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Is Faith Genetic? (Participant's Guide)

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Participant's Guide to

Is Faith Genetic?

A Study of *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into Our Genes*

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Summer 2017

How to Use This Material?

This study of the genetics of spirituality using Dean Hamer's *The God Gene* consists of three modules. Each module contains two sections. The first section presents a set of Reading and Reflection questions that are to be completed before each meeting and are meant to help the participant wrestle with the concepts introduced in that week's chapters. The second section consists of two (or more) Discussion questions, which will be written by the participants and the leader as they read. Both sets of questions are meant to foster discussion, but your group should by no means limit itself to the questions contained in these sections.

This study is intended for **informal, small group** discussion, such as that of a Bible study or small group. The themes presented in each submodule may be unpacked on its own, but it is the hope of the authors that the entire study may be useful to the interested reader (leader and participant alike). The study is also aimed toward **high school students, college students, and post-college adults** with an interest in how science and the Christian faith interact.

As you read, it is our hope that you will come across (and come up with) questions which challenge you, both in understanding your personal faith and in understanding science. In these questions, you will have the opportunity to grow through asking and answering these questions: Why has the church historically believed in *this* answer or *that* answer? How might you be challenged to defend your answer?

Who is the author of *The God Gene*?

Dean Hamer is a behavioural geneticist from New Jersey. He earned his Ph.D. from Harvard Medical School and was an independent researcher at the National Institutes of Health for 35 years. In 2011, he was given the title Scientists Emeritus from the United States National Cancer Institute. He is most known for his research on the role genetics play in a person's sexual orientation and human behaviour.

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Module 1: Introduction to the Genetics of Faith

Chapters covered: “Spiritual Instinct,” “Self-Transcendence,” “An Inherited Predisposition,” and “The God Gene”

Reading and Reflection

“Spiritual Instinct”

1. Do you think that there is a biological basis for spirituality? Why or why not? If spirituality can be described by science, would that undermine your faith?
2. Do you believe that there is a difference between religiosity and spirituality? How would you define each? Can you be spiritual without being religious? Or can you be religious without being spiritual?
3. How does Hamer define consciousness? What role might monoamines play in consciousness?
4. What value does Hamer see in having a “God gene”? Do you agree with his assessment?

“Self-Transcendence”

1. How would you rate on Cloninger’s self-transcendence scale? Is self-transcendence a desirable characteristic?

“An Inherited Predisposition”

1. What do you think about the idea that spirituality is “an inherited predisposition”? If people’s spirituality is at least in part influenced by genetics, can unspiritual people overcome the genetic barrier to improve their spirituality? Can unspiritual people be faulted for their lack of spiritualness?

“The God Gene”

1. What do you think of the process of finding “a God gene” Hamer describes? What does it tell you about how the studies of psychology or genetics are conducted? Does the process Hamer describes make sense to you?

2. If you could run a test to determine which type of VMAT2 gene you have, would you? If you did, would it impact the way you viewed or engaged in religious and spiritual activities?

Discussion

In addition to thinking about the above reading questions, please write two questions of your own regarding the chapters you read for today.

1.

2.

Module 2: How Genes Shape Faith

Chapters covered: “Monoamines and Mysticism,” “The Way Things Seem,” “How the Brain Sees God,” and “Evolving Faith”

Reading and Reflection

“Monoamines and Mysticism”

1. What do you think about drug-induced (or drug-inspired) religious experiences? Are they valid? Are they helpful? Are they deceptive?

2. What does it mean for something to be “supernatural”? Do biological descriptions of intense spiritual experiences invade the territory of the supernatural? Can there be overlap between the supernatural and the physical?

“The Way Things Seem”

1. What is the difference between core consciousness and higher consciousness?

2. Does a biological description of how we perceive, know, and think make our thoughts and feelings less real, valid, or reliable? Why or why not?

“How the Brain Sees God”

1. What do you think of the idea that the apostle Paul may have had temporal lobe epilepsy? Do you think that this might be true? What would be the implications of Paul having a neurological condition? Would it make his writings any less valid or valuable? Could God use mental disorders to reveal Himself to us?
2. What do you think of Hamer’s concluding statement, “We do not know God; we feel him” (139). Do you believe this? What do you think of the way Hamer supported this argument in the chapter?

“Evolving Faith”

1. What do you think of faith healing? What do you think of the Christian Science approach to medicine? Is it wrong to depend on conventional means for healing rather than divine intervention?
2. What do you think of the suggested relationship between faith and health? What do you think of Hamer’s tentative suggestion that “God genes” confer evolutionary advantages?

3. What do you think of the “Prayer for the Sick” study proposed in 1872? What about the subsequent “power of prayer” studies described? Is it wrong to study something like prayer scientifically?

Discussion

In addition to thinking about the above reading questions, please write two questions of your own regarding the chapters you read for today.

- 1.

- 2.

Module 3: What Does This Mean for Religions?

Chapters covered: “Religion: From Genes to Memes,” “The DNA of the Jews,” and “God is Alive”

Reading and Reflection

“Religion: From Genes to Memes”

1. What do you think of the idea of “memes,” as Hamers describes them? Is it reasonable to ascribe selfishness to an idea?

2. Why do you think that people become religious or stay faithful to the religion they learned growing up? What role does culture play? What role do personal religious experiences play?

“The DNA of the Jews

1. What do you think of Hamer’s descriptions of God’s interactions with the Jews in the Old Testament?

“God Is Alive”

1. What do we do with Hamer’s discussion of “God genes”? Should it influence the way we view our own spirituality and (or) religion? Should it impact the way Christians go about evangelism? Do you agree with the approach to consilience that Hamer describes?

2. Do you agree that “the act of believing” is “one of the greatest gifts of being human (215)? Why or why not?

Discussion

In addition to thinking about the above reading questions, please write two questions of your own regarding the chapters you read for today.

- 1.

- 2.

Bibliography

Hamer, D. *The God Gene*. New York: Anchor, 2004. Print.