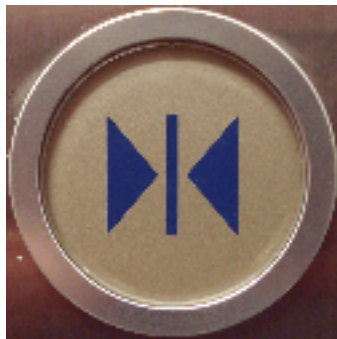




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Mission: Control



Next time you push some buttons, somebody may be pushing yours.


Years ago, the Wall Street Journal revealed a trend that has only escalated in recent times: many of the buttons we use to regulate what's going on around us simply don't work. They just fool us into feeling better by giving us the illusion of control.

Perhaps the best example is the "close door" button on elevators. That button doesn't function if the lift was installed after the early 90s when rules were passed to prevent the disabled from getting clipped by quickly closing doors. Today, the button is only there for firefighters and paramedics, and it only works with a key.

Another culprit is the crosswalk button that supposedly lets pedestrians activate a stoplight. The first of those devices was installed in 1964 but with the introduction of computerized traffic systems — which timed everything to the second — most of the old buttons were deactivated. It was too big a job to remove the buttons, so most municipalities left them in place. According to a new investigation, only one functioning crosswalk button could be found in several major American cities but pedestrians still press the deactivated ones because the light eventually changes, making them think they triggered it.

"Placebo buttons" are also found on dummy thermostats. To stop employees from costing companies money by constantly changing the temperature, many firms put up wall-mounted units that aren't connected to anything. Some even install a noise generator that makes a fan-like noise when the phoney thermostat is adjusted, completing the illusion. As early as 2003, a heating and refrigeration industry survey found that 72 per cent of participants had installed fake units.

Since employees assume adjustments they make actually do something, complaints about the workplace being too hot or cold stop



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even though nothing changes. In some leased buildings, even the corporate tenants don't know the thermostats are phoney.

Specific industries also use the ruse. When clients hover over the shoulder of sound engineers and video editors, the technicians often push a perfectly useless key on their consoles to "update" the project. The button does absolutely nothing but most clients convince themselves they see a slight improvement. And so it goes.

Even among Christians, the need to feel in control is strong. Many of us joke about being a "control freak" but all of us want to call the shots and command the outcome, at least on key issues. And through free will, God does give us incredible control over our options and decisions. But there are still some areas where we have no say.

As a pastor, I see this all the time. Despite all our knowledge and technology, people who desperately want to live, die. People who desperately want to die, live. Yet most of us spend our whole lives collecting whatever makes us feel safe, secure and in control, often at the expense of God who, in reality, is in charge of everything, whether we acknowledge it or not.

It's only when we're faced with serious illness, substantial loss or the death of someone we love that we see how very little control we really have, and how useless our substitutes for God are. Possessions, pride, position and prestige are little more than placebos. We can't put our trust in them and God at the same time.

"That's why I tell you not to worry about everyday life," says Jesus. "Isn't life more than food [and] clothing?... Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?... These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he'll give you everything you need." (Matt. 6:25, 27,32,33)

If we really believe that, we won't feel the need to pacify ourselves with illusions of being in charge. In other words, control is a trust issue. Once we truly believe God wants to take care of us, we'll let him, without hedging our bets. We'll be content to let him regulate the environment we find ourselves in, and get us where we need to go. Our Cross walk will be directed by his love and — in his timing — he'll determine, not only when the door of life will close, but whether we go up or down.

Rick Gamble