapsed upon the cloud-strewn sphere. P. T. Forsyth warns us not to distort the allegory: “Do not think,” he says, “that the loss of Faith develops the strength of Hope. It throws more strain upon Hope alone, and Hope is not infrequently over-tasked. Hope was never meant to replace Faith, but to supplement it” (107). The string of hope, barely audible, still sounds, but a fear haunts the forlorn figure. “Is that note of hope,” asks Forsyth, “only in the soul? Is it a subjective dream of our own?” (108). The scene is dark, the woman's
eyes are bandaged because "she cannot bear to see the only things she can still see" (109). But, visible only to the artist and to the observer, above the woman's collapsed form and above the earth ringed with cloud-shadows, a star shines in the night sky. The soul of the age may have shut its eyes to salvation, but the star shines on — a morning star, we think, "the first light of Heaven" (Luke 2:80, Phillips).

Popular culture, of course, is always formulaic and simplistic. Around us, the starlight, star-bright, first star we see at night survives in children's rhymes. And Jiminy Cricket counsels us to wish upon a star. The icon is retained in red on Macy's stores, in yellow at Hardees' restaurants, in shiny metal on the sidewalk of celebrity. Someone may even promise to make us a star. But we are not nor can we ever be the star. The true star gleamed over a stable in a small Judean village; we may need to follow shepherds' footprints in the dust or wise men's camel tracks along the way. Or maybe — "something better" — we should just look up beyond the shimmer of the neon, beyond the luminescent beacons of radio towers, and beyond the meteoric spray of fireworks to the "light of the world." His loved ones know that the root and offspring of Jesse is indeed "the bright and morning star" (Revelation 22:16, KJV)

1. Scripture

God has spoken to humankind and He continues to speak, but He is waiting for us to listen.

One Christmas, I read a little book entitled *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. The author was the former editor-in-chief of *Elle*, the Paris fashion magazine. At age 43, he was stricken with a massive stroke which left him a quadriplegic with "locked in"
syndrome. His story has been adapted for a feature-length motion picture. He retained only one bodily movement. He could blink his left eye; the right eye had been surgically sown shut. He wrote the book by blinking to an alphabetic code devised and deciphered by a patient secretary. The book is a heroic story, a testimony to the priceless value of our words. As I worked my way through the narrative, I thought about the time it must have taken to write a single word. But it is a tragic story, too. Jean-Dominique Bauby, the author, had no Gospel. He possessed words but not the Word. He blinked out a whole book only to savor and record the "butterflies" (that is, sense memories) of a foreshortened lifetime — the taste of apricots and the smell of flowers. In the light of this man's superhuman exertions, my own words took on a new value, especially my words in the classroom. For days, I would find myself saying, "50 minutes 3 times a week."

An animal fulfills its nature by simply being what it is; it is born, lives and dies within the deterministic, closed universe of impulse and instinct. Helmut Thielicke, the German-Lutheran theologian, says that God shines like the sun on most of creation. Only men and women are "addressed" by a word. Persons are endowed with self-awareness and free will; they possess the ability to step outside themselves, to criticize and choose, to respond with understanding and intelligence to meaningful messages from without. "Take up and read" was the word addressed to St. Augustine; that experience one afternoon in a garden has changed the course of the world.

Perhaps a Biblical example would be helpful. II Chronicles 34 records the story of King Josiah's reforms, the finding of the lost Book of the Law by Hilkiah the priest, and the renewal of the covenant. Josiah, it seems, lived in a time very much like our
own, a period of social upheaval, moral chaos, and spiritual privation. Of the cultural amnesia of our time, Richard Blackmur has said, "the loss is unnoticed because it is so total." Josiah sensed a similar impoverishment.

He sends a delegation to the temple: "Go to the temple and speak to the Lord for me and for the remnant of Israel and Judah. **Ask Him about the words** written in the scroll that has been found" (v. 21). Scripture is silent about what struggle, if any, took place in the young king's heart. But we recognize a moment of crisis. I think, for one thing, Josiah resolves the problem of the will. All God will ever give us is His will for us. Nothing else. If we want his will, we may have it. Choosing God's will over our own is to open our lives to a divine influence and to give God a deep inner permission. On the day we do that (says Paul in Romans), we become living sacrifices. Only then to we know what God wants to do, and only then will we know how good and pleasing and perfect His will really is (Romans 12:2).

At the heart of Wesley's theology is a profound respect for the authoritative, infallible word of God. Scott L. Jones, in *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, argues that Scripture is "authoritative in all matters of faith and practice" (31). Wesley recognizes, according to Jones, that "the Bible is the product of a divine-human collaboration, but the divine contribution far predominates" (21-22) and "the human part of its composition in no way obstructs the divine authorship of the text" (23). Wesley defends what has come to be known as the quadrilateral (scripture, reason, tradition, and experience) but grants to scripture the supreme, unchallenged priority. Randy L. Maddox summarizes Wesley's position as "a unilateral rule of scripture within a trilateral hermeneutic of reason, tradition, and experience" (46).
When Wesley declared himself to be *homo unius libri* (a man of one book), he did not mean to imply that he read no other volumes than the Old and New Testaments; instead, he meant to suggest that the one dynamic of his life, the source and norm of his thinking, the sole place where he found living truth was the scripture. In "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered," Wesley makes this *conviction* clear: “The foundation of true religion stands upon the oracles of God. It is built upon the prophets and apostles, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone.” In a clear, helpful discussion, Jones demonstrates Wesley's commitment to the *sufficiency* of scripture (“the whole and sole rule of faith” 37), the *clarity* of scripture (“only God himself can give a clear, consistent, perfect account” 41), and the *wholeness* of scripture (“every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess” 43).

Long before my Father passed away, he remarked to me one day that if I ever wanted to find him after he was gone, I could find him in his books. He meant by this, I am sure, that the volumes in his library had shaped and guided him throughout his life. But in a far more profound sense, of course, we find *Our Father* in the book of holy writ. He gave His Son without our asking or desiring or conceiving the possibility of an incarnation, and He has given us his word to serve as a lamp for our feet. He is not hiding. He is not lost. We do not need to search for him. Surely we want to affirm all adventures of the spirit in which students pursue goals. The God-given nature of human persons is interrogative and inquisitive. The human person is, in fact, the only creature who can become a problem to himself or herself. We ask questions about our own nature. We discover natural laws in the moral realm. We speculate about the nature of things and develop sophisticated theoretical constructs. We employ empirical
methods of research and establish sciences and instrumental technologies. All this human exploration may lead to a postmodern suspicion that we find only what we bring. As Don Cupitt has it, "Truth does not come from the other room; we make it up." But the nature of revelation does not work in this fashion. Here, the moment of greatest comprehension is a receptive one. As E. F. Scott puts it, "we shut him out by the effort to apprehend him for ourselves" (162). We tend to speak of this knowledge as streaming down "from above" or breaking through from "the other side," or, in Robert Browning's fine phrase, entering our earthbound domain from "the realms of help." When we hear Him, we understand that we are coming into possession of something we could not discover for ourselves. He creates the capacity to receive the gift as well as bringing the gift itself. After all our speculation about different "voices" in the canon, about extra-biblical influences, about literary genres, about contested dates, about "frameworks of belief" readers bring to the text, we must humbly acknowledge at the end of the day that God's word has come down to us from above. The underlying unity of the message attests to its singular Christological focus.

In the Platonic Dialogue entitled Phaedo, Socrates makes an intriguing comment on the intellectual life. He presupposes that every thinker oriented to the truth would welcome some disclosure of "ultimate reality." If the gods were to send us a ship, says Socrates, we would certainly climb aboard; we would delight in the absoluteness of our knowledge. But short of that, we must make do with rafts. That is, without a word from the gods, we reason on the level of opinion and conjecture. A sure foundation requires an inspired word.
II. STEWARDSHIP

Stewardship means bringing all of life under the lordship of Jesus Christ: time, talent, resources, privileges, opportunities — even, as children sing, the cattle on a thousand hills and the sun and stars that shine.

When we think of stewardship these days, of course, we tend to think of ecological sensitivity and earth-care — a wholesome reverence for the created order as the setting of our common life as residents of the planet. But too often the “greening” of culture is accompanied by a strange assortment of romantic utopianism and glorification of the primitive, apocalyptic foreboding and alarm, vitalist pantheism and idolatrous nature-love. The “deep ecology” movement, for example, wants to substitute a sentimental “biocentrism” for a decadent “anthropocentrism.” No species or life form is to be thought of as more worthwhile than another. One must get beneath the shrill politics to find a core of common sense beneath the noise. We are called to be caretakers. We don’t need to worship nature or idealize the wild as a panacea for all that ails us.

The question is one of worldview. Human attitudes and actions derive from a “model of the world” (Walsh and Middleton, 32). Avoiding the relativism often associated with the very notion of worldview, David Naugle in his study Worldview: The History of a Concept argues in this fashion:

Christianity is not only characterized by theological and moral verities, but is also marked by objective, cosmological structures based on the biblical doctrine of creation. An independent “givenness” characterizes the universe. All aspects of reality manifest an intrinsic integrity and inner coherence which may be traced to . . . biblical sources. (263)
Christians have typically thought of the “orders” of creation or the determinate “natures” of creatures. Albert Wolters employs the helpful terms *structure* (“the essence of a creaturely thing”) and *direction* (a sinful deviation from that structural ordinance and renewed conformity to it in Christ” (72-73). We accept, then, that a normed creational order with its divinely ordained structures underlies all reality. In our pluralistic setting, the structures are increasingly at stake and at risk. The threat to institutions like the family is obvious. The perverse, fallen *direction* of secular culture must be opposed by every discerning believer. Students have become aware that Christians must be active in the world for renewal and restoration.

In *God and the Crisis of Freedom*, Richard Bauckham argues that the Genesis norm of *dominion* has been misread as *domination* (128-177). That the “cultural mandate” to subdue the earth has been issued within a theocentric context is a humbling reminder of human finitude. Human beings are creatures even in their most creative moments; they have been granted use of the world’s resources and given authority over the terrestrial domain, but the notion of mastering or conquering nature in an exploitative way is foreign to any biblically-informed ethos. Bauckham suggests that the “use” humans make of creation is not intended to be a godlike appropriation for narrowly utilitarian benefits or for facile aesthetic *kitsch*. Nor is our creaturely control to take precedence over another, perhaps more pressing and sublime mandate. The earth, even in its current fallen condition, is a divine order designed to give glory to God and elicit reverence from persons.
III. Mission

Once upon a time, so the story goes, a man of letters was invited for the Christmas holidays to a magnificent country estate, one of those locales Henry James would have labeled “a great, good place.” When he arrived at the enormous house, he was surprised and somewhat embarrassed to discover that all the other houseguests had brought gifts for the host family. Such a gesture, while appropriate, had never occurred to him. Alone in his room after a pleasant Christmas Eve meal, he found himself in a sort of emotional turmoil as the snow dusted softly down upon the expansive grounds. He woke early the next morning, tip-toed down the long carpeted staircase and made his way to the decorated Christmas tree with parcels piled underneath the branches. One by one, he lifted the gifts and inspected the labels. “To Tommy from Charles.” He stared at the ticket-like strip of paper, then took his pen and added his own name. Likewise, with the next: “To dear Uncle Howard from Lillian.”

The story is not a new one, but it is a place to start. A gift has been given the human race — a gift we did not purchase. All we can do (we who have received the gift) is to add our own name to the label. Salvation is God’s incomparable gift. The price has already been paid, but we can pass it along to any and all willing recipients. In Asbury language, we affirm the superabundant, free grace of God and the universal scope of the atonement: “free salvation for all men, full salvation from all sin.”

Two recent publications accent the nature of our gift and task. In the first, Gregory S. Clapper (As If the Heart Mattered) has nicely rehabilitated Wesley’s metaphor of the house of sanctity: the porch of repentance, the door of faith, and the rooms of holiness. Then, William Abraham in The Logic of Evangelism has
argued persuasively that the task of the Wesleyan world is to "rebuild the porch" (106).

Asbury College is committed to the belief that the natural home of the liberal arts is Christian Faith. Chapel, for example, is part of the Asbury educational experience, seamlessly assimilated to the general education curriculum. John Zmirak has said that "you can tell what an institution thinks is important by what it makes mandatory" (vii).

John Wesley Hughes conceived of the college as a "sky-blue salvation school." Allegiance to the founder's vision is not our primary duty — though faithfulness to our founding charter is a serious matter. As Scrooge says in speaking of the three spirit-visitors in Dickens' A Christmas Carol: "I will not shut out what they strove to teach." No, our primary loyalty must be to preach and affirm the whole Gospel and not the half-gospel of contemporary evangelicalism — not because we can quote the Founder's statements from memory but because we possess the Creator's own supernatural love flowing in our hearts, because, in short, we can't do otherwise.

Liberal education may prepare the citizen for leadership, develop communication skills, convey a body of knowledge, initiate students into a moral tradition, foster critical thinking. Classical authors on the liberal arts stress that every natural truth has a certain saving power. Here, perhaps, the liberal arts in their secular shape reach a limit. For all the lofty rhetoric about "the whole person," naturalistic academic philosophies leave out those transcendent dimensions of personhood addressed by special revelation. The "saving power" of natural truth (even when conceived as natural revelation) is limited to the worlds of nature and creature. And the God to whom natural philosophies point may after all be the Father of Christian worship but too often He is
conceived in a contracted way as the conclusion to an argument or the absentee Creator of rationalistic deism.

The college is aggressively, unapologetically evangelistic, even revivalistic — in the best sense, we hope. Wallace Stegner has said that growing up is like hitchhiking; every person makes it out of childhood because he has been given a lift. How tragic, then, if we only take students halfway home. How tragic, also, if an education designed to be “liberating” leaves students lost in guilt, tangled in syndromes of carnal desire, held fast in bondage to “sin’s dark sway.” Asbury students know that this is the mission of every believer in these last days. The gift already given must be received . . . and passed along.

IV. Holiness

When I was an adolescent, my pastor-father would often repair our second-hand automobiles on the sideyard or driveway of the parsonage. On such occasions, I would be drafted to hold the light, usually a 60-watt bulb on an extension cord repaired at intervals with friction tape. I remember that frayed, rope-like wire drooping limply from the propped hood of an old Chevy and disappearing mysteriously into an open cellar window. The late autumn day would darken and the stars blink down from a frozen sky. I would stand shivering in a windbreaker while my father worked wordlessly, every now and then asking if I was all right or needed to use the bathroom. I remember, too, the narrow gravel drive extending to the base of a hill whose sharp rise ended at a garden plateau; there the dry stalks of Ingersoll’s cornfield formed a sort of crazy fence-line at the horizon. Occasionally, my mother or sister would come to the living room window and part the curtains. I would smile or wave in an offhand, grownup sort of way,
but I wasn’t fooling anybody. They knew I was not “helping” my
dad fix the Chevy. This was not an equal partnership, the jovial
teamwork of coworkers or fellow mechanics on the job. I simply
held the light while he did the work. Every now and then, I would
see his greasy hand or the end of a wrench flicker up from beneath
a tangle of wires and hoses like a fish leaping from a reedy stream,
then flipping over for the dive back down to the depths; in a sec­
ond, the hand or wrench — whatever it was — would be gone,
and I would be alone again in the chill and quiet. Down under the
vehicle where I couldn’t see, something was being assembled or
replaced or rebuilt. To this day, what happened down there might
have been happening on the bottom of the sea. With all the hours
of enforced lamp duty for countless second-hand vehicles, I never
learned a thing. What might have proved a crash course in auto
mechanics was lost on me. And I only became a little better at
holding the light. How God saves souls is a divine mystery. We
can’t do his work for him. Our job and our privilege is to hold the
light.

Any person who responds to the call of God in Christ sus­
pects from the very beginning that the claims of the Gospel are
total. The liberal arts may call a student out of herself to a world
of art and literature and science and history, but the Holy Spirit,
the third person of the blessed Trinity, is even now calling stu­
dents out of themselves to a life of perfect love through the blood
of the cross.

Beneath the cultured individuality of the gentleman, the
sage, the artist, the philosopher-king, the citizen, resides the unre­
peatable, incommunicable selfhood of the person. John Crosby
says that people do not come in duplicate or triplicate. In describ­
ing the scholar Philip Rahv, Mary McCarthy says, “he was less
like anybody else than anybody” (341). The unique inner self of
every student (to use the language of another century) is both “deprived” and “depraved.” The creeds testify that all men are “very far gone” in sin since the Fall. Even the regenerate, says Wesley, find “mountains of ungodliness” within themselves. The disciples were the best men the Gospel could produce. But they needed to “tarry” in Jerusalem. They needed a purity of heart and a power from on high. They needed the “Promise of the Father” as communicated by the incarnate, resurrected, ascended and glorified Son.

A. B. Simpson used to say that just as God rested when his work was done, so persons must cease from their own works so that God can communicate to them his own rest. God’s rest came when His work was over. Likewise, our rest will come when we cease the attempt to force our will on God or to sanctify ourselves. He never intended any person to solve the problem of his own heart. Only He can make us wholly His. No amount of self-culture or self-reform can take the darkness away. Not cultivation but crucifixion is the divine plan to expel “the old man” from his stronghold at the bottom of human hearts. What may be long overdue can never be too late. At the end of the day, Asbury was raised to keep alive the message: Jesus, Jesus alone, Jesus only is the answer to which the predicament of students is the question. We defend the “secondness” of the Wesleyan order of salvation because it is the more excellent way. Our task is to stay forever true to our raison d’etre. God’s promise is that he will keep us in his love and prosper our work in his name for as long as we will honor the “glad tidings of great joy” uttered for the first time on a night long ago. The same night a star stood still over a stable where a newborn Child was sleeping.
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**Dr. John Paul Vincent** has served in the English Department of Asbury College since 1976. He holds the BA (Roberts Wesleyan College, English and Philosophy, 1969), MA (State University College at Buffalo, English, 1971), and Ph. D (Syracuse University, American Literature, 1979). He regularly teaches courses in the Literature core, the American Literature courses, as well as Topical Seminars (Detective Fiction, Spiritual Crisis in Contemporary Literature, The Small Town in American Literature, Fathers and Sons in World Literature). He has published several articles, is currently at work on a study of the "rest of faith" in Christian experience and serves as the Gardner Endowed Professor for the Promotion of Holiness at Asbury College. He and his wife, Anne (RWC, 1969), have one son, Jonathan (Asbury, 1995).