

To see and not to see: Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21

Paul refuses to let God become just another novelty.

by [Scott Bader-Saye](#) in the [April 10, 2002](#) issue

About a year and a half ago my wife and I bought our first house. Before we moved in there was a lot to do: hang new curtains, paint, pull up old carpet, install new counter tops and purchase a microwave. Although we are now settled in, I have not been able to kick the habit of perusing the real estate pages of the Sunday paper. The color images of houses for sale catch my eye as I thumb through for the sports page, and before I know it I'm checking prices and comparing square footage. Our family is growing, I tell myself. More children require more space, and for just a little more money we could "trade up" and get a couple more bedrooms . . .

And so it is that just as we finish "remodeling" one home, my eyes are captured by images of the new, by the possibility and excitement that novelty promises. (Hmm, perhaps we'll need a new car soon—did someone say mini-van?) I feel a bit like those who would line up the pantheon of gods and then say, "Wouldn't it be nice to have just one more, over here in the corner, to complete the set?"

Novelty is alluring. The new always promises to surpass the old—and let's face it, there is always a thrill when we get that new computer or those new clothes. But the new quickly becomes old, and so novelty creates an inexhaustible desire. Our love of novelty can even take on the appearance of a search for truth, when in fact it is only a form of distraction. This seems to have been the case in first-century Athens. The verse leading up to the lectionary reading tells us that "all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21). So the crowd was drawn to the Areopagus to hear a "new teaching" about Jesus. The city was "full of idols"—each new god, each new philosophy added to the last, so that the streets (not unlike our own) offered a plethora of religious products ready for consumption. If one god failed you, or just bored you, there was always another.

While “deeply distressed” by all this, Paul nonetheless begins his proclamation not with judgment, but with the observation that the Athenians are “extremely religious.” Though one might read a bit of irony or even sarcasm here, Paul extends himself into the world of his audience—he even quotes their own poets and philosophers. Yet his message is not “apologetic” in any traditional sense. He does not seek to correlate his proclamation with anything they already know to be true. In fact, he takes as his point of departure their *lack* of knowledge, symbolized in the altar “to the unknown god.” He discovers an opening for proclamation not in some natural religious impulse, but in their willingness to confess that there are things they do not know, things they cannot see. Paul recognizes that their attraction to novelty goes hand in hand with the lure of visibility. The novel attracts us only insofar as it is easily grasped. If “seeing” a new truth requires time and training, the novelty inevitably wears off before truth is found. By proclaiming the invisible and the unknown, Paul refuses to let God become just another novelty, just another idol.

The contrast between seeing and not seeing, between God and idols, resonates with the reading from John’s Gospel. In his farewell discourse, Jesus tells the disciples that the world will not be able to see the Spirit nor will it see Jesus, but the disciples will see them both. “Seeing” God is made possible by obedience to the command of Christ. As we are transformed by the commandments we are made able to see God. John’s Gospel emphasizes that no one has seen God except for the Son who comes from God to make him known; so as we see the Son we see also the Father. But not all who simply see the Son with their eyes believe; indeed, some see him and hate him and so they do not see the Father. It’s about more than visibility. Jesus comes into the world “so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” Our expectations about visibility are reversed. Seeing God turns out to be more difficult than one might have thought, and in fact believing that one can see God (as did the Athenians) proves only that one is blind.

What is required to see God is to become obedient to Jesus’ commands. By this we show we love him and he reveals himself to us. Being trained to see things rightly involves a training in resistance to the glamour of novelty. It is here that the Athenians, with their love of all things new, fell short. The God of Israel refuses to be one God among many. Jesus and the Spirit refuse to be seen by those who will not obey.

St. Augustine tells us that in order to see truth, “The mind should be cleansed so that it is able to see that light and to cling to it once it is seen. Let us consider this

cleansing to be as a journey or a voyage home. But we do not come to Him who is everywhere present by moving from place to place, but by good endeavor and good habits." Such good endeavor is so easy and yet so difficult: we have his commandments, now let us keep them.