

2nd Opinion: The 20-Year Rule

March 29, 2016

A school of thought running rampant in congregations these days sounds something like this: “This is the worst pastor/group/recession/president/situation/era/event we have ever known! We must get rid of him/her/it/them immediately, or we are doomed.” As a result, we hear regularly about congregations and clergy who make hasty and ill-informed decisions that actually extend and expand their problems rather than resolve them.



Bill Wilson Let’s think for a moment about what we are saying in the midst of difficult days.

Something bad happens at our church or with a minister, and we react by saying: “*This is awful.*” Right so far.

We then go on to say: “*This is the worst thing that has ever happened to us.*” Could be, although we tend to under- and over-remember such things. A therapist friend of mine calls this our tendency to “awfulize” everything.

We close by saying: “*We are doomed.*” Whoa. We just went from being God’s people walking by faith to being fatalists. This is a huge leap into despair.

Another way ...

Let me suggest another way of thinking about difficult days that is at once more biblical, more hopeful and more likely to be true.

In the city where I last pastored, the local high school football team had a remarkable record of success. The Dalton Catamounts have amassed a winning record for nearly 60 consecutive seasons. That is almost unprecedented in high school athletics. Over many of those years, Bill Chappell was the head coach.

Now retired, Bill is a humble, intense and thoughtful man. He is a person of strong character and integrity and is beloved by nearly everyone in the state of Georgia.

One day, at an obligatory preseason dinner appearance before local fans who are way too invested in high school football, Bill was asked, "What kind of team are we going to have this year, Coach?"

He thought for a moment and replied: "Ask me in 20 years."

Thinking the coach had not understood the question, the fan asked his question again, with more passion.

Bill calmly responded with the same words: "Ask me in 20 years."

Exasperated, the fan raised his voice and asked more ardently, "Coach, what is the team going to be like this year?!"

Bill responded: "Look, I know what you are asking, but what you are asking is the wrong question. We'll have a fair football team, but we won't really know what kind of team this is until 20 years have passed. You see, we are about building character in young men, and we won't know how that turns out for at least 20 years."

"Ask me in 20 years."

I've adopted the 20-Year Rule for working with churches and clergy. I urge you to do the same. When someone looks at a painful situation in your congregation and asks you if you think all is lost, just respond by saying: "I don't know. Ask me in 20 years." When someone declares, "This is the worst thing that could ever happen to us," simply reply, "Perhaps, but let's see what happens over the next 20 years."

It's biblical. Think about all the characters who, had you asked at the moment, would have failed the success test. Moses, as he runs from Egypt with blood on his hands into the back side of Midian. David, as he sends Uriah into the heat of battle. Peter, as he denies knowing who Jesus is. Saul, as he executes innocent believers. Think about all the churches across the ages brought to their knees by scandal or sin or foolishness and seemed on the verge of closing.

In every case, what looked like a disastrous outcome was transformed by God's grace and unfailing love.

The 20-Year Rule says biblical faith and faithfulness comprise more of an endurance contest than a quick victory. Some of God's finest servants have failed him most. They have had to navigate personal failure, deep heartache and devastating loss. Some of the most remarkable congregations I know have endured trials and tribulations that seemed overwhelming in the moment. By remaining faithful over time, what they have found on the other side of despair is hope. It is the message of Easter brought to life every day of every year.

The good news is that God's people can recover from mistakes and life can regenerate, even when it all seems lost. That is the gospel story we want to personify to a world wondering if, indeed, this is a time to give up on the future.

Bill Wilson is director of the [Center for Healthy Churches](#).