

Heavy lifting: Reading theology

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [September 18, 2007](#) issue

A few years ago one of my adult children picked up a book of theology I was reading, leafed through a few pages, then asked, “Dad, why are you still reading this stuff?” Good question. There are many reasons why I read this stuff: Because I need to read in order to preach. Because, as Anselm put it, faith seeks understanding, and I don’t understand it all yet. Because I’m engaged in a vocation that Walter Brueggemann described recently as “the complex web of activities that we may call biblical scholarship, or academic research, or ministry of proclamation, or the reflective Christian life.” Because I remember theologian Joe Sittler being disappointed when he visited the study of a former student and noted that the books of theology on the shelf were untouched while the pastor’s desk was piled high with plumbers’ bills and floor-tile catalogs. And because I love to read.

I chose three scholarly works this year. William Placher’s *The Triune God: An Essay in Postliberal Theology* was the intellectual equivalent of a full-body workout—challenging, tough, exhilarating. Ranging from Aristotle, Locke and Aquinas to Barth, Moltmann and his beloved Hans Urs von Balthasar, Placher presents an accessible survey of theology, always returning to his theme that the purpose of all trinitarian thinking and writing is to approach the mystery of God with caution and reverence.

Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church is Walter Brueggemann—theologian, preacher, pastor and social/political/economic analyst—at his best. A chapter titled “You Cannot Fool Your *Nephesh*,” originally presented at a retreat for pastors, is for everyone who is caught up in our busy, frenzied, consumerist lifestyle.

Garry Wills’s *What Paul Meant* is delightfully provocative, full of straight talk about Paul and how we misinterpret him by assuming that he misinterprets Jesus. Wills reminds us that Paul, even though he never saw Jesus in the flesh, was closer to him than the Gospel writers by 25 to 50 years and that his own account of his conversion is quite different from that in Acts and also much closer to the experience itself.

Wills advances Krister Stendahl's argument that Luke omits material, misinterprets facts and rearranges the Pauline story for purposes of his own, mainly to cozy up to the Roman Empire. What Paul actually did and said is available only by careful reading of the authentic letters.

Wills suggests that Paul would have called the Damascus Road experience a summoning, not a conversion. In a concluding glossary Wills explains that he avoids using words Paul could not possibly have used—*Christian, church, preach* and *faith*, for instance.

From reading in another vein I recommend the best baseball book of the year: *Crazy '08*, by Cait Murphy. It is an affectionate and meticulously researched account of the 1908 baseball season, the last time the Chicago Cubs won the World Series. It was the era of Christy Mathewson and John McGraw of the rival Giants, the Pirates' Honus Wagner and the Cubs' Tinker, Evers and Chance—the trio who made a great double-play combination but didn't like each other—and "Three Finger" Brown. I learned that "box seats" were named for the boxes that fans used to stand on behind the outfield rope, that hot dogs were introduced at baseball parks in 1908, and that large electronic scoreboards transmitted news by blinking lights for fans who gathered in the streets before the age of radio (one such scoreboard was installed on the stage of Chicago's Orchestra Hall).