

Book Review

Matt Rhodes, *No Shortcut to Success: A Manifesto for Modern Missions*

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Rhodes, Matt (2022). *No Shortcut to Success: A Manifesto for Modern Missions*. Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 272 pp., \$19.99 paperback and e-book, ISBN: 978-1-4335-7775-8.

Matt Rhodes's *No Shortcut to Success* is a sobering gust of reality for missionaries dehydrated of spiritual encouragement and depleted by the pragmatism endemic to much missiological literature. Years ago, I challenged those who misapplied Scripture as they advocated for church planting movement (CPMs). Yet, much more was needed. Finally, Rhodes offers a far more extensive response that not only challenges popular fads in missionary strategy; he also equips the Church to prepare missionaries who bear lasting fruit for God's kingdom around the world.

With candor and clarity, Rhodes evaluates the disturbing trend among many missionaries to seek shortcuts to ministry success. While he writes as a practitioner, his book is well-researched. He does not demand that we merely take his word for it by relying on second-hand anecdotes. Furthermore, his presentation is balanced, fairly representing a range of missionary voices, with heavily cited arguments.

The opening chapter introduces the book's basic premises and framework for understanding the work of missions. Rhodes argues that missionaries lack a professionalism characteristic of other serious vocations. Consequently, many such workers tend to take "shortcuts by [not] allocating adequate time, energy, and resources to the task" (35). He desires to see better-trained missionaries with proper expectations and a long-term vision for their work. For Rhodes, the goal of missionary labor is to establish "Christ-centered churches that are sufficiently mature to multiply and endure among peoples who have had little or no access to Jesus's message" (42).

The next two chapters are an extensive and systematic dismantling of popular mission methods. As such, it is a tour de force. Rhodes leaves few stones unturned when evaluating ministry strategies that emphasize rapidity and judge success based on numbers rather than scriptural principles. He says, "Ultimately, 'success' in ministry is not a matter of numbers but of ministering in ways that honor the Lord... Ever the long-term thinker, Jesus prioritized healthy over huge" (56). The book consistently brings the reader back to the biblical text, which gets lost when missionaries lay too much stress on sociology. He exposes shoddy assertions that pass for arguments and have now become standard assumptions among many mission practitioners.

Having stated his thesis and identified key problems, Chapters 4-7 then lay the foundation for a positive way forward. These chapters are largely uncontroversial, though edifying. They consider how New Testament missionaries shared Christ's message and explore ways to prepare missionaries to communicate clearly, credibly, and boldly. Likening missionaries to "ambassadors" (2 Corinthians 5:20), he prioritizes gospel proclamation without excluding other ministry needs.

Chapter 8 suggests several components to healthy church planting. Rhodes's survey is substantive at every turn, wasting few words while addressing various approaches to discipleship (e.g., storying) and church planting (e.g., homogeneous unit principle). He critiques vogue claims

that discipleship should be “obedience-based,” as taught in many modern methods. Rather, “Discipleship is based on faith, and obedience flows from that faith” (184).

Moreover, Rhodes speaks to the identity and task of missionaries within a foreign context. For example, he asserts that missionaries should see themselves as immigrants rather than outsiders. They should seek to become one in heart with the people, proficient in the local language, building long-term personal relationships. Local people should not be independent but rather *interdependent* with foreign missionaries.

The final chapters contribute to the book’s well-roundedness. Chapter 9 discusses several considerations related to finding and sending qualified missionaries. Rhodes courageously and carefully assesses common ways of speaking about “calling.” He warns, “The Scriptures don’t teach us to rely entirely on a subjective sense of calling to determine our ministry direction” (212). Our calling, he says, will be reflected in how God equips us with grace. Too often, “we need to have some realistic idea of what we are signing up for” (215). Mission organizations need to underscore resilience, teaming, and healthy patterns of living while laying more stress on long-term missionaries than on sending short-term mission teams. Rather than merely inviting people to prayer, Chapter 10 highlights healthy and unhealthy ways of approaching prayer, fasting, and spiritual warfare.

No Shortcut to Success is a long-needed corrective to several decades of missions literature. While offering substantial critiques, Rhodes is far from cynical. At every turn, the book provides a constructive and well-nuanced discussion on an array of topics. He is appreciative and humble. Meanwhile, he develops a consistent proposal explaining why healthy professionalism is critical for genuine missionary success.

For all its virtues, the book provides no “silver bullet” to solve all missionary problems. Instead, Rhodes’s objective is far more limited. He addresses a particular set of ideas that undermine sustained fruitfulness. For this reason, he does not speak to other issues that fill missiological journals and books (e.g., contextualization and the place of “social ministry”). Some might criticize Rhodes for neglecting these and other subjects, yet his book is a corrective and so has the limitations of every such work.

For years, people asked me for resource recommendations that contrast the slew of popular books that emphasize rapid church multiplication, such as David Garrison’s *Church Planting Movements* (2004), Steve Smith’s *T4T* (2011), and Steve Addison’s *Pioneering Movements* (2015). Until now, I could only suggest a handful of articles. Thankfully Matt Rhodes has provided us *No Shortcut to Success*, an essential read I heartily commend to anyone who wants to see lasting fruit come from our missionary labors.