

Crucibles of Christian Leadership: An exploration of Bennis' and Thomas' 'crucible' concept as it relates to Christian leaders.

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The Making of a Leader

Of the making of books on leadership, it seems that there is no end. While the study of leadership is ancient (and complex), interest in the subject has surged in recent decades: Banks and Ledbetter² have suggested that 'there is arguably a broader and more systematic interest in the topic today than at any time in the past'.

Among the myriad questions surrounding the topic of leadership is the old chestnut of whether they are born or made. For Warren Bennis,³ the idea that leaders are simply born is 'the most dangerous leadership myth'; leaders become leaders by learning through life and experience. However others are keen to point out that leaders are not like other people⁴ and that to succeed, leaders need to have the 'right stuff', something that is not equally present in all people. Indeed studies of twins appear to indicate that some 30% of the variance in leadership role occupancy is associated with heritability.⁵ Even if this genetic component is no more than a *predisposition* to leadership, it appears that 'leadership is at least partially born into leaders'.⁶

How this predisposition interacts with the emerging leader's environment is significant. Part of the environmental component consists of various experiences

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² Robert Banks and Bernice Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership (Engaging Culture): A Christian Evaluation of Current Approaches* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), Kindle ed. p.loc.126.

³ Warren Bennis, *Managing People is like Herding Cats: Warren Bennis on Leadership* (Provo: Executive Excellence, 1999), p.163.

⁴ David L. Cawthon, 'Leadership: The Great Man Theory Revisited,' *Business Horizons* (May/June 1996), 1-4.

⁵ Richard D. Arvey, Maria Rotundo, Wendy Johnson, Zhen Zhang, Matt McGue 'The Determinants of Leadership Role Occupancy: Genetic and Personality Factors,' *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17 (2006), 1-20.

⁶ Bruce Avolio and Fred Luthans, *The High Impact Leader: Moments Matter in Accelerating Authentic Leadership Development* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), p.56.

Crucibles of Christian Leadership

which have been analysed and described in the literature using a range of terms. Badaracco wrote about ‘defining moments’, whose key elements consisted in revealing, testing and shaping;⁷ Olivares⁸ described ‘momentous events’ - ‘novel, vivid, emotional episodes that disrupt the continuity of daily life’; Horowitz and Van Eeden⁹ chose the term ‘catalytic moments’: a catalytic experience leads to a re-examination of the self-concept and a questioning of perceptions of reality that had been held previously.

The term used in the current research is *crucible* and is drawn from the work of Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas in their book *Geeks and Geezers*.¹⁰ They coined the term in what began as a study of how era influences leadership. In the study, Bennis and Thomas interviewed two groups of leaders: one younger (the ‘Geeks’ of the digital era), and one older (the ‘Geezers’ of the analogue era). Several era-based distinctions were observed, but Bennis and Thomas observed that ‘every leader in [their] study, young or old, had undergone at least one intense transformational experience’.¹¹ A crucible.

They came to define a crucible as ‘an event or experience that tests and transforms a person’,¹² or ‘a transformative experience from which a person extracts his or her “gold”: a new or altered sense of identity’.¹³ The crucibles were varied, and although the term suggests harshness, and some of the experiences described were harsh, Bennis and Thomas suggested that ‘the crucible need not be a horrendous ordeal’.¹⁴

The term, as they saw it, was sufficiently flexible to encompass a range of different individual experiences. It should be noted however, that if the term becomes too elastic, it starts to lose some of its meaning.

⁷ Joseph Badaracco, *Defining Moments: When Managers Must Choose between Right and Right* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1977), p.57.

⁸ Orlando Olivares, ‘The Formative Capacity of Momentous Events and Leadership Development,’ *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, 32 (2011), 837-853

⁹ Daphna Horowitz and Rene Van Eeden, ‘Exploring the Learnings Derived from Catalytic Experiences in a Leadership Context,’ *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskryf vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur*, 13 (2015).

¹⁰ Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas, *Geeks and Geezers* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002). The book was later revised and updated and given a new title, *Leading for a Lifetime*.

¹¹ Bennis and Thomas, p.14.

¹² Warren Bennis, *Still Surprised: A Memoir of Life in Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), p.199.

¹³ Robert Thomas, *Crucibles of Leadership: How to Learn from Experience to be a Great Leader* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008), p.5.

¹⁴ Bennis and Thomas, p.15.

Thomas's further work¹⁵ on the theme led him to describe three types of crucible. The first, 'new territory', often relates to the early stage of a career and involves facing the new and unknown; the second type, 'reversal' is more often located in the middle of a career and may involve loss or failure; while the third, 'suspension' often happens towards the end of a career. Each of the three types confronts the leader with particular challenges; all test the leader's resilience and what Bennis and Thomas came to describe as 'adaptive capacity'.¹⁶

The aim of this current research was to explore the significance of crucible experiences in the specific context of the development of a Christian leader.

Methodology

Given that aim of the research was to explore the significance of crucible experiences rather than attempt to measure their frequency, a qualitative approach, with its emphasis on 'description, interpretation and understanding'¹⁷ was chosen. Such an approach is predicated on the value of people's stories and stories' validity as a source of knowledge. None of which is to say that qualitative research should be thought of as nothing more sophisticated than listening to stories!¹⁸

The most appropriate qualitative approach was that of hermeneutic phenomenology,¹⁹ with its emphasis on the interpretation of experience. Smith et al. suggest that the researcher is in fact engaged in a double hermeneutic²⁰ as not only is the participant attempting to interpret her experience, but the analyst is also attempting to interpret the participant's interpretation.²¹ Thus, far from being an impartial, objective observer, the researcher is implicated in the construction of the themes that emerge from the research. Drawing on Gadamer, Swinton and Mowat argue that these emerging themes 'are a constructive

¹⁵ *Crucibles of Leadership*.

¹⁶ Bennis and Thomas, p.91. Adaptive capacity includes the ability to understand context and the ability both to recognise and seize opportunity. It is 'the defining competence of everyone who retains his or her ability to live well despite life's inevitable challenges and losses' (p.91).

¹⁷ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006) Kindle ed. p.loc.943.

¹⁸ See the discussion of story-telling as science in Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006), pp.8-9.

¹⁹ Swinton and Mowat, p.loc.943.

²⁰ Jonathan Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*, (London: Sage, 2009), p.3.

²¹ In reality a triple hermeneutic is at work when the reader in turn attempts to make sense of the researcher's sense-making (see Smith, p.109).

product of the fusion of the researcher's horizons with those of the participants [...]' ²².

Interviewing is arguably the most suitable approach in the quest for information that goes beyond the merely factual; as Sensing²³ has noted, interviews allow access to a participant's inner life in a way that other methods cannot. I chose to carry out a series of semi-structured interviews with a total of fourteen participants.

The participants were selected across the evangelical spectrum, including, but not restricted to Baptists. Fourteen leaders agreed to take part in the research. All but three of them are based in Ireland,²⁴ which meant that most of the interviews were carried out face to face. All but two of the participants were male, not entirely surprising given the conservative nature of much of the evangelical world in Northern Ireland; the average age was 61, with the youngest in his early forties and the oldest in his mid-seventies. Most of the leaders had been involved in local church leadership, although some had also served in wider, denominational roles, and some were involved in the leadership of parachurch organisations. Each participant was asked to affirm the Evangelical Alliance Statement of Faith and sign a form indicating his or her consent to be interviewed.

The interviews were semi-structured one on one interviews that lasted, for the most part, between two and a half and three hours. The aim of the interviews was to have the participants outline their leadership journey and discuss in more detail some of the most formative influences and experiences.

Each interview was recorded and later transcribed. A copy of the transcription was sent to each participant, allowing them to review what had been recorded for accuracy: an important step in establishing the validity of the data.

Clearly the approach to issues of reliability and validity among qualitative researchers differs from that adopted by those in quantitative fields: rigour is perhaps better defined in terms of trustworthiness, which comprises credibility, auditability and fittingness.²⁵ In addition, it can be difficult to speak of generalizability given what are often small sample sizes and the ideographic

²² Swinton and Mowat, p.loc.2146.

²³ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011), p.103.

²⁴ One was in England and the other two were in North America. These were interviewed using Skype/Facetime.

²⁵ Swinton and Mowat, p.loc.1985.

nature of the material. Swinton and Mowat have suggested that it is more appropriate to think in terms of identification and resonance:²⁶ the qualitative researcher must therefore aim to provide a rich description without which resonance is difficult to attain.

It should also be noted that complete accuracy of recall cannot be guaranteed: the passage of time and the participant's own implication in the events described mean that memories may be both incomplete and slanted. However this limitation is mitigated in that the impact of the experiences described has been determined by the meaning the leader attributes to them.

Findings

The data were read and re-read and subjected to two types of analysis. MAXQDA™ software was used to produce a detailed set of codes. Just over 200 distinct codes were identified, with forty nine of them occurring in five or more interviews. Among the most frequent were 'calling', marriage/family, God speaking, and prayer.

I chose to borrow from Robert Thomas' three-part classification of crucible experiences: new territory, reversals and suspension; however I preferred to use the term 'isolation' for the third category.²⁷

New Territory

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the evangelical backgrounds of the participants, several discussed their experience of conversion.²⁸ Where conversion takes the form of a dramatic transformational experience, it may be classified as a crucible of sorts, launching the convert into a new life. For a number of leaders their conversion had indeed been a dramatic experience. One spoke of becoming 'a different person'; another said that his conversion (as a twelve year old) had been 'utterly, completely and totally life-changing'.

Not everyone had experienced instant, total transformation, however. One leader described what was basically a two-stage conversion. The first stage had taken place in the setting of a Billy Graham-style mission which left this leader 'on the right side of the track', 'over the line'. However it was only after several

²⁶ Ibid., p.loc.955-6.

²⁷ It had been suggested to me that 'suspension' carried unwelcome disciplinary tones, like a school suspending an unruly student!

²⁸ Note Bebbington's evaluation of 'conversionism' as one of the four defining marks of British evangelicalism: the others are activism, Biblicism, and crucicentrism. See David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, (London: Routledge, 1989).

years of drifting that he experienced what he believes to have been his real conversion, which led to a significant reordering of priorities and direction.

Given the way that a conversion experience could lead to a significant life reorientation, it is hardly surprising that, for some leaders, the experience of conversion contained within it the seeds of a calling to ministry and leadership. One leader expressed it in these terms;

If I were to be really honest, I never was aware of any dramatic call to ordination; but I had a very dramatic conversion. So my conversion and my call are very closely interlinked [...] I think, maybe, there was more of a call to ministry involved in that than I was actually aware of at the time.

In itself, the experience of entering into leadership may also be a form of crucible. One leader described how her first experience of vocational leadership had not been ‘the bucket of roses that maybe I’d hoped it would be’. Others experienced baptisms of fire or steep learning curves as they learned to lead.

Some leaders appear always to have been comfortable with the idea of leadership and have taken to it naturally and with relative ease. For others, it has been more a case of leadership seeking them out rather than them seeking to lead. Interestingly, not all reluctant leaders were put off by leadership *per se*; it was rather the idea of being considered as a leader. One leader described his resistance to being recognised as a leader and how his resistance was finally broken in a ‘watershed moment’ as he listened to a speaker at a leadership conference describing his reluctance in remarkably accurate terms.²⁹ The result was a phone call to his wife with the words, ‘I think I have finally grasped the reason I was born’.

Once involved in leadership, several leaders discovered themselves at the foot of a steep learning curve, having to ‘muddle through’ or learn by doing. At times leadership involved moving into ‘virgin territory’ where the leader was forced to carve things out for herself.

One leader talked about the way he is energised by problems: ‘I’m one of those people who’s always liked a challenge’. He recalled a talk by Bill Hybels³⁰ in which he described the ‘Popeye Factor’. This is when the leader reaches a point where, like Popeye³¹, facing the threat of Bluto, he ‘can’t stand it no more’

²⁹ While he was always happy to lead, it was the word ‘leader’ that put him off. Unfortunately he had observed poor examples among people who had influenced him.

³⁰ Founding pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois. He and his church continue to be significant influencers of church leaders via their annual Global Leadership Summit.

³¹ The somewhat spindly (until he consumed a can of spinach!) cartoon character who found his affection for Olive Oyl threatened by the villain, Bluto.

and has to take action. Sometimes it is dissatisfaction at the status quo that moves a leader to action.

With an average age of sixty-one, many of the leaders in the research had lived through a number of notable cultural and theological paradigm shifts. These shifts involved issues as the changing role of women in the Church, the understanding and expectation of the world of the Holy Spirit, changing models of church and issues that were specific to the Irish context during some of the years of the Troubles. Paradigm shifts take leaders out of previous comfort zones, place leaders in new territory and often call for courage in leading.

Reversals

A second major type of crucible was ‘reversals’; leaders inevitably face challenges and setbacks. Some challenges are intensely personal and others are more specifically leadership-related. It is not always easy to distinguish between a personal crisis and a leadership crisis as the sources and implications of the crisis may be both personal and professional.

Among personal crises discussed in the interviews were experiences of loss (more than one leader spoke of the relatively early loss of their father), family crises and seasons of spiritual crisis.

One leader referred to family issues in this way:

It is one thing coping with leadership challenges in the church, but there’s a totally different dynamic when it’s a challenge you’re facing in your own family or your marriage. It is of a different dimension altogether. I’ve often said to [my wife], you know I really feel it’s family is our Achilles heel.

One of the two women among the participants observed:

I think the times when I have been nearest to walking away from leadership have been family crisis [...] That impacts your ministry greatly because it’s all-consuming when it’s your family. In those years there was so much pain that I wondered was I being hypocritical in terms of leading, you know, should you just not stand down and stop?

Several forms of leadership setback were discussed. Some leaders described experiences of opposition and conflict. By its nature leadership is relational and for some leaders it is broken relationships that cause the greatest amount of pain.

At times it was having to deal with opposition or the experience of having their leadership challenged that led to leaders reaching a deeper level of awareness of God’s call or deeper levels in the experience of their relationship with him.

One leader, in the particularly Irish setting of the issue of whether his church should permit a demonstration by the Orange Order³² at a service, described his conflicts on the issue as ‘seminal’. While they were extremely hard times in which he found himself ‘thrown back on God on many occasions’, the conflicts contributed to the crystallising of his sense of calling and his leadership priorities. Such clarity may be regarded as the ‘gold’ he extracted from his crucible. A price had to be paid, but it is a price that this leader believes Christian leaders must be prepared to pay.

Other leaders experienced crucibles of disappointment and rejection: not every leadership assignment ends well and a leader can be left with regret. One of the female leaders described aspects of the gender crucible she experienced while leading in a male-dominated organisation: ‘It was horrendous, it was horrendous. You were treated like a piece of dirt under their foot.’

Isolation

Both Robert Clinton and Shelley Trebesch³³ have observed that almost all Christian leaders undergo some kind of isolation experience where they are removed, either voluntarily or involuntarily from their ministry setting. I chose to borrow their term for the third type of crucible.

The line between reversals and isolation experiences can be blurred, given that a prolonged setback or reversal can effectively lead to isolation.

A notable example of this was illness. One leader described her experience with ME during a year when ‘it felt like every bit of scaffolding was knocked away, every inch of it’. The ‘scaffolding’ consisted of her sense of call, her love of life and of ministry and that fact that, to some extent she was what she did. One might argue about the health or otherwise of this last element, but leaders find that what they do is integral to who they are.

She referred to her illness as a ‘dark night of the soul’; despite its difficulty, she has been able to trace some good:

I realise the only reason I can do what I do today is because God allowed me to go to the darkest place and in that darkest place revealed himself to me. And only in that dark place was he able to do a work in me that’s allowing me to be effective.

Another leader also spoke of a dark night of the soul, although he used the

³² The Orange Order is a Protestant society that draws its name from the Dutch King, William of Orange; it sees its mission as the defence of Protestantism. See, for example, Patrick Mitchel, *Evangelicalism and National Identity in Ulster*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³³ Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1988); Shelley Trebesch, *Isolation: A Place of Transformation in the Life of a Leader* (Altadena: Barnabas Publishers, 1997).

term slightly differently, describing a theological dark night of the soul. This was a crisis of faith, ‘almost like a theological wilderness’. The outcome was a greater grasp of God.

Moving on from a leadership role can bring its own kind of crucible. Moving on may be a result of transition when a degree of status that has gone with a previous position may have to be left behind, or it may be the crucible of retirement. The oldest of the leaders in the research described the abruptness of a retirement that had meant moving away from a congregation he had led for over twenty years. In addition he noted that he felt a bit ‘stranded’ and was unsure whether he was ‘finishing well’; ‘that is because I’ve become redundant and that’s been self-imposed’. Another retired leader spoke of the pain of retirement: ‘I suppose - and this is why retirement is quite painful sometimes - I just loved to be the minister of that church. I just loved those people; I loved the excitement of preaching.’

Discussion

Reporting the findings of the interviews has already begun to hint at some of the significance of crucible experiences. For some leaders, the experience of the crucible becomes part of their being shaped for future ministry, as in the ‘dark night of the soul’ episode mentioned above. More broadly, their significance may be summed up in a way that is perhaps unremarkable, but which nonetheless opens an opportunity for reflection: namely these experiences are significant in terms of their impact on who the leader is (the leader’s character and relationship with God) and in terms of their impact on what the leader does (calling).

Character

As McNeal has observed, leaders and their character are ‘shaped over time’.³⁴ The crucible, be it of illness or opposition, may serve to highlight character issues to which the leader needs to pay attention. One leader’s story illustrated the fact that unresolved character issues may be apparent even in the positive experience of ministry success, although there is a danger that such success may mask deeper issues.

God had given me quite extraordinary gifts as a preacher, as a minister, as a person who could relate to people, and, you know, comedian and the whole

³⁴ Reggie McNeal, *A Work of Heart: Understanding how God Shapes Spiritual Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), Kindle ed. p.6.

works. A package. I had these gifts but not the maturity, I had not the spiritual maturity. I didn't even think, now looking back, I had even the social, personal maturity even though that was not the impression that was being created. And therefore wilderness was necessary for me.

The point was that while his public ministry was flourishing, his family was quite dramatically threatening to fall apart.

There is wide agreement about the importance of a Christian leader's character and it should be noted that in both Old and New Testaments leaders were warned about character issues.³⁵ Nonetheless both biblical and empirical evidence suggest that we should not be surprised at leaders' shortcomings. Indeed success and failure apparently co-exist. Bill George³⁶ has observed that many leaders get derailed during the course of their leadership journey: not that they are necessarily bad leaders, but they get caught up in their success. Biblically, one thinks of the pride of Hezekiah and his eagerness to display his wealth to Jerusalem's future nemesis, Babylon.³⁷

There is much biblical evidence to suggest that a leadership journey will often feature tests of character. Both adversity and prosperity have the potential to reveal character issues that the leader will need to address.

Spirituality

A related aspect of a leader's life was the leader's relationship with God. Crucible experiences appeared to influence this in several ways, including the cultivation of a greater awareness of God's character, a deeper sense of being loved by God and a greater degree of trust in God.

A previous section made reference to one leader who had to navigate a 'theological draw night of the soul': the experience led him to see God in a new way.

For me this was a move from my theological adolescence, where my theology and my ability to articulate my theology was the most important thing, [to] where to see him as more wonderful than I could ever say [...] it was just so liberating.

Specifically, several leaders described significant experiences through which they became more personally aware of God's love. The most dramatic

³⁵ Old Testament kings were warned against the accumulation of many wives (who might turn them from God) and the accumulation of excessive wealth; discussion of the credentials of New Testament church leaders are heavily weighted in the direction of character issues rather than issues of skills or gifts.

³⁶ Bill George, *True North: Discover your Authentic Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), p.27.

³⁷ See 2 Kings 20.

story took place at a charismatic conference where one of the leaders had gone at a time of particularly difficulty during his ministry. He recalled what he perceived to be a remarkable encounter with God ('I was out of circulation for about forty-five minutes') in which he heard an audible voice and received an overwhelming assurance of God's love. 'If ever there was a life-changing thing that was it.'

Such an account raises obvious questions of validity and indeed theology.³⁸ It should be said that from the perspective of interpretive phenomenology, the experiences, and the meaning attached to them by the participants, are what they are. As Janson noted,³⁹ 'the impact of a formative experience on a leader depends more on the meaning the leader can make of it rather than on the experience itself'. Of course theologically one also finds oneself in the midst of a discussion on the validity of experience as a source of truth. Zoe Bennett⁴⁰ has noted the polarisation that exists between those who fear the tyranny of experience and those who fear the tyranny of the text. In the terms of Killen and DeBeer, theological reflection will seek to '[bring] experience into conversation with the wisdom of the Christian heritage'.⁴¹

What must not be overlooked in these discussions however, is that an important aspect of the function of crucible experiences appeared to be the leader's increased awareness of God's love. One thinks of Paul's prayer for his Ephesian readers to know the love of Christ, something that 'cannot be merely an intellectual exercise'.⁴² Perhaps there are times when the crucible functions as an accelerated learning opportunity, even a short-cut, to new spiritual awareness.

Similarly, some leaders spoke about their growing trust in God; the leadership journey had been a journey of learning to trust God more. One commented, 'God has inculcated into me something that is a gift of him and that is a capacity to know that he will not fail me and that I can trust him'. Clearly a leader's (or anyone's) faith may be both tested and strengthened through crucible experiences.

Christian leadership is arguably inseparable from ongoing Christian discipleship: it can be difficult to talk about a leadership journey as though it

³⁸ The particular experience referred to here sits in the context of the phenomenon of the Toronto Blessing, a phenomenon that caused considerable debate and controversy in the 1990s.

³⁹ Annick Janson, 'Extracting Leadership Knowledge from Formative Experiences,' *Leadership*, 4 (2008), 76.

⁴⁰ Zoe Bennett, *Using the Bible in Practical Theology: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives (Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology)* (Abington: Routledge, 2015), p.134.

⁴¹ Killen and DeBeer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad, 2007), p.127.

⁴² Donald A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation* (Leicester: IVP, 1992), p.191.

were separate from the rest of life. Such a view is not unique to Christian leadership: Warren Bennis observed that ‘for the leader, as for any integrated person, life itself is the career’⁴³ In Christian terms, the leader remains a follower. One leader observed that even though leaders are called to be shepherds, ‘one of the big mistakes some of us make as leaders is we’ve forgotten we are still sheep’. Sometimes it is a crucible experience that serves to remind the leader of this; the cumulative effect of a lifetime of crucible experiences can shape a leader’s expectations of what it means to follow God.

Calling

Guinness⁴⁴ has sought to distinguish between an ordinary calling, by which he means that ‘no follower of Christ is without a calling’, since all are called to follow God, and a later ‘special’ calling by which he is referring to ‘those tasks and missions laid on individuals through a direct, specific, supernatural communication from God’. All of the leaders in the research made reference to some kind of special calling, or the way they believe they have been led into specific leadership situations.

At times the call itself can be a form of crucible experience. I have already commented on the possibility that a conversion experience may contain the seeds of calling, but there are also times when a leader senses a specific challenge to accept a leadership role. For example, more than one leader recalled formative moments as they listened to speakers at large gatherings.

Beyond this, the crucible was sometimes associated with the testing of the call. This appeared to work in two ways: a crucible experience may test the depth of reality of the call, but a strong sense of call may be part of what enables a leader to persevere through a crucible experience. One leader observed that she could not have persevered in her role in the face of opposition, had she not been ‘absolutely rock solid about the call.’

Many evangelicals subscribe to a particular view of calling and - in a wider sense - the experience of being guided by God. The view is predicated on the idea that there are three aspects to the will of God. His sovereign will is his plan for the wilderness, his moral will is his revealed will for the lives of his followers and is made known in the Bible, while his individual will is his life plan for each individual. This view has been challenged by Gary Friesen⁴⁵ who advocates for what he calls ‘the way of wisdom’.

⁴³ Warren Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (London: Arrow Books, 1989), p.4.

⁴⁴ Os Guinness, *The Call* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003). p.48.

⁴⁵ Gary Friesen, *Decision-Making and the Will of God* (Portland: Multnomah, 1980)

At least some of the traditional view appears to rest on dubious exegetical foundations. The ‘peace of Christ’ (Colossians 3.15) is more likely to refer to corporate harmony within a church than to a sense of psychological wellbeing. Yet it is not uncommon to hear people to describe a form of decision-making which valued a sense of inner peace about the decision. Nor is it clear that the call narratives of Isaiah or Saul/Paul were intended as normative templates, or that the Spirit’s interventions in Acts are any more than occasional, strategic interventions.

Nonetheless, the experience of several of the leaders in the research appeared to validate the subjective nature of their call. And there was evidence to suggest, *contra* Friesen, who contended that a sense of call ‘which was dubious scripturally and is highly subjective at best, lacks sufficient weight to function as the ultimate anchor in the heavy seas of ministry’,⁴⁶ that in fact it can be a subjective encounter with Scripture that adds ballast to a leader. The longevity and apparent success of many of the participants’ leadership makes it difficult to discount their experience.

Perhaps a counter to the potential for excessive individualism that can be encouraged by a traditional evangelical view of the call is the suggestion, made by two senior leaders in the research, that there needs to be a greater role for the church in seeking to discern an individual’s call. One thinks of Parker Palmer’s rather amusing tale of his experience with a Quaker ‘clearness community’.⁴⁷

‘Existential intensity’

One final result of crucibles is what one of the participants referred to as ‘existential intensity’. At times a painful crucible experience results in a leader needing to draw a line in the sand in terms of a defining mark of his leadership and at times that defining mark may be a familiar idea that has taken on an ‘existential intensity’ because of the pain of the crucible.

In the example mentioned earlier of the church leader who was opposed by the Orange Order, it was the crucible of conflict that helped determine the extent to which his understanding of the gospel would define his leadership. Another leader reflected on how his experience of what he perceived to be harsh and abusive treatment at the hands of a church had given an ‘existential intensity’ to the view that the church should be a living proof of the gospel:⁴⁸ ‘If you have gospel doctrine on paper but you don’t have gospel culture in relationships, you

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.320.

⁴⁷ Palmer gives an entertaining account of how his aspiration to be a College President was shot down by the ‘clearness committee’. See Parker Palmer, *Let your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).

⁴⁸ He had been significantly influenced by the work of Francis Schaeffer on this theme.

don't really have gospel doctrine.' He now sees his primary leadership responsibility as safeguarding such an ethos within the church he now leads. He believes he would not be the pastor he is today, had he not encountered the pain of his crucible.

Conclusion

As noted earlier in this paper, Bennis and Thomas acknowledged the flexibility of the term *crucible*. While this flexibility allows for a significant degree of individuality in terms of crucible experiences, the difficulty with elasticity is that the term can become meaningless: after all, if everything can be a crucible, is anything really a crucible? One might arguably wish to exclude experiences which lack harshness, however the significant element of a crucible is that it functions as a defining moment in which a leader's identity and leadership are shaped.

Crucible experiences, then, may be understood as intense, transformative experiences that contribute to the shaping of a leader, and often play an important part both in who the leader is and in the leader's calling. At times they are painful and at times they call for courageous leadership. In some senses they function as intensive learning opportunities where leaders learn about themselves, about God, and about their leadership.

It should also be noted that crucibles do not really tell the whole story. In a critical review of *Geeks and Geezers*, Robert Allio suggested that a crockpot might be a more fitting metaphor for the process of a leader's development.⁴⁹ Similarly, more recent research by Paterson and Delight⁵⁰ while partially supporting Robert Thomas's work, also found evidence of the part played by other learning experiences 'more akin to a gradual evolution.'

In the current research it was apparent that other factors were involved in the development of a leader. Of particular significance was the role of mentors and other influencers. Among the most important for some leaders was the role played by their father. Others spoke about youth leaders who impressed as much by their consistency of character as by anything they said.

Sometimes mentors, like Jethro⁵¹ in the story of Moses, contributed advice

⁴⁹ Robert Allio, 'Is the "Crucible of Leadership" a Crock-Pot? *Strategy and Leadership*, 31 (2003) 58-60. Allio clarified his point in a personal email to me on 23/01/2015.

⁵⁰ Fred Paterson and Phil Delight, 'A Study into how Senior Leaders Learn to Lead from Experience,' *Critical Perspectives on Business Management* (October 2014), 52-61.

⁵¹ See Exodus 18.

in specific circumstances, either encouraging or challenging. No doubt certain specific interventions on the part of a mentor could be classified as crucible experiences (Bennis and Thomas include mentoring relationships within their definition), but often their influence is gradual and incremental.

Limitations and scope for further work

The focus of the research was on the *significance* of crucible experiences and not on their *frequency*. No attempt was made to measure the latter and the quality of the study would perhaps have been improved had the qualitative approach been preceded by some basic quantitative research that may have helped distinguish between leaders who have experienced crucibles from those who have not.

Secondly, the research was limited to those who self-identified as evangelical. A comparison of evangelical and non-evangelical leadership journeys and crucibles might help determine whether some experiences are more likely depending on one's theological position: for example, how would a non-evangelical experience of call compare with that of an evangelical? Given the place accorded to conversionism in evangelical thinking, or the emphasis on the call in some circles, were the cards somewhat stacked in advance of the research?

Third, more could be done to develop a discussion of the means by which leaders navigated their crucible experiences. How much did Bible reading play a part? What about the encouraging influence of friends?

Fourth, the research focussed on those who have basically stood the test of time - indeed some would be regarded by their peers as having attained a considerable degree of success. Another area of enquiry would be to involve those leaders who have been derailed by their crucibles: not all leadership journeys end well. Why do some leaders successfully navigate their crucibles while others are spoiled by them?

Each of these limitations in the present research could result in further work. Similarly there would be scope to work with greater numbers of female leaders: are their experiences of crucibles markedly different from those of male leaders? It would also be useful to explore the relationship between personality types and degrees of resilience in navigating a crucible.

Implications and possible benefits

Implicit in the discussion is the importance of who the leader is and that leadership is not merely something that a leader learns to do. While as much as possible should be done to ensure that leaders are equipped with the tools needed to lead, this should not be allowed to take the place of encouraging

Crucibles of Christian Leadership

leaders to develop both their character and their relationship with God: possible food for thought for institutions seeking to equip future pastoral leaders!

As well as some benefits of the interview process to individual participants,⁵² subsequent interest in the research has resulted in my participation in several leaders' events that have demonstrated the value of leaders being able to learn from other leaders' experiences. Further work remains to be done in developing tools that might help leaders to 'read' their own leadership journey, whether alone, in groups, or in a mentoring relationship.

Finally, even if crucibles do not tell the whole story of a leader's development, the concept that Bennis and Thomas have portrayed provides a worthwhile contribution to the task of understanding a leadership journey.

⁵² One leader commented on the value of being 'heard'.