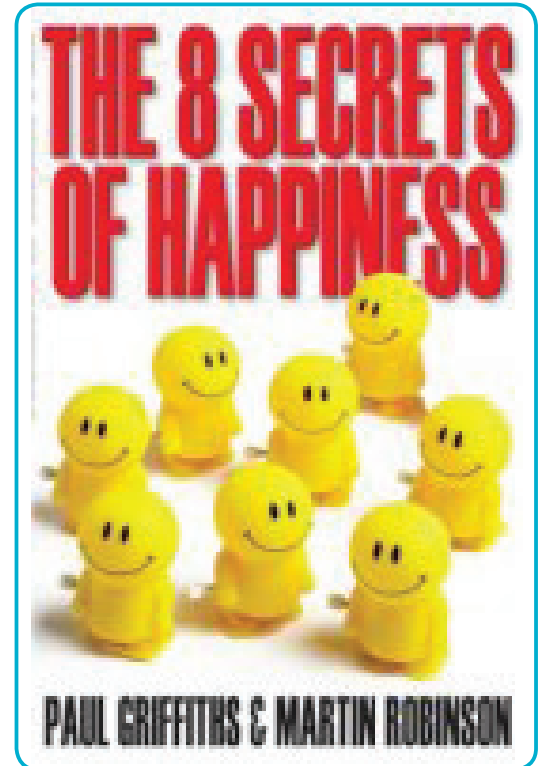


The 8 Secrets of Happiness

Martin Robinson and Paul Griffiths
(Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2009)
ISBN 9780745953298
160 pages; rrp £7.99



This book will appeal to everyone who is seeking practical guidance for a happier existence; and it may well attract the attention of grass-root church practitioners looking for a 'pre-Alpha' resource that could start their un-churched friends and neighbours off on a spiritual journey.

The 8 Secrets of Happiness focuses on key areas identified by up-to-date psychological research as well as old-time philosophy and religion. The authors conclude that lasting happiness is impossible without acknowledging a spiritual dimension.

The underlying assumption that human beings have a soul, which transcends and will never be fully satisfied with the material world, however, is not rammed down the post-Christian reader's throat; instead, they are gently encouraged to consider the possibility of a God-shaped void within them. And the authors repeatedly make the point that wisdom for living is found not only in the Bible, but also outside Judaeo-Christian spirituality.

It would appear that Paul Griffiths and Martin Robinson went for subtlety to keep non-religious readers from putting the book down before reaching page two; the price to pay is that the connections

drawn between the subject matter and the Bible are so brief and scattered that some readers may wonder why they were put there in the first place. Having said that, I could still see the book being successfully used in the aforementioned pre-Alpha context; Christians and non-Christians could read the *8 Secrets* as a group, with the former helping the latter to explore further the biblical themes to which the book merely alludes.

Its underlying spiritual dimension apart, *The 8 Secrets of Happiness* is essentially a 'how to' book. An emphasis on learning – step by step – to tackle the practical challenges of daily life pushes abstract musings on the human condition into the background. Happiness is tangible. But it doesn't just happen. Contentment can be achieved, as it were, through daily training.

As a first step on the road to happiness we are encouraged to resist the lure of materialism and to be grateful for what we have – to count our blessings. Step two consists of practising acts of kindness, and while the authors remind us that our motivation should be altruistic, they point out that people who care about others tend to be happier themselves. The third

secret of happiness lies in the ability to savour truly the good things in life. The remaining chapters deal with forgiveness, relationships, stress, hardship and looking after your body as well as your soul.

In a sense, the eight secrets of happiness may seem pretty obvious, but the issue is not whether we agree with what's wrong with the world, and us, but whether we are going to do something about it – a small step at a time. Once the reader actually begins to take these small steps, they may well find that this book is starting to transform their life; and they will discover that the secret of happiness is not found in looking after number one, but in the growing awareness of how their own small existence fits into God's big picture of the dignity, beauty and mystery of life.

Michael Pfundner
Church Programme Manager, Bible
Society