CHAPTER ONE

WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD STUDY SOCIOLOGY

This chapter acknowledges misconceptions associated with sociology and discusses the reason for the inclusion of sociology as part of a balanced curriculum. Three reasons are then advanced as to why Christians ought to study sociology. These include the biblically-based group focus of the discipline, its potential to instill in people an awareness of themselves and others, and its capacity to empower people with a thorough grasp of their social world.

Some Christians, Perkins (1987) has observed, have “deep misgivings about sociology.” The fear is that students who take sociology as a course in college may have their religious conviction “…undermined, if not destroyed” (p. 13). However, in spite of the alleged fear, Christian colleges and universities continue to offer sociology as a course to their students. In light of this, it seems relevant to ask the following questions: Why do professors and students at Christian colleges teach and study sociology? Can the teaching and study of sociology facilitate a deeper understanding of the Christian life? Can it serve as a vehicle for building faith?

To begin to understand the reason for offering sociology as an academic discipline at a Christian college/university, we must first understand the broader purpose of the educational enterprise. Educational institutions aim at exposing students to a variety of experiences, with the ultimate purpose of preparing them for life. The goal of the education offered, at least from the Christian standpoint, is to equip students with the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and perspectives that will enable them to live meaningfully and fully in this world as a preparation for heaven. Hence, the selection of a curriculum for a Christian school presupposes a careful analysis and grasp of humans’ life activities and need dispositions. Thus questions are raised as to how these life activities and need dispositions

1. The social construction focus of the discipline, the view that reality is basically a human-made product, seems to be the source of concern for some, and the basis of the perceived threat. (See Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion.)
are to be characterized, and what, in this light, constitutes a meaningful educative process.

Though positions vary on the qualities that are considered central to a person’s development, and those deemed important but not central (Pring, 1987), educators generally agree on the holistic nature of human beings. Despite the varied views advanced on this subject (Nohria, Lawrence, & Wilson, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Thompson, Grace, & Cohen, 2001), some basic needs have been determined. Maslow (1970) conceives of these in terms of lower and higher order needs. He identifies six levels of need, with the physiological being the lowest and self-actualization the highest. Pratt’s (1994) classification of philosophical, social, aesthetic, and survival needs is similar to Ellen White’s (1903) formulation of the physical, mental, spiritual, and social faculties. Based on these categorized needs, core experiences considered necessary to facilitate a person’s meaningful and optimum development have been identified.

Educational institutions, particularly Christian schools, aim at providing a balanced education. Thus, the various core areas of the curriculum—such as the natural sciences, the social sciences, the arts, and the humanities—take a cue from and are organized in keeping with the needs identified above. The objective is to facilitate the individual students’ optimal development in the way best suited to these needs. As White (1903) has suggested, the process of education is concerned with the holistic development of the mental, physical, spiritual, and moral faculties, with the ultimate goal being the Godlikeness of the student. In this regard, where does sociology come in?

The Sociological Focus

Sociology, like the other social sciences (psychology, anthropology, political science, and economics), is concerned with the study of human behavior. Why, then, should not any one of these disciplines suffice for an understanding of the social dimension of human life? The reason lies in the complex nature of human beings, which cannot be understood from a single perspective, and in the efforts of various scholars to understand the human condition from their various philosophical positions.

Sociology as a method of approach and a body of knowledge differs from the other social sciences in that it emphasizes the “groupness” of human behavior. The basic argument advanced in this perspective is that human behavior is strongly contingent upon social norms and values that
result from group interaction. This group-based (interpersonal) perspective is somewhat unlike the more individualistic (intrapersonal) emphasis associated with human behavior by some divisions of the social sciences.

Economists, for example, tend to point out the utilitarian nature of human behavior, positing rational choice as the basis of such behavior (Rawls, 1992). They suggest that human beings calculate their choices and negotiate their responses to the various demands of their environment in terms of cost and benefit outcomes. In other words, an individual will most likely carry out and repeat a course of action he or she deems to be beneficial. On the other hand, if that individual does not consider the particular behavior to be beneficial, it will not be carried out, much less be repeated. However, while sociologists do not deny the role of rational choice as a feature of human activities, they do not hold it as the primary motivating force of these activities. Sociologists point to the fact that many human behaviors are carried out without regard to their value. Many people, for example, continue to adhere to social practices (e.g., cigarette smoking or hazing) that are clearly not in their best physical interest. Yet they are inclined to indulge in these practices, largely because of the weight of social expectations.

Emile Durkheim (1964), who in many ways can be seen as the premier architect of the sociological perspective, argues for an external locus for human activities. He maintains that social facts which are group-produced and group-sustained phenomena constitute the mainspring of human conduct. In the development of his ideas on the forces that inform human behavior, Durkheim takes issue with the reigning theories of psychology and sociobiology of his time period. While psychology proposes that human behavior is due to psychological factors, such as the will and other characteristics of the mind, sociobiology suggests that biological principles, such as genetic predispositions and hormonal levels, are the real cause of human behavior. Contrary to both of these views, Durkheim argues that the ways in which people relate to the world around them (construct, sustain, or deconstruct that world) are socially rooted.

For example, Durkheim notes that the ways people fulfill their duties in their jobs and other personal relationships have all been given in the social expectations and established practices of their society. In other words, the

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2. Durkheim (1964) defines social facts as “ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him” (p. 3).
ways people relate to their brothers, mothers, or bosses are largely determined by the norms of the society in which they live. The key, therefore, to understanding human behavior lies in a study of social facts. In keeping with this Durkheimian logic, sociologists recognize that there is an objective, socially-created reality in social facts that provides the impetus for and sustenance of human action and interaction.

This group-focused approach to human behavior seems to ignore the biblical view that each human is responsible for his or her actions (2 Cor. 5:10), however. While this is true to some extent, it is the contention of this author that the characterization of the sociological perspective as antibiblical will not hold up upon closer inspection. In fact, in this study, I shall argue that the group focus of sociologists in their quest to understand human behavior and society is largely defensible within the biblical view of humans. This point will be articulated toward the end of this chapter as one of the principal reasons Christians ought to study sociology. But there are at least two other reasons for Christians to understand the human condition from the sociological perspective.

**Rationale for the Study of Sociology**

Sociology is a useful tool for Christians because (1) it provides an important account of the self and others, and (2) through it one can obtain a much-needed understanding of the social world. Of course, the position that sociology provides the only or even the best account of the human condition is not taken here. Human beings are far too complex to be reduced to a single disciplinary, perspectival explanation. Sociology is but one of several ways of viewing human beings.

The need for Christians to seek an authentic understanding of themselves and others derives in part from the commands of God to humans to “be fruitful and multiply…” (Gen. 1:28) and to love one another as they love themselves (Matt. 19:19). These injunctions loom even larger when viewed in the light of human beings bearing the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Indeed, to reproduce (multiply) selves created after the image of God and to love one’s self and extend that love to others cannot be attempted on the basis of mere guesswork and uninformed emotions. Thorough and systematic efforts are required. Moreover, it would be enormously difficult for humans made in the image of God to reproduce themselves and truly love themselves and others without an authentic awareness of the self and others. Common-sense
understanding would not suffice. Often such understandings display no more than a superficial, impressionistic grasp of the issues. In addition to inspired writings, we must draw upon the accumulated wisdom of the human race for clarity and direction.

Many people take their behavior for granted, seemingly unable to readily see their behavior within the multi-layered circumstances of their lives. Saddled with an individualistic ethos, most people seem to think of their behavior in terms of their personal qualities, thereby demonstrating a lack of the capacity to grasp the general in the particular, that is, to see themselves within the wider circumstances of their lives. In this they display a notorious innocence regarding the “thereness” component of their behavior. Yet this notion seems clearly biblical, in light of the Psalmist’s suggestion that God will take note when He documents the lives of the people that “this man was born there” (Ps. 87:6). The implication here seems to be that God considers the place of a person’s birth and his or her socialization experience to be important to his or her life activities and character formation. This position of the Psalmist is consistent with the sociological perspective, which pursues an understanding of the behavior of people within the context of their social locations.

**The Sociological Imagination**

C. Wright Mills, who drew upon and extended the Durkheimian notion of social facts, has given us perhaps the most insightful account of the “thereness” approach. Mills (1959) advances the notion of the “sociological imagination,” which is critical to understanding that the behavior of humans is guided by the normative demands of their society. He suggests that one who possesses the sociological imagination is able to see how history and biography intersect in their impact upon the lives of people.

In Mills’s (1959) own words, “the sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner and the external careers of a variety of individuals” and “to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society” (pp. 65–66). Accordingly, Mills argues that any social investigation properly carried out will demonstrate a grasp of human conduct as a function of the intersection of history (those broad structural features within a society) and biography (the personal and more immediate circumstances of the lives of individuals).