

Recently, I've begun to realize just how obsessed Americans are with controlling the things they see and hear and experience. We aren't simply content to be observers on anything. We must be part of the action.

You see it in political debates nowadays. Once upon a time, we were satisfied – even happy – to have a moderator come up with questions to ask the candidates. Now, the questions almost always come from the public. Sometimes even from their own mouths through Youtube videos and Skype chats. We must insert ourselves into the debate.

The same is true of movies. For years, movie studios have dictated what films would be made. But now we have Kickstarter campaigns, where people can fund a movie that hasn't even been shot yet, simply to be in control of the process.

Maybe most of all, it's true in television. We can't be happy with just watching someone sing or perform anymore, like we did in the days of Desi Arnaz and Lawrence Welk. No, we have to make a competition out of it where we, the viewers vote on who stays and who goes. We can't enjoy the program we're watching unless we're in control of what we see and hear.

And this need to control everything. To tailor every experience to exactly what we like and don't like, what we want and don't want, has begun to infect the church as well. All over the country, pastors let their parishioners dictate the message that they preach.

They do it through compliments and complaints. They do it through their dollars and support for the church. Sometimes they do it even more directly. There are many Christian churches where the very concept of a sermon has gone out the window. Instead, they have a time of discussion and group Bible study. Where the pastor serves more like a debate moderator or a TV host than a preacher and evangelist.

But, I suppose that begs the question: Is there anything wrong with that? Do we need to have pastors who stand in the pulpit lecturing to us week after week? While the rest of the congregation passively sits and listens to everything he says without comment or input? Is that really so important? After all, Jesus engages in an awful lot of discussion and debate in his ministry, much of it during his sermons.

We're currently right smack in the middle of quite a bit of in our lectionary right now. We heard it a couple weeks ago when the chief priests demanded to know by what authority Jesus was preaching. We hear it again in this discussion about paying taxes. And in the sections that follow this we hear it again, as the Pharisees ask Jesus to identify the greatest commandment, and then again when they ask him to describe the Christ. It seems nearly everyone who hears Jesus preach has to throw in his own two cents about what he thinks about it.

And yet, when we look at these "debates," they look a little lopsided, don't they. Jesus isn't really concerned with having a lengthy discussion with the chief priests or the Pharisees. Honestly, it looks an awful lot like his goal is to shut them up. Half the time he doesn't answer the question they actually asked. And he's always extremely brief and, really, looking to get out of the conversation as quickly as he can. Not because he can't debate them, but because... well... he just doesn't want to.

Jesus is in the last days of his life here on earth. In less than a week from this passage today, he will be crucified and buried. He doesn't have time for these games. And frankly, he has no reason to play them.

Because, the truth of the matter is that no matter how much we might want to debate God's Word, it's never going to change. God's Word is what it is, and you either accept it or reject it. There really isn't much middle ground.

Which is part of the reason why 99% of Lutheran pastors don't ask their congregations for comments and input during the sermon. There's no reason for it. Your opinion mid-sermon isn't going to change the Word of God that I need to preach to you that day.

But don't feel bad about it. I'm in the same boat. I once had a professor who told me something that basically boiled down to this: Always be creative with the delivery of your sermons. Never be creative with the theology of your sermons. Creative delivery makes for a good sermon. Creative theology makes for heresy.

No matter how much I might want to interject a bit of myself, of my own philosophy, of my own opinion, of my own commentary into a sermon, I'm not allowed to do that. That would be no different than me arguing with Jesus. So while you hear what I deliver and there is no two way street to it, I hear what God's Word delivers and there's no two way street to that either.

But honestly, it's always been like this. It was like this in time of ancient Israel too. Look at our Old Testament lesson. Here is the prophet Isaiah delivering a prophecy. A leader named Cyrus will be the Lord's instrument to do His will. To accomplish His plans. It's an amazingly clear, precise prophecy.

All the more so because it came true. Cyrus the Great, emperor of Persia, did subdue nations before him. He did accomplish God's will to free Judah from captivity. Some 160 years after Isaiah made this prophecy, every word of it came true.

But in the mean time, I can imagine what the people of Israel thought about it. Cyrus, a ruthless, pagan king, bent on absolute worldwide domination, is God's instrument? God's anointed king? Right up there with men of God like David and Solomon? Are you kidding? There's gotta be something wrong here. Can't we do something with this? Tweak it to something a little more... plausible. A little more palatable?

But no, God had everything under control. He knew what His Word had to be. There was no way to argue with it. There was no need to argue with it.

St Paul tells us in our Epistle that the Gospel comes not simply with words, but with power and a deep conviction and with the Holy Spirit himself working within it. And that when the Thessalonians began preaching the Lord's message, it rang out until everyone everywhere heard it.

No matter how much God's Word may confuse us or bother us. Challenge our preconceptions or run contrary to what we want it to say. No matter how much we may want to control it or argue with what it says, God's Word is not debatable.

If you try, it will shut you up, like it did to those Pharisees. If you question it, it will prove you wrong, like Isaiah's message did for Judah. But if you let it work, it will ring out with a message that will be heard everywhere.

And it is a message that needs to be heard everywhere. As St Paul tells us, a message of turning from the idols of this world to the true and living God. A message of waiting patiently for God's Son, who died on a cross but was raised to life on the third day. A message about Jesus Christ and the salvation He brings us from the coming wrath.

That is not a message that you can argue with. The Bible itself is not a message that you can argue with. Because it comes from one who is like no other. A God apart from whom there is no other. The Lord who forms light and creates darkness. Who brings both prosperity and disaster. The God we fear and the God we love. Who sent His Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

And really, would we want to argue with the message like that? It may not be very American to read God's Word and accept it at face value. Without any input or opinion of your own. Just as it may not be very American to sit and listen to a sermon without interrupting with your own response.

But I'm rather happy that it's not. In an age where everything is up for debate and my opinion is the center of the universe and I'm expected to control everything in the world around me, it's kinda nice to hear God tell me, *"I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God."* It's kinda nice to lose control, lose the debate, lose my own pride in the face of an all-powerful God. Especially when that one and only God sent His Son for my salvation. Amen.