

## Book Review

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

Reviewed by Dave Coles

Published in *Global Missiology*, [www.globalmissiology.org](http://www.globalmissiology.org), April 2022

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.

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. While raising several valid concerns—e.g., the danger of inordinate focus on speed at the expense of cross-cultural missionaries’ necessary theological and linguistic preparation—the book also contains numerous weaknesses which undermine its essential premises.

The *first* weakness lies in the title: *No Shortcut to Success* suggests a contrast between one or more shortcuts, that will *not* lead to success, and a clear path that *will* lead to success. Apparently, Rhodes would define success 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” (42). However, he makes no mention of any fruitful application within the past 100 years of this envisioned establish-mature-multiply-endure model.

In ironic contrast, Rhodes 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” (41). He seems to hope he can discredit CPM/DMM’s success stories through a four-pronged attack:

1. Consistently use insulting descriptors e.g., “fads” (17, 18), “newfangled” (20), “silver-bullet” (38, 39).

2. Cast doubt (without evidence) on the truthfulness of CPM reports of success, e.g., “hyper-anecdotal and impossible to verify” (20), “exaggerated” (65, 66). Rhodes and his audience need to read analyses published, just a few months prior to *No Shortcut to Success*, in *Motus Dei: The Movement of God to Disciples the Nations* (2021). Numerous chapters of that book present solid data to counter Rhodes’s groundless insinuations.

3. Claim (again, without evidence) that the churches in CPMs are theologically shallow and will not endure, e.g., “unconverted converts, false churches” (42), “a circus of heresies” (106).

4. Critique the biblical support some CPM advocates have claimed for their methodology, e.g., “overlook key scriptural principles” (78), “goes far beyond Jesus’s instruction” (93).

Ultimately, Rhodes’s critique of CPM methodology fails to demonstrate that the hundreds of known CPMs (currently 1,491) now 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.”

Rhodes’s focus on the value of professional missionary skills—such as ample theological preparation, fluency in target language(s), and deep cultural understanding—is well placed. But

he errs by taking a good norm (professional use of means) and making it an absolute rule for every person and situation. 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 appears in the subtitle: *A Manifesto for Modern Missions*. Strangely, all the positive examples of missionary success are drawn from *at least 100 years ago*. Men of God like William Carey, Adoniram Judson, and Hudson Taylor, along with their fruitful ministries in previous eras, are indeed to be honored. Strangely, however, Rhodes makes no mention of the (non-CPM/DMM) church planting approaches that resulted in significant fruit through the twentieth century. His promise of “A Manifesto for *Modern* [or *Contemporary*] Missions” stands unfulfilled, as he points us back to the nineteenth century.

A *third* and pervasive weakness is the claim that slow ministry is inherently more biblical than rapid ministry: “The slow, expansive growth of a mustard seed—or of leaven seeping through dough (Matt. 13:31–33)—still characterizes kingdom growth” (75-76). Actually, though, mustard seed grows very quickly, and yeast completes its work in the dough in less than two hours. The point of these parables of Jesus is not slowness. By contrast, Scripture portrays God’s rapid work as appropriate cause for rejoicing, e.g., 2 Chron. 29:36, Acts 6:7, 2 Thess. 3:1. (See also my January issue article, “Rapid Kingdom Advance: How Shall We View It?” (Coles 2022)).

A *fourth* weakness of the book is the assumed paradigm that Western missionaries function as the primary proclaimers and gatekeepers of the gospel. For example, Rhodes acknowledges the value of oral Bibles for reaching the unreached—but then cautions: “We must be present to ask and answer questions until we know that people understand” (182). Rhodes does comment favorably on the potential effectiveness of partnership with Majority World Christians (196). However, his mostly-helpful counsel for partnership with national believers betrays that he still envisions outsiders holding paternalistic control (198).

A *fifth* weakness assumes that the best approach for reaching the unreached is a “battle of ideas” (126), beginning by convincing people that their worldview is wrong. “Our job, then, is to help people see the inconsistencies in their beliefs” (164). This apologetic approach is one valid means of evangelism, but for centuries it has borne *very little* fruit among Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. By following the Apostle Paul’s principle (“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.

*No Shortcut to Success* helpfully points out some potential problems and weaknesses among some CPM proponents, and it outlines one historically useful approach to missionary work among the unreached. However, the book falls far short of the title’s claim to offer a path to “Success” and a “Manifesto for Modern Missions.” Instead, it desperately 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.”

## References

- Coles, Dave (2022). "Rapid Kingdom Advance: How Shall We View It?" *Global Missiology – English* 19, 1 (January 2022): 29-36, e-journal: <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/2547>