

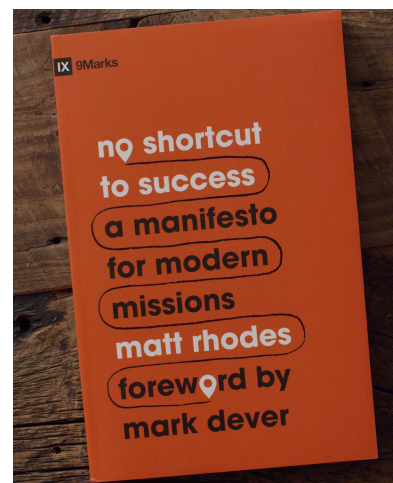
Matt Rhodes. *No Shortcut to Success: A Manifesto for Modern Missions*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2022.

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SUMMARY

No Shortcut to Success by Matt Rhodes is subtitled “A Manifesto for Modern Missions.” In it, Rhodes responds to contemporary trends in Evangelical missiology he finds troubling. In particular, he is disturbed by approaches to mission work that emphasize rapid reproduction as the controlling criterion in missionary strategies. Rhodes names Church Planting Movements (CPM), Disciple Making Movements (DMM), Training for Trainers (T4T), and Any 3 as the prime examples of rapid missionary methods. He believes these methods place an undue emphasis on speed and subsequently engage in reductionistic practices in language and culture learning, evangelism, discipleship, church formation, and other elements of the missionary task.

The book is divided in two parts. Part 1 is entitled “Where Shortcuts Have Led Us: Surveying the Problem.” Rhodes identifies and analyzes the features he finds troubling in the popular missionary methods named above. These include deliberate anti-professionalism, anti-sequentialism, an overriding emphasis on speed, the quest for silver bullet strategies, an inordinate reliance on short-term mission trips, and an aversion to rigorous missionary



preparation. He details his concerns about the quantitative and qualitative integrity of mass movements that have been reported by practitioners of these strategies. He is particularly concerned with inadequate language learning and cultural acquisition.

Part 2 provides Rhodes' proposal for corrective action, responding to the issues he has described. He calls missionaries "ambassadors for Christ" and uses this identity to appeal for a focus on communication and teaching by missionaries. He stresses the importance of language learning, while fully acknowledging its difficulty. He insists that missionary communication be clear, credible, and bold. He proposes a path for long-term missionary service that includes extensive preparation and careful labor in biblical knowledge, language and culture acquisition, evangelism, disciple making, healthy church planting, and leadership development. He outlines the steps that a church, a mission agency, and a candidate should take in preparing and sending missionaries. He concludes his book by discussing the relationship between the work of the Holy Spirit and the work of missionaries in using ordinary means. He particularly focuses on concerns regarding popular ideas about prayer, fasting, and spiritual warfare.

ANALYSIS

There is much to appreciate in this book. Rhodes accurately identifies the connection that can exist between an overriding concern with rapid multiplication and an unhealthy reductionism in many components of the missionary task. Having been engaged in this task for over three decades, as practitioners, trainers, and mission leaders, we found ourselves nodding in agreement with many of Rhodes' observations. We wholeheartedly endorse his passionate commitment to deep, never-ending language learning. Our agency, the IMB, will send apprentice missionaries home if they have not met their language learning requirement by the end of their first term. We thoroughly agree with the necessity of solid biblical training, which is why our organization requires seminary training for long-term missionaries.

Perhaps most crucially, we agree that Scripture never promises rapid multiplication, and that there is no silver-bullet strategy that will compel God to give it to us. We agree that evangelism must be clear and must include the necessity of repentance; that conversion is marked by a permanent, radical transformation of life; that discipleship is a life-long process that engages every area of life; that healthy churches with a rigorously biblical ecclesiology are a nonnegotiable necessity; and that church leaders need thorough biblical training. We agree that missionaries need to teach new believers and young churches, and not simply facilitate discussion. We agree that missionaries must be committed to hard work over the long haul – however long it takes to get to the point of *exit to partnership*. Furthermore, we agree that many of the methods critiqued by Rhodes can produce the results he mentioned, particularly in their early forms as recorded in the books he cites. In many ways, this book could have been a helpful corrective to concerns we share with him.

However, we also have concerns with this book. Some are relatively minor, but some are quite serious. We will begin with the relatively minor points and proceed to the serious ones. Rhodes writes of the early fourth century AD, “While the church may have formed around 10% of the Roman population, it had little presence outside the Roman empire” (74). This ignores the incredible growth of Christianity in the Persian empire, India, and Ethiopia in the early centuries of the Christian era. The interested reader is directed to the first volume of Samuel Moffatt’s magisterial *A History of Christianity in Asia* for more details.

Rhodes’ description of the Non-Residential Missionary (NRM) approach reflects more familiarity with the book by that name than it does with the reality that quickly emerged in the NRM program in the International Mission Board (IMB) in the early 1990s. NRMs were required to learn the language of the people they were assigned. Many NRMs (indeed, almost all in Central Asia) found ways to move into the area where their people groups lived and engaged in direct work with their people, while also seeking to encourage

partnership between evangelical organizations and ensuring that issues such as Bible translation and media production were addressed. This example illustrates the danger of treating written sources as permanently definitive of the movements they represent. Rhodes accurately reflects the literature at this point, largely because most methodological developments never get recorded. He would be better served to interview current practitioners rather than rely on books that are decades old to represent current realities.

A deeper concern is the impression that Rhodes values slowness for its own sake. In light of the vastness of lostness and the reality of hell, no one should desire that the gospel spread slowly. The Apostle Paul certainly did not (2 Thess 3:1). However, Rhodes uses the word *slow* quite often and with clear approval. While it is true that Scripture never promises speed, slowness is not a virtue. Urgency is a necessary consequence of understanding the exclusivity of the gospel and the condition of the world.

However, the most serious concern with this book is how Rhodes misrepresented Mike Shipman's work and the *Any-3* evangelism method. Below are specific examples from Rhodes' book that we believe misrepresent Mike Shipman and his work.

First, Rhodes states that Shipman does not encourage language learning. He then uses a quotation from *Any 3* out of context to support his accusation: "Mike Shipman, designer of the *Any-3* method, doesn't encourage language learning. In its place, he advocates using 'a translator . . . to bridge language barriers'" (147). Rhodes, as he does in many places in his book when referencing *Any 3*, does not list a page number in his footnote, only stating it was in chapter 7. The only reference to a translator in chapter 7 of *Any 3*, and the only section that fits Rhodes' quote, is in the section entitled "Speak his language." Here, Shipman advocates knowing the language and culture of the people and then adjusting your communication style as you share the gospel with them. Shipman writes, "Adjustments in communication are the responsibility of the speaker, not the listener. So, plan to adjust the way you communicate in order to be heard with as little misunderstanding as

possible”¹ Shipman then explains how a translator may help expat mission volunteers² reduce misunderstandings when they are sharing the gospel during an overseas mission trip. Referring to these volunteers, not full-time career missionaries, Shipman says:

A translator can help to bridge language barriers for expat mission volunteers. The translator should be trained to avoid terminology that might be misunderstood by the hearer. The goal is to explain who Jesus is according to the Scripture while using religious terms that are already familiar to the recipient. This way, the recipient will actually hear the gospel, rather than closing the conversation before the gospel is presented.³

Mike Shipman never suggested that career missionaries should use translators as a short-cut to expedite gospel conversations. Nevertheless, Rhodes misrepresents Shipman’s suggestions making it seem that he is advocating for missionaries to use a translator in evangelism. Shipman is a model of fluency in the language of his adopted people group, and has numerous written works in that language.⁴ He is a strong proponent for extensive language and culture acquisition.

Second, Rhodes states that Shipman believes that learning a people’s culture and beliefs before sharing the gospel is detrimental. Rhodes states:

¹ Mike Shipman, *Any 3: Anyone, Anywhere, Anytime* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2013), 59-60.

² A short term expat volunteer is ordinarily someone who is part of a two week trip. These volunteers are rarely experts in the language or culture of the people they are attempting to reach with the gospel.

³ Shipman, *Any 3*, 60.

⁴ See Mike Shipman, *Khotbah Alkitabiah Yang Komunikatif dan Berwibawa* (Lembaga Literatur Baptis: Bandung, Indonesia, 2003). Mike Shipman, *Pembaruan Pelayanan Mimbar* (Yayasan Kalam Hidup: Bandung, Indonesia, 2006). Mike Shipman, *Amat Agung: Karya Kerasulan Kuno dan Kini* (Rahayu Group: Salatiga, Indonesia, 2009), Revised 2012. Mike Shipman, *Amanat Agung Asli* (Rahayu Group: Salatiga, Indonesia, 2014). Mike Shipman, *Kepemimpinan Kerasulan*, (Dian Cipta: Jakarta, Indonesia, 2017).

Mike Shipman – the architect of Any-3, a widely used approach to missions – agrees that such an approach is dangerous, explaining that learning a people’s culture and beliefs before sharing the gospel with them is actually detrimental to mission work. Shipman explains, “We find being a bit ‘dumb’ [is] better than being too smart, as expertise in the local culture can provoke defensiveness” (37).

Rhodes repeats this claim:

Many say it is unnecessary to learn people’s culture and beliefs in detail before sharing the gospel with them. In fact, we’re warned that it may even be detrimental. I’ve quoted this already but it’s worth repeating. One of today’s prominent missionary leaders contends, “We find being a bit ‘dumb’ better than being too smart, as expertise in the local culture can provoke defensiveness.” But until we understand what people believe, how can we engage with them or answer their questions? (166).

Rhodes lists the source for this quotation as a *Mission Frontiers* article about *Any 3*.⁵ Shipman does say something similar in *Any 3* about “being a bit dumb,”⁶ but the context is opposite of what Rhodes is portraying for its meaning. A distinctive characteristic of *Any 3* is to ask questions about what people believe and listen, before sharing the gospel. Further, *Any 3* was designed with an extensive knowledge of the Muslim mindset.

⁵ It should be noted that the *Mission Frontiers* article published July/August 2013, attributed to Mike Shipman, was not written by him. Rhodes references the *Mission Frontiers* article on pages 37, 38, and 166 of his book. Shipman asked the publisher to change the attribution, and it has subsequently been changed. The author of the *Mission Frontiers* article attempts to summarize several aspects of *Any-3*, but parts of the summary do not accurately reflect what Shipman writes and teaches. Mission Frontiers Contributor, “Any 3: Lead Muslims to Christ Now!” *Mission Frontiers*: <https://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/any-3>, accessed 20 April 2023.

⁶ Shipman, *Any 3*, 60.

In the original context described in *Any 3*, Shipman tells those sharing the gospel with Muslims to get to know and understand the beliefs of the person with whom they are talking. He is saying we need to ask each individual Muslim what they believe because many of them may not know their own religion or may have peculiarities. He suggests that it is better to be “a bit dumb”⁷ (meaning don’t assume you know what they believe) than to come across as an expert on what they believe, because that may provoke defensiveness. Shipman advocates asking questions about what they believe in order to understand first what they believe. Mike mentions dumbness twice in his book. First:

Asking personal questions builds rapport that is necessary for witnessing well. Early in a witnessing conversation, it is important to let the other person do most of the talking, because later you will guide the conversation. When you ask a lot of questions to get the other person engaged in the conversation, the person witnessed to will more likely listen politely later as the witness shares the gospel with him.

Being “a little bit dumb” is actually better than being “too smart.” Appearing to know too much about the person’s religion and culture, often makes the person being witnessed to uncomfortable. This may cause him to put up his guard. The best way to learn about a person is to ask him about himself and what he believes. Asking questions not only teaches you what the person believes and what makes him unique, it allows you to tailor your witness to that particular individual.⁸

The second mention is similar to the first:

⁷ Shipman, *Any 3*, 60.

⁸ Shipman, *Any 3*, 60.

Ironically, we have found that when it comes to evangelism, being a little bit dumb may be better than being too smart. Revealing expertise in the local culture can provoke defensiveness from the Muslims with whom you are sharing. Using an Any-3 approach, and asking questions, even when you already know the answer, lays a foundation of mutual respect.⁹ (Any-3, pp. 64-65)

Shipman's point is that when sharing the gospel, we should not come across as an expert or know-it-all. Instead we should find out about the person's culture and beliefs and then share the gospel informed with that knowledge. Frequently, in *Any 3* trainings, Shipman explains what he means by being a little bit dumb: "I'm referring to the need for humility when we share the gospel, instead of coming across as a know-it-all."¹⁰ He also frequently says in *Any 3* trainings, "Everything you can learn about their religion and culture is vital, as long as you don't flaunt it when you share the gospel."¹¹

Third, Rhodes implies that he espouses fad missiology, when Shipman painstakingly built his discipleship and church strategy (*The Big 1*) upon a biblical foundation using careful hermeneutics.¹² *Any 3* is a book on evangelism, not a big picture missionary strategy. Another book by Shipman, *Plan A*, lays out much of his *Big 1* strategy and plan.¹³ It is not clear why Rhodes

⁹ Shipman, *Any 3*, 64-5.

¹⁰ Mike Shipman email with author (Mark Stevens) 30 June 2022. Shipman makes these statements in his evangelism training.

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¹² Robert Christopher Abner, "An Embryonic Ecclesiology Enabling Church Planting Movements to Flourish," (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019), 160. Abner applied an ecclesiological matrix to examine the foundations in church plants. He concluded, "The ecclesiological foundations of *The Big 1* church planting strategy are solid. They emphasize biblical essentials for church. At the same time, the strategy instills an element of multiplication."

¹³ Mike Shipman, *Plan A: Abide in Christ, Disciple the World!* (Mount Vernon, WA: Mission Network, 2019).

refer to Shipman's evangelism book as a missionary strategy book but then does not refer to his missionary strategy book at all.

CONCLUSION

No Shortcut to Success aspires to be a manifesto for modern missions. Many of its critiques are valid, and much of its content reflects solid missiology. However, our concerns with how Rhodes misrepresents his sources outweigh the book's benefits. These misrepresentations are so egregious that we are compelled to recommend that no one read, distribute, or teach from this book.