

# Advancing Conversations about Proclamational and Movements Methodologies

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## Abstract

Movements methodologies have spread throughout much of today's missions world. The prevalence of these methods necessitates conversation about their validity. This article provides constructive critique of movements methodologies, addresses responses to previous critique, and suggests paths for conversation going forward.

**Key Words:** Church Planting Movements, Disciple Making Movements, language acquisition, Proclamational Missions

## Introduction

Missionaries speak about missiology because missiology matters and because we have much to learn from each other. So it caught my attention when movements-advocate Michael Cooper claimed in a review of my book, *No Shortcut to Success* (Rhodes 2022), that “9Marks [(9Marks 2022)] adherents and CPM/DMM advocates are talking past each other” (Cooper 2022). Could discussions that analyze movements have devolved into opposing echo chambers, talking past each other without hearing?

Certainly, heated debate has erupted over movements methodologies. I have seen large missions organizations dissolve partnerships over the issue. The kind of constructive conversation about movements methodologies that this article and the corresponding one in this issue of *Global Missiology* (Arlund and Farah 2022) are trying to facilitate is sorely needed.

Two starkly different reviews of *No Shortcut* were published in the April issue of *Global Missiology*. They are relevant to this discussion because *No Shortcut* critiques certain aspects of movements methodologies, and it is primarily its critique of movements methodologies which was controversial. Jackson Wu praised *No Shortcut* as “humble,” a “tour de force” that “leaves few stones unturned” (Wu 2022). David Coles criticized it as making “groundless insinuations,” “insulting” other points of view, and “desperately attempt[ing] to undermine *actual* reports of significant ‘success’” (emphasis original; Coles 2022a). My task here is to respond and simultaneously to try to advance the conversation. So which review was correct?

## Proclamational Missions

*No Shortcut* was not written primarily to critique movements methodologies (indeed, I attempt to honor their strengths) but to encourage professionalism in the missionary community. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to missions, I do believe best practices—and pitfalls—exist in parts of the missionary vocation. For the purposes of this article, I will summarize a *professional* approach as one which (1) embraces the necessity of “human” responsibilities including language-and-culture mastery, (2) focuses on long-term engagement and discipleship of unreached peoples, and (3) recognizes extensive, direct teaching by mature believers as part of the road to spiritual maturity. This last emphasis on direct teaching is often described as a *proclamational missiology* (Esler 2013).

*No Shortcut* argues that many types of missionary efforts today are unintentionally shortcutting the type of professionalism I have described above and offers constructive suggestions for how to return to healthier practices. Two chapters are devoted to addressing movements methodologies in particular, since they are more widespread than other methodologies today, and any weaknesses they have may have wider impact.

### **Coles on *No Shortcut***

If the purpose of a book review is to portray the book's essential character, Coles fails at a number of points. Here is a sampling:

- Coles claims I “cast doubt (without evidence)” on reported movements successes (Coles 2022a, 35). In fact, however, I spend nine pages providing extensive evidence for my concern that some reported movements numbers may be unreliable (Rhodes 2022, 57-65).
- Coles ends a separate, longer review of *No Shortcut* by warning:

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 (Coles 2022b).

Clearly, Coles is likening my attitude in *No Shortcut* to the response of the synagogue leader. Is such a dark comparison accurate? I have many flaws, but I have never been indignant about anyone's healing or any other work of God. Additionally, I do not try to stop anyone ministering—rather, I hope to help people minister:

I'm also writing for the missionaries who have given up so much for the cause of Christ. I want their efforts to succeed... I've been consistently humbled by the quality of the men, women, and even children I've had the privilege to work alongside, many of whose shoes I am not worthy to untie. If these insights contain some grain of truth—if they're not simply my own personal missions fad, of which I too will repent in another ten years—then I hope to bless these great men and women (Rhodes 2022, 21).

- Coles claims I assume a “paradigm that Western missionaries function as the primary proclaimers and gatekeepers of the gospel” (Coles 2022a, 36). In his longer review he adds, “... with statements like ‘we must grow to trust their character and gifting before sending them out’ (p. 198), [Rhodes] betrays that he still envisions Westerners being in paternalistic control. This ethnocentric assumption violates Jesus’ teaching...” (Coles 2022b).

Do Coles's allegations of un-Christlike ethnocentrism and visions of paternalistic Western control portray me accurately? Here is the section in *No Shortcut* to which he is referring:

Some national churches are already sending out qualified missionaries on their own. We should absolutely rejoice in this... A mature and gifted national missionary will almost certainly be more effective than you. But if [expatriate missionaries'] help is needed in mobilizing and sending him... [those expatriate missionaries will likely face] the same pragmatic hurdles they would face in planting churches among the unreached: *they must build relationships across enormous geographical, linguistic, and cultural divides*. When

we go ourselves as church planters, we invest years in language and culture acquisition. Then we patiently teach, disciple, and observe leaders before we leave churches to stand on their own with their own indigenous leadership. If we invest this much care in raising up church leaders, should we not take a great deal of care in sending out *church planters*? We must know their language and culture well enough to build close relationships, and in these relationships—over time—we must grow to trust their character and gifting before sending them out... (emphases original; Rhodes 2022, 198–199).

There is no paternalistic Western control in these words. I prefer national missionaries, and I prefer nationals to control the sending of those missionaries. But when expatriates (Western *or* non-Western) are involved, they should exercise the same cautions they would when appointing *anyone* to ministry.

- Coles claims I see slow ministry as “inherently more biblical than rapid ministry” (Coles 2022a, 36)—but such a claim is untrue: “I love CPM-style practitioners’ desire for lots of people to come to Christ—and quickly... the church *did* grow quickly in the book of Acts” (emphasis original; Rhodes 2022, 72). My clear concern is not to promote slow growth but to avoid *overemphasis* on rapid growth and to avoid growth timelines that become so rapid that teaching and discipleship are short-changed.
- Coles writes, “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” (Coles 2022a, 35). But he takes the quote badly out of context. Neither this quote nor the nearby text is specifically discussing CPM or DMM—other methods also concern me—and my quote clearly *does not* endorse the reliability of the success stories in question, as he implies. I actually say, “Despite the proliferation of success stories that fill bookstores and various organizations’ fundraising letters, our increasing acceptance of amateurism has significantly reduced our effectiveness” (Rhodes 2022, 41).
- Coles claims I am advocating a primarily “apologetic approach,” that “for centuries... has borne *very little* fruit” in unreached settings (emphasis original; Coles 2022a, 36). I am less pessimistic than Coles is about the role of apologetics, but I *never* imply it is more than one part of holistic approach to evangelism. I spend pages discussing the importance of relationships in evangelism (Rhodes 2022, 126, 169-171). I acknowledge that the ideas that drive us most profoundly are not apologetics arguments—they are *stories* we believe about God and ourselves (Rhodes 2022, 163)—and that the most important ideas are simple (“God loves you”), not complex (Rhodes 2022, 40).

Clearly, conversation is not yet taking place, at least regarding what *No Shortcut* seeks to address. Coles’s objections take issue with assertions and ideas I neither say nor believe. My concern is not just that Coles has misunderstood me but that such mischaracterizations may interfere with the wider conversation. People are less likely to hear me after I have been described as having ethnocentric assumptions, positioning Westerners in paternalistic control, and believing slow ministry is inherently more biblical. But I am none of those things, so I advise those who are interested in conversation to read carefully what I have written. Whether or not one agrees, reading what I have actually written will give a wise way to engage in the conversation that follows.

Where does the conversation go from here? I offer my thoughts below.

## Interacting with Critique

A part of Coles's concern seems to be a feeling that critiques of movements methodologies are too negative. This concern is not merely theoretical: suggesting someone is raising the "heat" is often enough to cut off missiological conversation altogether, and as noted earlier missions organizations have stopped working together after feeling conversations about movements methodologies had grown too negative. Any charges of negativity can quickly become the primary focus of conversation.

In this case, I am confused about Coles's criteria for evaluating negativity. He has claimed my "ethnocentric assumptions violate Jesus's teaching" and that I want to put Westerners in "paternalistic control" (Coles 2022b). He has compared me to someone who tried to stop Jesus healing on the Sabbath. These are personal character critiques. Yet he objects to my use of softer language to critique systems of ideas as "consistently [using] insulting descriptors." It seems inconsistent for Coles to issue strong, personal critiques while characterizing my straightforward interaction with people's ideas as insulting. Still, Coles's charges must be evaluated carefully. If I am insulting people, however softly, healthy discussions are unlikely to occur. They are also unlikely to occur if people take offense when no insult—only critique—is offered.

So, have I insulted anyone? I *never* question anyone's character, intelligence, or value. I always assume the best about the motives of people I disagree with and even enjoin others to do the same (Rhodes 2022, 28, 51, 64). I certainly do not insult individuals. But do I, perhaps, insult people's ideas? Do I describe their ideas as stupid, or ill-motivated? The Gospel Coalition's review of *No Shortcut* notes, "While Rhodes names sources directly and identifies problems clearly, he does so without demonizing those he critiques. Identifying and critiquing problems is one thing; proposing solutions is another. But Rhodes doesn't disappoint. The bulk of *No Shortcut to Success* is a positive, biblical vision..." (Coleman 2022). Moreover, in *multiple* places (e.g., Rhodes 2022, 70, 72, 76, 82, 92, 95) I go out of my way to affirm aspects of movements methodologies. I critique practices I disagree with, but negative descriptors can be sincere warnings—rather than insults—if they are not used flippantly but in the context of a larger argument which gives evidence for their use. For example, Coles says it is insulting to describe movements methods as "silver-bullet" strategies. In fact, though, proponents of these methods have described them as "the most effective means in the world" (Garrison 2007, 195) to bring people to Christ, as "what God is doing... today" (Trousdale 2012, 17), and as so extraordinary that some "believe another 'Reformation' is underway" (Brown 2015). It is not "insulting" to warn about the "silver-bullet" nature of such claims. It is a warning to help young missionaries evaluate them soberly. If you think the warning unnecessary, our difference is only a difference of opinion. No insult has been offered.

Indeed, any full-length book will provide adequate material to cite single words or phrases which could seem insulting when pulled from their context. In a single article by Coles, he warns against "scoffers," "refusing to believe," "skepticism," and "[missing] out on the astonishing work of God" (Coles and Parks, 2019a). But Coles is not being insulting: he is presenting his concerns. I am glad he shared those concerns; now, if I disagree, I can explain why.

Missiological conversations can get far more intense than the current debate over movements methodologies. Recently, people on *both* sides of Insider-Movement conversations thought their detractors had altered the gospel itself. Regardless of how one evaluates such claims, controversies like these will inevitably arise, precisely because missiologists believe in the gospel's importance. Rather than viewing strong opinions as overly polemical—and essentially assuming serious errors

could not occur in missions today—we must labor to include such strong opinions in conversation and evaluate their substance. Interacting with critique can be painful and requires a thick skin. But conversations become sterile, and echo chambers form, when we only interact with our softest detractors. If missiology matters, we cannot afford to let that happen. Constructive conversation must include room for constructive critique; only through friction does iron sharpen iron.

So let's have these conversations with thick-skinned charity. I hope this article, together with the corresponding piece by Pam Arlund and Warrick Farah (Arlund and Farah 2022), can offer a constructive example of discussing movements missiologies. Arlund and Farah review *No Shortcut* from a movements methodologist's perspective while promoting the Motus Dei network and its self-titled book on movements methodologies (Farah, ed. 2021). They have been good conversation partners. I have enjoyed our discussion and will continue by interacting with their review. Its overall message is that I mischaracterize movements methodologies and issue outdated critiques.

### **Back to the Sources**

Arlund and Farah provide a list of eight “incredibly valuable works” (Arlund and Farah 2022, 12). I do not cite. This list is produced as evidence that I have not adequately understood movements methodologies. Somewhat awkwardly, seven of these eight works never once cite any of the others, and the vast majority of contributions to the book *Motus Dei* (Farah, ed. 2021) never cite them either. Similarly, then, if my contribution fails to explicitly cite these works, I hope that will not be counted too heavily against it! Given the “voluminous... published literature on movements” which Arlund and Farah note (Arlund and Farah 2022, 5), it is not possible—in a book like *No Shortcut* that already quotes over 100 external sources—to explicitly cite each work each reviewer finds significant, and reviewers may raise the bar too high by assembling such lists after the fact. Public discussions of ideologies necessarily focus on the most influential contributions. Thus, I primarily cite “resources written by the known leaders and principal designers of these methods” (Rhodes 2022, 59). Arlund and Farah's list includes works that only exist as online PDFs (Prinz 2016) or are written for U.S.-American church settings (Hirsh 2016). In contrast, other sources that I quote extensively (e.g., Watson and Watson 2014) each have far more customer reviews (on Amazon and Goodreads) than all the works they cite put together and have been the foundation for movements trainings across the missions world.

Arlund and Farah also take issue with the missionary success stories I cite, arguing I draw extensively from “Western missionary examples” from “the nineteenth century” while offering “no contemporary examples” of success (Arlund and Farah 2022, 10). Is my missiology stuck in the 1800s? Perhaps I can ease their concerns: I know of many, many contemporary success stories. *No Shortcut* argues from older examples for two reasons. First, contemporary successes I point to will strike readers as unfamiliar and anecdotal, while even Arlund and Farah recognize and honor the old “pioneers” (Arlund and Farah 2022, 10). Second, I want to show how modern missiologies differ from past missiologies. If I differ with Arlund and Farah, it is only in my belief that older examples remain as relevant as recent ones. The world has changed, but human spiritual needs have not.

### **Speed and Sequentialism**

Arlund and Farah disagree with my view that movements models place too much emphasis on speed (Arlund and Farah 2022, 8-9). Of course, no one *intentionally* bypasses scriptural patterns

for the sake of speed. But movements methodologies' first designers idealized streamlining church structures wherever scripturally possible (Rhodes 2022, 77–78). To the extent we follow their methodologies, we will inherit their emphasis on speed *whether we intend to or not*. Arlund, for example, warns against “violating the principle of speed,” and her missiological decisions take into account “... a pragmatic question: How can the most number of people hear about Jesus in the shortest amount of time? Church-Planting Movements are the fastest-growing expression of Jesus on the planet today” (Arlund 2013, 17).

Here is where movements methodologies' emphasis on speed gets dangerous: if the early designers exegeted Scripture poorly—if they unintentionally jettisoned scriptural practices in their pursuit of speed—then we may inherit their errors.

*No Shortcut* describes in detail where I think these errors lie (Rhodes 2022, 67–107). I will summarize here by saying I believe Scripture shows that spiritual maturity and healthy ministry growth, like all maturity and healthy growth, largely come through processes we cannot bypass. *First* we learn language, *then* we can minister effectively. *First* we mature in Scripture, *then* we can lead. Movements methodologies tend to reject this belief as unhealthy “sequentialism” (Garrison 2007, 243; Arlund and Farah 2022, 11).

Statements like “go slow first to go fast later” (Arlund and Farah 2022, 9) are too vague to reassure me when movements literature is filled with statements extolling speed. Indeed, Kebreab's recent research of 129 movements primarily among unreached groups shows the average time between initial engagement of a people and reported arrival at “the movement stage” (“more than a hundred churches planted, four or more generations deep”) is 42 months, with some movements only needing three months (Kebreab 2021, 31–32). If movements were to begin the day missionaries arrived, four generations in 42 months would require churches to grow and duplicate every ten months—far faster than the growth rate of the apostles' church in Acts (Rhodes 2022, 71–72). Four generations in three months would require duplication *every three weeks*.

Given these concerns, here is a clearer statement that might reassure me:

- New believers need significant time to mature before assuming any significant leadership responsibilities (1 Tim. 3:6; Tit. 1:9).

Movements proponents still argue the opposite (Farah 2022; Coles 2021, 44–45).

Here nuance is required. Arlund and Farah are correct to insist we can minister in a “shepherd-disciple or guide-apprentice role” (Arlund and Farah 2022, 8) and that spiritual maturation is not *linear*. They fail, however, to appreciate the ways in which it still is *progressive*. In scriptural shepherd-disciple relationships, new disciples had not progressed enough to have responsibility for several additional generations of disciples who were each simultaneously discipling several other generations of disciples. The hierarchy between Paul, Timothy, and the Ephesians was one of *gifting* and *office*:

- *Not*: mature shepherd → new disciple → new disciple → new disciple;
- *Instead*: mature apostle → mature evangelist (2 Tim. 4:5) → mature elder (1 Tim. 3:6) → mixed congregation.

Because growth is a process, proclamational missionaries believe both slowness and speed are dangerous at their extremes. Build too slow and growth will not happen (note that I am pro-multiplication). Build too fast and you might short-circuit essential growth processes. What is “too fast?” Scriptural practices are the only meaningful yardstick. To the extent I emphasize “a slow, thorough path” (Arlund and Farah 2022, 8), I do so because I am responding to missiologies that seem to bypass scriptural practices to achieve faster growth.

Perhaps the lens of “growth-as-a-process” can ease Arlund and Farah’s (and Coles’s) worry that I am placing Western missionaries at the center of missions. Since John Nevius, the wider missions community has prioritized indigenous church leadership. I have no interest in *Westerners* leading. I simply believe people should be disciplined by *mature believers* before becoming leaders. And in most unengaged contexts—where mature indigenous believers do not yet exist—the task of raising up leaders will fall to outside missionaries. Of course, this paradigm is time-bound and I never imply that those missionaries must be *Westerners*. Thus *ecclesiological constructs* are at stake here, not the “colonial construct[s] of mission, ‘From the West to the rest’” that Arlund and Farah warn against (Arlund and Farah 2022, 10). Similarly, I am confused by warnings that “North American churches in particular need to be extremely careful not to promote a universality of ‘professional’ standards formed in highly affluent and educated Western contexts, elevated standards that *No Shortcut* implies” (Arlund and Farah, 2022, 8). Most likely they have misunderstood me—otherwise, I would worry they might be underestimating our non-Western brothers and sisters. Every culture has people who can attain the standards I am advocating: long-term commitment, language-and-culture mastery, and scriptural depth. Academic orientation may help some, but many non-Western cultures are highly academic, and those that are not may bring other strengths to the table. Happily, more and more successful missionaries are non-Western!

### **Straw-man Portrayals?**

Next, Arlund and Farah feel I mischaracterize movements methodologies’ practices. Yet the ideas that concern me remain prevalent in movements literature.

For example, Arlund and Farah claim my concern about movement methodologies’ limited emphasis on language acquisition is a mischaracterization (Arlund and Farah 2022, 7). Their acknowledgement of language acquisition as essential is a welcome step in the right direction, and I appreciate Arlund’s own linguistic background. However, Arlund and Farah seem to feel language is adequately emphasized in the movements community. I see underemphasis of language in nearly all segments of the missions world, and the movements community is no exception. Movements literature as a whole is almost completely silent on the importance of language acquisition (*Motus Dei* continues this tradition); it also contains multiple denials of its importance and endorsements of working through translators (Rhodes 2022, 145–147). Perhaps Arlund and Farah define *proficiency* differently: the level of proficiency I am advocating *must* be strongly encouraged or it will not happen. It is safe to assume that most missionaries describe themselves as proficient—but most missionaries (movements proponents or not) are only able to follow simple conversations between mother-tongue speakers. Real mastery takes painstaking, nose-to-grindstone years. This standard contrasts with *Motus Dei’s* report that the average movement begins experiencing explosive growth long before missionaries have a chance to reach meaningful levels of proficiency (Kebreab 2021, 31–32). What would reassure me more is for movement practitioners to affirm what they have historically denied (see Rhodes 2002, 145–147): “Missionaries are severely limited in ministry until achieving language-mastery and should usually

devote their first years on the field to full-time language acquisition.” Arlund and Farah’s article declines to do so. Until movements leaders begin to assert this kind of commitment, it will not be clear to me that my concerns about language mastery being shortchanged are mischaracterizations. Rather, Arlund and Farah’s feeling that this is the case may only underscore our differences regarding the nature and importance of language mastery.

Similarly, Arlund and Farah suggest my concerns about movements methodologies’ aversion to direct teaching are outdated (Arlund and Farah 2022, 12). Yet the essay they endorse in *Motus Dei* as having addressed my concerns repeats caricatures of direct teaching as “one-way lecture; one person talks and everyone else listens quietly” (Coles 2021, 43). That essay appreciatively quotes the Watsons’ comment that “outsiders facilitate rather than teach” and endorses only the “non-directive biblical teaching” that Bible-study facilitators offer by asking questions (Coles 2021, 43). Other quotes from *Motus Dei* even portray direct teaching as overbearing: “Discovery style study encourages the group to ask questions... rather than having them rely on an expert to tell them what to believe” (Adams and Adams 2021, 320). Other recent sources repeat the point, advising that “Outsiders facilitate, rather than teach” (Watson 2019, 71, 73), and promoting discovery groups that are “facilitated (*not* taught)” (emphasis original; Coles and Parks 2019b, 318).

Facilitated “discovery” methods certainly have value, but the point of my critique was that movements methodologies’ over-emphasis on simple, rapidly-reproducible methods leads them to promote “discovery” and undervalue direct teaching. For example, Arlund writes about a “9-year-old Bible storyteller [who] is the best preacher out of fifty house churches in that area.” This nine-year-old’s stories—and her mother’s facilitative questions—help “seekers and new believers” to feed a network of churches spiritually (Arlund 2013, 16–17). Doubtless there is more to the story than Arlund’s article reveals, but her unqualified appreciation of this story—and omission of further details—clearly shows that she places less value on direct teaching than I would. Naturally, then, Arlund and Farah will see my concerns as straw men, but that may only underscore where we actually differ. If my concerns truly mischaracterize movements methodologies, practitioners need only advocate the following statement (Arlund and Farah again decline to do so): “Churches remain immature and in danger until mature leaders are established who can teach deeply and directly through the ‘whole counsel of God’” (Acts 20:27).

I would welcome clear statements like these. I do not question that *movements* happen (Korea in the twentieth century, for example). My concern is that *movements methodologies* seem to lose sight of certain biblical emphases in pursuing them. I would welcome clear commitments to these emphases. Movements methodologies have other healthy aspects to offer, and I have no desire to paint them “in a black/white, valid/invalid framework” (Arlund and Farah 2022, 1) as Arlund and Farah fear.

Arlund and Farah are correct that diversity of ideas exists within the movements community. Yet this is true of all ideological communities—evangelical, postmodern, LGBTQ+, etc. Nevertheless, public discourse requires appropriate generalization in order to discuss common emphases of each ideological community. Multiple leading movements methodologists have affirmed, and many continue to affirm, the practices I critique. Healthy conversation must address these leaders’ clear, frequent statements. If Arlund and Farah disagree with the practices these leaders promote, they might serve readers better by echoing my concerns about parts of their community than by dismissing my concerns as mischaracterizations. Doing so would not cede the

debate over movements methodologies, and it might lead to healthier movements practices! Alternatively, if Arlund and Farah see the practices I critique as acceptable, then at least in their case, my characterizations are correct.

### **What Is Really Happening?**

Last, Arlund and Farah believe my missiology does not take real-world phenomena adequately into account, critiquing my primarily Scripture-based approach as one of “abstract concepts” not “based on real-world phenomena” (Arlund and Farah, 2022, 6). Missiology should be primarily Scripture-driven, and I would not demand observable confirmation of missions strategies without first establishing that their scriptural basis was weak. While I do engage with real-world events (e.g. Rhodes 2022, 56–66), I place less emphasis on them. Below, I offer three reasons why.

First, different “real-world” experiences provide people with different perspectives. Arlund and Farah suggest I would understand better if I had more real-life experiences with movements. In fact, I have spent years working under movements practitioners. I have visited reported movement locations. Near where I live, two people groups were reported as “reached,” with several hundred churches planted in each. Those of us on the ground know that one group does not have *a single believer*; the other does not have *a single church*. Reports like these could dissuade new missionaries from going to groups that remain unengaged. Do Arlund and Farah’s experiences convince them of movements methodologies? Mine leave me concerned! Whose experiences should guide us?

Second, our ability to assess real-world phenomena is limited. We will only know the quality of each person’s work when “the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done” (1 Cor 3:13). The collapse of Mars Hill Church (Welch 2014) showed how vibrant a fast-growing movement can appear—even to those who share that church’s culture—before the cracks become clear. Caution is needed, then, in letting our assessments of contemporary movements or churches inform our missiologies. Scripture provides a more reliable assessment of what is truly happening than our observations can.

Third and finally, movement methodologists’ interpretation of real-world events could lead to overly results-driven missiologies. Farah writes, “God has quietly brought 1% of the world into his Kingdom through church planting movements in the past 25 years, mostly among Hindus and Muslims. We have much to learn from these remarkable movements...” (Farah and Hirsch 2021). If we have “much to learn” because many people came to faith quickly, then numbers *are* influencing missiology. These numerical claims exert powerful influence on young missionaries (Rhodes 2022, 51–52). To one extent this is appropriate: those numbers count *people*, and people are important. However, when extraordinary numbers are used in trainings and literature to press for large-scale missiological changes which affect thousands of missionaries and untold numbers of unreached people, these numerical claims bear a substantial burden of evidence.

Unfortunately, Farah neglects to mention that the numbers he cites are highly controversial. I have explained my related concerns in detail (Rhodes 2022, 57-65) and cannot find any corresponding explanation that seems to justify the confidence with which numbers are often reported. We are simply informed that nearly 1,500 movements exist in the world, comprising 1% of the world’s population (see Coles 2022a; Coles 2022c; Farah and Hirsch 2021). No evidence is given except the affirmation of Justin Long—who heads the team that compiled the numbers—that they come from “trusted movement practitioners” (Coles 2022c). I was an epidemiologist for

years, so measuring the spread of fast-moving phenomena through populations is precisely my wheelhouse. During the COVID pandemic, tiny differences estimating the speed of transmission had led to massively different projections of the virus's spread. The world's best statisticians gave projections that were massively wrong. In the United States, for example, it was initially supposed that a two-week partial economic shutdown might be sufficient to flatten the curve of the pandemic. Insofar as Long's numbers are projections not counts, they also are inherently unstable. Doubtless, Long is doing his best as he compiles these numbers! But if the numbers *matter*, his claim to trust the hundreds of people who provided data—many in countries he has never visited—is not enough. In his chapter in *Motus Dei*, Long provides little clarity about how numbers are generated, except in the smallest movements, where the data collector knows everyone (Long 2021, 70). With larger movements, Long speaks of using “estimates,” “averages,” and “surveys” (Long 2021, 71). He does not explain what is estimated (or how), what averages are measured (or how), what surveys are taken (or how), or how he uses the results to size movements in the millions. With the largest of all movements, Long is even more vague: “most leaders” are visited “to gather both quantitative and qualitative data” and generate estimates—we are not told how—that are “accurate and very precise” (Long 2021, 72). Far more transparency into Long's methods could be offered without compromising believers' safety.

Indeed, no other discipline would accept numbers with so little justification. In business, if we were counting millions of dollars, rather than millions of people, we would demand far more careful accounting—because business people know that money matters. And if colleagues voiced concerns about the numbers, we would immediately investigate, because money matters. But people matter, too, and where accounting is so vague, the movements community should view concerns about numbers more seriously than it has. It is no longer adequate to respond, “*Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: “Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you... How many of us are... refusing to believe the report that our answer is knocking at the door?”* (emphasis original; Coles and Parks, 2019a). Numbers are not an article of faith, and those of us who desire more justification are not “scoffers... refusing to believe.” Rather, *we are concerned about the people these numbers represent.*

To the extent movement proponents are concerned with real-world phenomena, they might join me in calling for real investigation into what is really happening! For a fraction of the cost that has gone into collecting and promoting such numbers, nonpartisan Christian experts with credentials recognized by the outside world could research their validity. Until that happens, let's admit how much we do not know rather than presenting confident numbers—which seem to carry the certainty and science of hard fact—to churches and impressionable young missionaries.

### **Back to Scripture**

Numbers are interesting but often unclear. Experiences are powerful but not definitive. The heat of conversation is worth watching but not the main point. All these topics are worth discussing, but none is a substitute for careful, scriptural examination of our missiology. Discussions about missions methodologies rarely get as far as examining the Scriptures. Until they do, conversation is likely to get stuck. For example, there is no point discussing whether or not people should teach more directly if we disagree over what the Scriptures say about direct teaching. Discussion participants will only feel mischaracterized, rendering real discussion impossible.

I have already described my scriptural concerns with movement methodologies at length (Rhodes 2022, 67–107). I will not repeat them here in full, but by way of a one-sentence list they include movement methodologies’ over-emphasis on rapid growth, minimizing of direct teaching, frequent emphasis on external obedience over against the knowledge of God in discipleship, the outsized role given to “persons-of-peace” and the *oikos*, and the promotion of new believers to leadership. Arlund and Farah suggest Coles’s essay in *Motus Dei* (which was published before *No Shortcut*) substantially anticipated my concerns (Arlund and Farah 2022, 5), but Coles was not prescient enough to anticipate or respond to the scriptural substance of my critique. Coles seems to recognize this, noting that each of my concerns would still “require its own essay” in response (Coles 2022b). Very well, if missiology matters—and if we still have much to learn from each other—let’s write the essays!

Thousands of missionaries are sent out every year. Their training will profoundly affect their lives and those of lost people around them. It is our responsibility as Christians and professionals to investigate how to train them most effectively, even if it takes a few essays.

Let’s spill some ink.

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