

Hey, have you ever been afflicted with PPP? That's the three letters: PPP. Truth be told, every one of us has, sometime or another, gone to a place that's not very healthy. Some will pay the ultimate price.

Wait, you say, just what in the world is PPP? Well, economists might say PPP stands for Purchasing Power Parity. Or some government officials would say PPP stands for Public-Private Partnership. The technologist would likely tag PPP as Point-to-Point Protocol. But few of us really deal very much with any of those PPPs.

So, just what is this affliction with that pesky PPP! What we're talking about here is a spiritual, intellectual affliction that has wasted more resources and done more damage than virtually any other condition. And that PPP is *Picking Portals Poorly!* Yes, that's right: *Picking Portals Poorly!* Laughable? Hardly. PPP delivers constant distractions, mediocrity, wrong conclusions, and often tragic failure...both in this world and beyond! No kidding! So, just what kind of portals are we talking about here? Let's cover several angles.

Let's start by saying it used to be that the word *portal* was not used very often in everyday language—that was back when portals pretty much were limited to meaning *doorways* or *entrances* to a building. You know, like a church architect would talk about the church's portal—the grand entrance with pillars!

But then the internet marched relentlessly into our lives—yes, a very good thing overall! So nowadays we use *digital* portals all the time: those are websites or web pages where we get some sort of access...yeah, often a link...to massive amounts of information. So, have you Googled something this past week? For sure, Google is a dominant portal in many peoples' lives. And, boy, is that portal powerful! Google pretty much singlehandedly changed the way much of digitally-connected humanity does search and research.

The problem is, digital portals are biased. Yes, a portal is a door to something else. And when you Google something, you experience the biases of the algorithms that Google's coders inherently designed. That means when you come knockin' on Google's door, you're naturally going to get the information that Google wants to steer you to. Kinda like when you go through a church's doors, the message you're going to get is what that particular church wants you to absorb. Fair enough, but you should know that going in.

Now, with Google, the direction taken is oftentimes very obvious because the results are labeled as *advertising* or *sponsored*. OK. But, still, the order in which the *other* results are presented is based upon the algorithms that Google has chosen. Now that bias doesn't *automatically* make Google wrong or bad in the search results it delivers—it's that anything built by human effort with judgment involved has the biases of the builder embedded in the results! Digital companies have now been around for a while, and a number of folks are pretty darn suspicious that there's a bunch of bias under the hood. Well, duh, because that's always been a core element of every portal, digital or not!

How about God's designated portals in a family—dad and mom? What are parents—if not their kids' primary portals—yeah, the “doors” appointed to regulate information in to their kids on a ready-to-know basis? Yes, parents are *supposed* to have biases, yes indeed, biases as directed by God! Great parents function with wisdom, yes, with good filters in virtually every conversation with young children. How about you, did you have parents who functioned as excellent portals to pretty much the right information?

As someone who's been teaching, discipling, and mentoring folks of various ages and backgrounds for decades, the Lord compels me to work to understand exactly what is to be accomplished in every conversation, every session—with special focus on the topic at hand, whether business, politics, spiritual development, or whatever. The teacher...the mentor...the discipler must always be calibrating as closely as possible to the message-receivers. This includes the background and life experiences of the receivers—for example a classroom full of 19-year-old university students is a wholly different door-and-filter delivery than speaking individually to a 60-something technology CEO.

Hey, you know this—a political touchpoint has recently detonated in America: just *who* gets to control door-and-filter issues for a six-year-old? Is it the child's parents or the child's first grade public-school teacher whose values are strongly opposed to those of the parents? Who gets the control? Portal wars.

Here's the big picture. Every website, news outlet, book, and expert—yes, every source you access functions as a portal with biases, linking you to *their* vision of data and information. So, is that filtered well or poorly? See, we live in a connected world with millions of possible sources, so each of us must always ask this question: are we diligently connecting to the top fraction of the top 1%—those few with great data and well-grounded biases that will hold up through tough circumstances and clear-eyed evaluation?

And don't think that churches, pastors, and theologians are exempt here! They also have biases! You do know, of course, that most church "experts" disagree with one another at least in some ways as to truths about this life or eternal destiny or both. Sometimes those disagreements are more than substantial, often truly huge in consequence. In the past, have you allowed pastors or theologians to wrongly act as a poor filter in your life? And...do you truly know the strengths and weaknesses of even the good ones that you look to for important counsel? Or are you pretty much casually following key authority figures? Overall, can you honestly say you *are not* or *have never been* afflicted with PPP— Picking Portals Poorly? *Honestly?* One thing's for sure: God's appointed task for us is to select our pastoral and church portals very wisely!

This is the key. God has positioned us with two ideal portals to do exactly that—yes, *the* doors to information and knowledge and wisdom. The first is the Bible. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (ESV) says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete equipped for every good work." Indeed, as part of His ministry, Jesus Himself quoted Scripture from the Old Testament a number of times—instances of that are recorded in the New Testament Scripture. Yes, the Bible is an unparalleled guide shared by all believers, an awesome portal to essential information and wisdom for life here and life eternal!

And, Jesus said this in John 14:25-26: "These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." Yes, the Holy Spirit will teach us *all* things, not just spiritual things! There we go: a *second* door to learning essentials! Indeed, both the Bible and the Holy Spirit are the ultimate—*the utterly reliable*—portals to information and wisdom and understanding!

Did you think I was too hard on some pastors and theologians a couple of minutes ago? True, many *are* teaching solid doctrine! So, be sure to honor your on-target pastor! But...there are many others who are off-base! Centuries ago, the Roman Catholic church prohibited Bibles from being published in everyday languages. Reformers and Restorationists objected to Roman Catholic practices largely forged by Rome's traditions taking key primacy over the Bible. Hey, no reason to downplay the depth of the rift: Catholics teach that Rome is the "one true church." Astute non-Catholics chuckle dryly. Yes, portals matter *deeply!*

Consider William Tyndale, who boldly translated the Bible into English so that all English-speakers could personally, meaningfully read the Bible. Tyndale was burned at the stake by the powers that be—*powerful human portals worked to keep people from reading the Bible!* But Tyndale's dying prayer was for the King's eyes to be opened, and soon King Henry himself authorized such a Bible using Tyndale's work! That's *wild*.

And we do well to remember that many church leaders over many centuries have often discounted and diminished the fullness of the Holy Spirit's role in the lives of believers. Of course, that path is exactly backwards: Christians are to test the accuracy of pastors and theologians against the Bible and the Spirit, *not* test the Bible and Spirit by the postures of pastors and theologians! Yes...pastors are appointed to be vital portals for believers—but they must line up with the Bible and the Spirit! Psalm 119:99 sets God's primacy: "I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation."

For sure, we live in a truly amazing era! Christians should expect to cultivate and enjoy the best portals. Sure, each of us has stumbled into at least a bit of PPP—picking portals poorly! But the path ahead is clear: first use both the Bible and the Spirit as the *two foundational portals* to discern how other portals are to be accessed and used. Hey, using portals is inevitable. But we must choose our portals-strategy well. Then, with the initiating guidance of the Bible and the Spirit, we can confidently expect a waterfall of benefits!

A&A: Application & Action

1. As a believer, have you found that you can better use portals like Google or books or websites if you are continuously steeped in Bible study and communion with the Holy Spirit? If this is not your experience, do you believe it is possible? Explain.
2. Pastors, like every person who has walked the face of the earth except Jesus, sometimes get certain things wrong. How do you distinguish between (a) the need to reject and depart from an off-track pastor who doesn't get key essentials of the Bible correct and (b) avoiding a critical spirit when your pastor is fallible on a few points but usually gets the essentials correct? Be specific.
3. Beyond the Bible and the Holy Spirit, what are your top five portals that you use, ranked in order of importance to you in your integrated (workplace and personal) life as a Christian? Give reasons both for the selection of each portal itself and its relative ranking on your list.