

Comments on *No Shortcut to Success: A Manifesto for Modern Missions* by Matt Rhodes
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The book *No Shortcut to Success: A Manifesto for Modern Missions* critiques numerous aspects of the CPM paradigm and presents an alternative and historically endorsed approach to church planting among the unreached. I appreciate that the author frequently (more than 20 times) affirms positive aspects of the methods or people he critiques. I also appreciate his focus on “the type of missions that sees its goal as establishing Christ-centered churches that are sufficiently mature to multiply and endure among peoples who have had little or no access to Jesus’s message.”

The book raises a number of valid concerns and notes of caution. Among the most salient: the danger of inordinate focus on speed and large numbers tempting gospel workers to short-change substantial theological and linguistic preparation needed for significant cross-cultural understanding and engagement.

At the same time, the book contains numerous weaknesses which tend to undermine its essential premises. Two of these weaknesses become apparent from the title itself. **First**, the title *No Shortcut to Success* suggests a contrast between one or more shortcuts which will *not* lead to success, and a clear path that *will* lead to success. I surmise from the text that the author would likely define success roughly as “establishing Christ-centered churches that are sufficiently mature to multiply and endure among peoples who have had little or no access to Jesus’s message” (p. 42). If so, I concur. However, he fails to offer *any* current example of success that employs the model he proposes. He presents his model thoroughly and clearly, with biblical backing and hortatory use of “should” and “must.” But he makes absolutely *no mention* of anywhere this model has been fruitfully applied within the past 100 years. That alone should give readers serious pause. The title speaks of success, but the model championed offers no evidence of any current or recent success whatsoever.

In ironic contrast, he acknowledges that the church planting models he labels as “shortcuts” (CPM and DMM) have in fact resulted in a “proliferation of success stories that fill bookstores” (p. 41). While the CPM/DMM paradigm offers abundant evidence of fruitful church planting ministry, Rhodes’ model presents no evidence of gospel fruit since the 19th century. One wonders Rhodes’ opinion of the non-CPM/DMM approaches that yielded many churches planted during the whole 20th century, as their absence seems a glaring omission.

He seems to hope he can discredit all of CPM/DMM’s success stories through a four-pronged attack:

1. Consistent use of insulting descriptors (“fads,” “newfangled,” “easy,” “silver-bullet,” “frenzied,” “get-rich-quick,” “flashy,” “hyper-spiritual,” “rumors,” “speed-at-all-costs”);
 2. Casting doubt (without presenting any evidence) on the truthfulness of CPM reports of success (“Such stories tend to be hyper-anecdotal and impossible to verify. They’re rarely, if ever, what they seem;” “there’s probably something exaggerated;” “numbers...can be wildly inaccurate;” “The simple fact is that statistics can lie, and numbers shouldn’t be trusted without verification”).
- While not all CPM stories should be received at face value, Rhodes and his audience would do

well to read analyses published just a few months prior to this book, in *Motus Dei: The Movement of God to Disciples the Nations*. (Due to close proximity of publication dates, Rhodes could not have read these analyses prior to publishing his accusations.) Numerous chapters of that book present solid data to counter Rhodes' groundless insinuations, notably: "How Exactly Do We Know What We Know about Movements?" "How Movements Count," "Observations over Fifteen Years of Disciple Making Movements," and "the Way of Life: Transference of Spiritual DNA within Movements in East Africa." These cite credible research describing current "success" in reaching the unreached.

3. Claiming (again, without evidence) that the churches in CPMs are theologically shallow and will not endure ("do far more damage," "unconverted converts, false churches," "will not survive," "root out false doctrine," "a circus of heresies," "fooled by a substitute," "untaught churches which are 'Christianized' but have little understanding of the gospel," "slapdash work and undermine the health of the churches we hope to leave behind");

4. Critiquing the biblical support some CPM advocates have claimed for their methodology ("overlook key scriptural principles," "goes far beyond Jesus's instruction," and numerous others). Rhodes devotes a whole chapter to this critique, such that responding to each accusation would require its own essay. In some cases, I believe he identifies some weak exegesis; in others, his interpretation of a text is no more credible than the interpretation he disputes. In still others, his interpretation quite misses the mark.

His exposition reveals that some of what he interprets as "key scriptural principles" (such as a "battle of ideas" to "to help people see the inconsistencies in their beliefs") turn out to be just one of the ways God's Spirit worked in New Testament times, not timeless principles for all missionary proclamation throughout this age. For perspective on his concern about teaching as a biblical method, see for example pages 41-44 of "Addressing Theological and Missiological Objections to CPM/DMM" in *Motus Dei*.

Ultimately, his critique of CPM methodology fails to demonstrate that the hundreds of known CPMs currently taking place do *not* meet his own description of "success": "Christ-centered churches that are sufficiently mature to multiply and endure among peoples who have had little or no access to Jesus's message."

After naming CPM and DMM (along with others) as "fads," he writes: "Fads in missions...are more dangerous than fads in math teaching....it may be impossible to become a 'good missionary'...without the slow acquisition of professional skills." I appreciate his focus on the value of professional missionary skills such as ample theological preparation, fluency in target language(s) and deep cultural understanding. But after acknowledging "we should never set limits" on God's work, he presents human professionalism as the only viable path to effective ministry. He bolsters his thesis with this false claim: "When the Spirit works in New Testament missionaries, he does not bypass ordinary patterns of human communication, relationships, or reasoning. Instead, he works through them" (p. 19). This is only partially true. We see in the New Testament that the Spirit works both through *and beyond* ordinary human patterns. For example, when the Spirit of Jesus would not allow Paul's team to enter Bithynia (Acts 16:7), or Paul had a vision of a man in Macedonia (Acts 16:9), or the Spirit told the Antioch leaders to set apart Barnabas and Saul for the mission (Acts 13:2), the Spirit clearly conveyed something

beyond the fruit of the missionary team's human reasoning. Rhodes presents his partially true claim as an absolute, thus conveying a false denial of the Spirit's supernatural work as described in Acts.

When applied in the present, Rhodes errs by taking a good norm (professional use of means) and turning it into an absolute rule for every person and situation. By focusing on illustrations from math teaching and medicine, Rhodes steers the reader's focus away from the essential biblical application: the numerous effective means God is blessing for bringing salvation to the nations. For those with eyes to see, God is using a *wide variety of means* to spread the gospel in our day, not only the one method Rhodes recommends.

By focusing on a dispute about methodology, Rhodes misses (and steers readers away from) the much *larger* issue: what *is currently*, and seems likely to continue, bringing salvation to the unreached peoples of the earth, as Jesus commanded? The Scripture lays great emphasis on this larger issue, which Rhodes has labeled "success," far outweighing its focus on missionary *methodology*, where Rhodes mainly focuses his attention.

A **second** weakness of the book shouts from the subtitle, which promises "A Manifesto for Modern Missions." Strangely, all the positive examples of missionary success are drawn from *at least 100 years ago*. Rhodes does mention Nabeel Qureshi (who was not a cross-cultural missionary, but a former Muslim who ministered to Muslims in the West), and Jim Elliot, who died at the hands of those he intended to reach, before he could ever present any part of the gospel message. Neither of these excellent servants illustrates a complete model of missionary success in cross-cultural church planting.

Rhodes' only models of missionary success are Robert Morrison (1782 –1834), William Carey (1761 –1834), Adoniram Judson (1788 –1850), and Hudson Taylor (1832 –1905): not a very recent list. We honor each of these men of God and praise him for the fruit of their ministries in previous centuries. But none of them reached Muslims with the gospel, and none of them modeled missionary life in a 20th century context, much less any 21st century context. Strangely, no mention is made of the non-CPM/DMM church planting approaches that have resulted in significant fruit through the 20th century. The promise of "A Manifesto for *Modern Missions*" stands glaringly unfulfilled.

A **third** weakness pervading the book is the claim that slow ministry is inherently more biblical than rapid ministry. Granted, as Rhodes points out, a push for speed or insistence on rapid ministry can open the door for shallow ministry or other temptations. But he goes beyond suggesting caution, to present an unbiblical suspicion of any rapid kingdom growth and a glorification of slow growth. He claims: "The slow, expansive growth of a mustard seed—or of leaven seeping through dough (Matt. 13:31–33)—still characterizes kingdom growth" (pp. 75-76). However, mustard seed actually grows very quickly (["How Do Mustard Seeds Grow?"](#)), and yeast completes its work in the dough within just one or two hours. The point of these parables was clearly not slowness, but rather that something seemingly small and insignificant can have a very great impact. Sometimes our sovereign God does choose to work slowly and sometimes he chooses to work quickly. We see in Scripture that his rapid work is appropriate cause for rejoicing. See, for example, 2 Chronicles 29:36, Acts 6:7, 2 Thessalonians 3:1, and the article ["Rapid Kingdom Advance - How Shall We View It?"](#).

The great theologian Jonathan Edwards rejoiced much in God's rapid work during the revival in New England, as reported in *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*: "God has also seemed to have gone out of his usual way, in the quickness of his work, and the swift progress his Spirit has made in his operations on the hearts of many. It is wonderful that persons should be so suddenly and yet so greatly changed.... when God in so remarkable a manner took the work into his own hands, there was as much done in a day or two, as at ordinary times, with all endeavours that men can use, and with such a blessing as we commonly have, is done in a year." Rhodes prefers a slow approach involving an apologetic "battle of ideas," and offers no evidence of this approach having borne significant fruit within the past 100 years. Meanwhile, many others prefer to rejoice with Edwards and the writers of Scripture in the great works God is doing to bring many unreached people to salvation in our day.

A **fourth** weakness of the book assumes a paradigm in which Western missionaries function as the primary proclaimers and gatekeepers of the gospel. Their principal role should be to authoritatively "teach" and keep the ministry under control. For example, Rhodes acknowledges the value of oral Bibles for reaching the unreached, but cautions: "We must be present to ask and answer questions until we know that people understand" (p. 182). Requiring the physical presence of a missionary for all gospel proclamation would leave the vast majority of unreached peoples without the gospel until some outsider can learn their heart language sufficiently well to personally teach them the meaning of God's word.

Rhodes does comment favorably on the role and potential effectiveness of partnership with Majority World Christians (who have now for decades constituted the majority of the world's Christians). "Certainly, mobilizing national believers is an attractive strategy" (p. 196). But after mentioning three advantages of mobilizing national believers and acknowledging he has seen "incredible effectiveness" in this approach, he presents three disadvantages, all qualified with "may" "sometimes," and "many." He then offers helpful counsel for partnership with national believers, but with statements like "we must grow to trust their character and gifting before sending them out" (p. 198), he betrays that he still envisions outsiders holding paternalistic control. This ethnocentric assumption violates Jesus' teaching that "you are all brothers" (Matt. 23:8).

A **fifth** weakness of the book assumes that the best approach for reaching the unreached is a "battle of ideas," beginning by convincing people that their worldview is wrong. "Our job, then, is to help people see the inconsistencies in their beliefs" (p. 164). This apologetic approach is one valid means of evangelism, but for centuries has borne *very little* fruit among Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. By following the principle of the Apostle Paul ("so that by all possible means I might save some" 1 Cor. 9:22), much more effective approaches (means) are now bringing salvation to many in the Muslim and Hindu worlds. Rhodes seems more interested in pushing one (not-very-effective) evangelistic approach than in affirming and applying the means that are demonstrably saving a great many.

A **sixth** weakness appears in Rhodes' spotty handling of Scripture. In multiple cases he pulls verses out of context to try to prove a point. For example, as part of his argument against extraordinary prayer, he quotes Jesus' command: "when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases

as the Gentiles do” (p. 237). How sad, that he would label Christians’ earnest intercession for the unreached as “empty phrases.” Those are not the empty phrases against which Jesus cautioned!

In another case he not only pulls a verse out of context, but also inserts his own idea into the text of the Scripture. Consider this claim: “Remember what Jesus tells us: it is not for us to know—or to hasten—the ‘times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority’ (Acts 1:7)” (p. 256). Jesus made no mention of not hastening the coming fullness of his kingdom. Rhodes inserted that to support his point about not being in haste to reach the lost.

In numerous cases, he presents arguments from biblical silence. In arguing *against* the importance of fasting for gospel breakthrough, he notes two verses in Acts that seem to show fasting as a normal part of effective ministry: Acts 13:2 and 14:23. He then argues: “Against these two passages, we must remember that in every other situation in the book of Acts where guidance is given, fasting is not mentioned” (p. 250). How strange, to counsel us that we “must remember” what is *not* written in Scripture, so we will ignore what *is* written there. Fasting, while not mandated for New Testament ministry, was clearly practiced by the apostles and the early church. Jesus himself had predicted that future disciples would fast. “The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast” (Matt. 9:15, reported also in Mark 2:20 and Luke 5:35). The biblical text does not explicitly tie fasting to fruit in ministry. Yet numerous leaders of fruitful movements have found this application of the apostolic example to be consistent with powerful working by God’s Spirit. I suggest we would do well to learn from them.

In his argument for the rarity of miracles, he claims, “Surprisingly, while miracles happen throughout the book of Acts, they’re not nearly as common as we think. Only the apostles and two of the seven deacons are recorded as having miraculous gifts” (p. 235). He then mentions in a footnote that “Paul’s vision is miraculously healed when the prophet Ananias prays for him” (Acts 9:17–18). But in trying to apparently buttress a theological construct limiting miracles mainly to the apostles, he overlooks a vital fact. As mentioned in John 21:25 and illustrated in Acts 2:43, the writers of the Gospels and Acts selected only a small portion of actual events for inclusion in their report. Naturally, *The Acts of the Apostles* focuses mainly on the Apostles as the main characters. And the book describes a significant number of miraculous events as part of the gospel’s advance among the unreached. A great number of credible reports also describe miracles opening doors for gospel advance in our time. (See, for example, [*Miracles Today: The Supernatural Work of God in the Modern World*](#), by Craig Keener.) Yet Rhodes seems to want his readers to hold a low view of the value of miracles in evangelism among the unreached. So he downplays what Luke *did* write about miracles, to muster an argument from what Luke didn’t write.

A **seventh** weakness consists of multiple unsubstantiated accusations. For example, on page 204, he quotes a pamphlet written 40 years ago (by Keith Green in 1982), then says: “Ideas like these are still around today.” But no current example is offered. On the next page, he quotes a frustrated Indian pastor, then writes of that frustration: “It’s likely born out of painful experiences with immature missionaries.” Such speculation seems to betray a shortage of solid evidence.

A **eighth** weakness is the author's seeming allergy to fervent prayer, fasting, or miraculous events. I appreciate the stress on God's grace rather than human effort, and on hard sensible work rather than expecting God to miraculously make up for a shortage of ample preparation. But Rhodes seems at great pains to reassure readers that prayer need not be fervent, fasting is merely optional, and miracles should not be expected. He rightly points out that some missionaries take a "hyper-spiritual" approach to ministry, but he seemingly fails to realize that at the same time, we in the West have a lot to learn from brothers and sisters in the Majority World. They see God working numerous miracles in the Bible, and believe he is the same yesterday, today, and forever. They have not been taught the flawed arguments for cessationism, so they expect God to work in marvelous ways, and they find that he often does. Some of them are undeniably seeing substantial spiritual fruit among the unreached (as reported in the abundant published accounts previously mentioned). We would do well to give respectful attention to their descriptions of extraordinary prayer, fasting, and miracles as significant in opening the way for the salvation of the unreached.

From my vantage point, Rhodes accomplishes two good things in this book. First, he points out some potential problems and weaknesses among some CPM proponents (though he vastly overstates the problems). Second, he outlines one valid and historically useful approach to missionary work among the unreached. God can and has used distant-culture outsiders who become sufficiently fluent in a people group's heart language to bring people to faith through theological disputation and discourse. But that is neither the only biblical approach nor the most effective methodology for reaching the remaining billions of unreached peoples.

Sadly, Rhodes' commitment to championing his preferred approach leads him into a large handful of significant errors which collectively undermine his central thesis. The book falls far short of the title's claim to offer a path to "Success" and a "Modern Manifesto for Missions," and offers readers flailing attempts to undermine actual reports of significant success in modern missions: the movements that are demonstrably "establishing Christ-centered churches that are sufficiently mature to multiply and endure among peoples who have had little or no access to Jesus's message."

When Jesus healed a crippled woman on the Sabbath (Luke 13:10-17), the synagogue leader was indignant, and told the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath." He believed his interpretation of Scripture to be so much better than others' that he refused to appreciate the mighty work of God in his day. May we not fall into the same error.