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DESIGNER GENES

(Written by Scott Temple, published by Springfield News Leader, March 2001)

Last month two teams of scientists announced the sequencing of genes in the human body. Their finds were published in the journals Science and Nature. Since the impact of the Human Genome Project (HGP) will affect us all, people should consider what this advance means.

HGP will advance genetic engineering. It seems wrong to use this technology to cosmetically alter a person's appearance or modify behavior. However, it would seem good to use it to control disease or make a matched organ for transplant.

HGP will advance cloning. Four years ago the first of several mammals were cloned from embryos. It was interesting that the question that determined the winner in this month's Miss USA contest was, "Do you think a human should be cloned?" All three finalists answered emphatically, "No!" They agree with 90% of Americans.

The publicly funded HGP, led by Dr. Francis Collins, at a cost of \$300 million, and the privately funded HGP, led by Dr. Craig Venter of Celera, reached the same surprising conclusions. The three things that surprised the 2,000 international scientists involved could be summed up in three words: Simplicity, Similarity, and Symphony.

First, we are genetically simple. After years of guessing that a human has over 100,000 genes, it turns out to be only 34,000. As Dr. Venter put it, "We have about twice as many genes as a fly and the same number as corn. Think of that the next time you eat corn." Dr. Eric Lander, a researcher in the HGP, said "The great mystery is how we manage to be so complex with so few genes."

Secondly, we are genetically similar. The DNA of all human beings is 99.9% identical. As Dr. Collins told an audience at Harvard "There is no scientific basis for using ethnic or racial categories." Genetic researcher Dr. Harold P. Freeman said, "The mapping of the human genome could be pivotal in promoting the concept of one race, the human race."

Thirdly, our genes are coordinated like a genetic symphony. Dr. Collins calls our genome "the book of life" written in "the language of God." Dr. Gene Myers, Celera's computer genius, said, "What really astounds me is the architecture of life. The system is extremely complex. It's like it was designed."

Designed? Designer? What surprises the scientist doesn't surprise people of faith. It's as if the scientists have climbed a mountain of knowledge only to discover the Christian seated at the pinnacle with a Bible in hand. The mystery of life cannot be understood apart from God.

God made us out of simple stuff. Genesis records that "God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." Our complexity cannot be discovered scientifically. We have a spirit and a soul.

God made us similar. "Eve (is) the mother of all living." As the scientists have proven, we are all distant cousins. Perhaps now we can move beyond the ignorance of "other

racess" and begin celebrating the unity of one human race. Love your neighbor as yourself. After all, he's 99.9% just like you!

God is conducting the orchestra. God is life's creator and maintainer. Harvard professor Wally Gilbert said that we are free to believe that God did it. With the freedom that only faith affords, I respond to the breathtaking announcement of the HGP by worshipping the Creator who gave me the breath of life. I believe "In the beginning, God."