

Evaluating the Lausanne Congress's Seoul Statement

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Each world congress of the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelisation (LCWE) has produced a statement presenting a theology of mission as well as the major challenges of world evangelisation. The first was the now famous Lausanne Covenant (1974), which was followed by the Manila Manifesto (1989) and the Cape Town Commitment (2010). Following this custom, the fourth world congress in Seoul-Incheon in September 2024 released the Seoul Statement, as well as the complementary *State of the Great Commission Report* (SGCR).¹

How do I, as an outsider and sympathetic observer of the Lausanne Movement, evaluate the Seoul congress documents? I notice a number of important aspects. In the area of mission theology: the emphasis on the Great Commission as the basis and content of mission, the double priority of evangelisation and discipleship, and the introduction of a new mission model or paradigm of 'presence, proclamation and practice'. With respect to the practice of evangelisation: the emphasis on the vital role of the local church, and the clear position on a number of ethical issues, notably sexuality, gender, marriage and family.

In this article, I will summarise these aspects, make comments and formulate some questions and critical remarks. But before I deal with the content of the two documents, a word about their making is appropriate. In the article 'Introducing the Seoul Statement', published on the LCWE website, we read that these documents are complementary and should be read and studied together, as 'an informative and inspirational tool for the global church'. Both documents were written in advance by a Theology Working Group, confirmed by the leadership of Lausanne, and made public at the beginning of the congress in Seoul-Incheon.

The purpose of the Seoul Statement is not to replace previous congress declarations, but to affirm them and build further on them, by focusing on 'biblical and theological gaps'. Thus, the authors have selected seven areas to which the previous Lausanne documents, in their view, had not given sufficient attention: the Gospel, the Bible, the Church, Man Created in the Image of God, Discipleship, Family of Nations, and New Technologies.

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¹ Seoul Statement: <https://lausanne.org/statement/the-seoul-statement>; State of the Great Commission Report: <https://lausanne.org/report>.

The SGCR opens with an article on the theological foundation of the Great Commission, which is followed by 23 short chapters with statistical information about major trends that are shaping the world and the church, and about areas needing greater strategic collaborative action in the area of evangelisation. It also contains regional reports from the 12 regions into which the LCWE has divided the world.

Mission is Great Commission

What is the importance of the Seoul documents in the area of mission theology? Seoul marks the 50th anniversary of the missiological debate about what ‘mission’ entails. It was sparked by the Lausanne Covenant of 1974, which proposed a comprehensive definition of the mission of the church, mainly in terms of evangelisation—the *proclamation* of the gospel. But in its famous paragraph 5, this understanding was broadened to include the *demonstration* of the gospel, through providing humanitarian aid striving for social justice. Since then, evangelical theologians and mission practitioners have been discussing how we should see the relationship between these two, and which of the two has priority. Is evangelisation the most important and most urgent aspect of the church’s mission or is demonstration of the gospel in concrete action equally important and urgent? The Manila Manifesto (1989) more or less confirmed the first view, which I would call ‘evangelisation first’, but the Cape Town Commitment (2010) clearly opted for the second approach and formulated an ‘integral mission’ in which proclamation and demonstration have equal importance and should go together. This idea of integral mission is grounded in the idea of the mission of God, *missio dei*, i.e. his salvation plan to restore mankind and the whole creation from the consequences of evil and of human sin.

When we look at the Seoul Statement against this background, it is striking that it only mentions integral mission and *missio dei* once or twice in passing, only in quotations taken from the Cape Town Commitment, but that it does not use these ideas in its theological argument.

Neither do the Seoul documents use the word-pair ‘proclamation and demonstration’, probably because of its loaded and problematic connotations. In some articles, there is a plea to ‘declare and display’ the gospel, which I suppose is meant as an alternative terminology. The overall theme of the congress was ‘let the church declare and display Christ together.’ From participants I have heard that this theme was very prominent throughout the congress, but that is not so apparent to someone like me who only reads the text. Granted, this theme is the last phrase of both the preamble and the conclusion of the Seoul Statement. But for the rest, this duality is only mentioned a few times, and it is not linked to the former duality of proclamation and demonstration.

Instead, there is a clear emphasis on the Great Commission—the evangelistic mandate at the end of the synoptic Gospels, and notably the version in Matthew 28. The latter plays a key role in the documents and runs as a thread through all the articles and chapters. So, according to the Seoul Statement, the mission of the church should be understood first of all as evangelisation. In the preamble this tone is set, by emphasising ‘the church’s commitment to the great apostolic priority of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ in order to bring salvation to people lost in sin’.

What is at stake?

One might assume that evangelical readers know very well what this good news and this salvation are all about. Moreover, the previous Lausanne documents had already presented the evangelical understanding of the Good News. Even so, the authors deemed it necessary to devote the first of the seven sections to this well-known theme and to reiterate the classic evangelical Protestant theology of salvation through Jesus Christ. This arouses the question: what motivated the authors to cover common ground in this first section? What is at stake? Is there a danger perhaps that evangelicals might foster different understandings of the gospel? Are we confronted with theologies of mission that need to be corrected? Sadly, the authors do not answer these questions, so we are left wondering why.

The same questions come up when reading the second section, wholly devoted to the Bible and its proper interpretation. The authors summarise the 'high view', dear to evangelicals, of the Bible as 'God's self-revelation' and therefore 'the authoritative, unerring, set-apart text that gathers and governs the people [of God]' (II, 17). But then, the authors hasten to add:

What the church needs most today is an affirmation not of the nature of the Bible but of its interpretation. ... [This] requires a way of reading the Bible that is attentive to its historical, literary, and canonical contexts, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, and guided by the interpretive tradition of the church. (II, Introduction)

So the real issue of this section is what the Seoul Statement calls 'faithful' or 'gospel-centred' interpretation. What does that mean?

The central message of Scripture is the Gospel of the kingdom of God, the proclamation of Jesus' incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, and return. ... Therefore, we read the whole of Scripture in accordance with and guided by this gospel. ... We should honour the gospel-centred interpretative tradition ... that stretches back to the apostolic church. (II, 18, 22)

Why do the authors insist on this interpretative tradition? Is the evangelical mission world perhaps endangered by other ways of interpreting the Bible? Sadly, the authors do not give us any indication, so the reader is left wondering.

There is more in the Bible than the gospel

Moreover, I would argue that the reading of the Bible advocated in the Seoul Statement leads to a reduction of the rich and multivariate content of the Scriptures. First of all, 'gospel-centred' is not the most appropriate term for the interpretative tradition to which the authors appeal. A better term is 'Christocentric', i.e. seeing the Person and work of Christ in all the Scriptures. This leads to my second point: there is more in the Bible than the gospel of God's reign and of personal salvation through Jesus Christ, however important this is. For example, the doctrine of creation, the natural law and the revealed law, the moral teaching of the New Testament, the message of the prophets, the salvation of Israel, the nations and all creation. The interpretative tradition to which the Seoul Statement appeals has always seen the larger picture.

Double priority of evangelism and discipleship

The second important aspect of the Seoul Statement is that it defines the mission of the church not in terms of proclamation and demonstration of the gospel, as was hitherto usual in the Lausanne Movement, but in terms of evangelism and discipleship. It also uses a second word-pair that amounts to the same: declare and display (the gospel). The authors emphasises that the Great Commission in Matthew 28 is not a mandate to just *evangelise* all nations, but to make *disciples*.

This involves *two equally important priorities*: the evangelistic task of baptising them into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the pastoral task of teaching them to obey all that [Christ] had commanded. (Preamble, emphasis added)

I suppose that in this insistence on a *double* priority of the church, the authors wish to avoid a new priority debate that might dominate the reflection on mission and evangelism for maybe another 50 years to come.

The Seoul Statement goes at length to develop these two tasks, showing all along that they are intrinsically linked to one another. One of the sections (V) is especially devoted to discipleship, which is defined as ‘a call to holiness and mission’. In other words:

Those charged with the task of announcing God’s good news to all peoples must themselves live as disciples and understand that the proper aim of our mission is the transformation of those who hear and believe the good news to live as disciples who obey all that the Lord taught. (V, 72)

This recalls what several mission theologians have put forward in recent years, namely that we need a more balanced missiology which we could summarise as *reaching* (through evangelism) and *teaching* (the new believers in their churches).²

The focus on discipleship is already present in all the major mission declarations of the last 15 years, beginning with the Cape Town Commitment in 2010. ‘Missionary discipleship’ is the overarching theme in Pope Francis’ encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* of 2013. In 2016, the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches published the Arusha Call for Transforming Discipleship, and the General Assembly of the World Evangelical Alliance in Bogor, Indonesia in 2019 also emphasised this theme.

Following this trend, the Seoul Statement is even more explicit in putting discipleship formation high on the missionary agenda of churches and agencies, but also at the heart of the mission mandate itself. In order to corroborate this, the SGCR opens with an excellent article on ‘the theology of the Great Commission’. This theology is based not only on the classic foundational texts in Matthew 28 (‘go into all the world’) and its parallels in Mark and Luke/Acts, but also on John 20 (‘as the father sent Me, so I send you’), called ‘the Johannine Great Commission’. John Stott already made this combination during the first congress in Lausanne in 1974. Since then, many missiologists have adopted the same approach, including the authors of the SGCR. It emphasises that this passage is not so much about what actions we

2 Cf. the title of the book by M. David Sills on the mission mandate of the church: *Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010).

should engage in as about who we are and how we live. In other words, it is about our discipleship rather than about proclaiming the gospel.

I appreciate the way in which the Seoul documents broaden the understanding of the mission mandate. This is an important step. By concentrating on discipleship, the priority debate of evangelisation and social responsibility is overcome through a new synthesis. In the words of the Seoul Statement:

We cannot make disciples without announcing the good news and cannot be disciples without a deep engagement with a broken world. ... The pursuit of righteousness in our personal lives, our homes, our churches, and in the societies in which we live can no more be separated from the announcement of the Gospel than being a disciple can be separated from making disciples. (V, 73)

Not 'making' but 'teaching'

In this respect I want to make two remarks. As the opening article in the SGCR rightly states, the central 'action' in the Great Commission of Matthew 28 is *mathēteusatē*. This is an imperative form of a verb that comes from *mathētes*, 'disciple'. It is difficult to translate in our modern language, and often circumscribed as 'make disciples', also in the SGCR and other Lausanne documents. 'Disciple making' is a standard expression in evangelical mission literature. However, the verb 'to make' is absent from the text. A better translation is 'teach' or 'instruct' (someone) 'as disciple'. Sometimes it is rendered by the verb 'to disciple' (someone), but that is not a current word outside Christian circles. At any rate, in Matthew 28, we are not called to 'make' or produce disciples, but to 'teach' all the peoples in all the world 'as disciples'. Older Bible translations have therefore rendered the phrase as 'teach' all the nations.

A teaching mandate

According to the Seoul Statement, the Great Commission in Matthew 28 is an evangelisation-plus-discipleship mandate, but I would go one step further than that and argue that it is a teaching mandate. The words 'evangelisation' and 'proclamation' and 'gospel' are absent. On the contrary, the mandate adds a fourth and final 'action', namely 'teaching' the commandments of Jesus.

In fact, when we call communicating the good news 'evangelisation', we should realise that this is not something that precedes teaching. Rather, evangelisation is already a form of teaching, namely teaching other people about Jesus and about the content of the gospel, its pertinence, its invitation. Listening to the gospel, i.e. to the explanation of who Jesus is and what He has done to bring salvation, is already a beginning moment of discipleship. When, hopefully, someone's heart opens up, a process begins that can lead to becoming a follower of Jesus Christ and a permanent learner in his life-school of discipleship.

A kind of new mission model: presence, proclamation and practice

In the passages describing the gospel and the double priority of evangelisation and discipleship, something like a new mission model emerges. The Seoul Statement

ignores well-known models like holistic mission, integral mission, *missio dei*, or the Five Marks of Mission, a model developed in the Anglican Church and widely adopted in Europe. It also bypasses the debate about the relationship between proclamation and social responsibility. Instead, it introduces a new terminology: 'declare and display', and 'presence, proclamation and practice'. With a reference to Matthew 28, the Seoul Statement affirms:

The church is called to declare and display Christ together. The Great Commission summons all believers everywhere to participate in our Lord's will to make disciples of all peoples, by baptising those who believe in the Gospel message and teaching them true obedience to Jesus Christ. In the power of his Word and Spirit, God sends us out into the world as a holy people to bear witness to the Gospel before a watching world. We do this through our Christ-filled presence, our Christ-centred proclamation, and our Christlike practice. (II, 43)

This squares with the theme of the congress, 'let the church declare and display Christ together.' Participants at the congress tell me that this duality of declare-display played an important role in the programme, and that three large tarpaulins were put up with parallel exhibitions under the themes 'declare', 'display' and 'together'. Jim Memory, co-director of the European region of the Lausanne Movement, explains that the organisers wanted to show 'that the mandates to proclaim the Gospel and to demonstrate the love of God in action should be held together as equally important, in a creative tension.'

So much for the congress. When we turn to the documents of Seoul 2024, this terminology of declare and display does not play an important role. Instead, the authors emphasise the triad presence, proclamation and practice—in that order. This 3P model shows how evangelisation and discipleship work together to communicate the gospel.

Presence refers to being the 'salt of the earth' that must maintain its integrity and so never lose its potency. It refers to the presence and the lifestyle of individual Christians *and* of church communities in the various spheres of society—families, neighbourhoods, schools, the workplace, the public square, politics. 'God uses our practical discipleship in these areas to make known his nearness to a world long alienated from him' (III, 44).

Proclamation is 'essential' to the witness of the church. 'The church displays God's saving power of the Gospel and sends heralds to declare his gospel where Christ is not known' (III, 45).

Practice includes what previous Lausanne documents called 'social responsibility' or 'the demonstration of the Gospel'. But it is more encompassing than that. The relevant paragraph is worth quoting in full:

Just as the world hears Christ in gospel proclamation, it can also see Christ through our love for one another and our neighbours, through how we care for his creation and do excellent work in our daily callings. Just as faith comes by hearing, faith is always accompanied by works. These works promote the common good, prioritise care for the poor and most vulnerable, and advance the cause of justice following the example of our Lord. (III, 46)

Discipleship and local church connection

The Seoul Statement goes at length to describe a third foundational element of carrying out the Great Commission besides evangelisation and discipleship, namely active involvement in a local church. I am not sure under which P this should be put, but the Statement devotes a whole section to the church (section III). Living as a disciple of Jesus and 'making disciples' (the term used in the text) are both inseparable from a local church community and its regular worship services. Therefore, 'We call on all churches to give greater attention to worship as a foundational practice and to make worship a more corporate experience through their preaching, prayers, and songs' (III, 39).

The topic is taken up again in Section V on discipleship. Here we read that local churches 'play a vital role in our formation as disciples' (V, 75). Moreover:

They play a vital role in providing accountability and modelling healthy patterns of leadership and governance for ministry leaders, missionaries, and ministry partners. ... Therefore, we call on ministry leaders and missionaries to remain in vital fellowship with and accountability to local churches. (V, 76)

The emphasis on ecclesiology is noteworthy. The Seoul Statement places its reflections in the framework of the classical marks of the church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic. It also includes paragraphs on the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Without taking any denominational stand, it marks them as central elements of the life of any church, because they are ordered by Jesus Himself. Also striking is the call for orderly worship services and regular participation. All of this is completely absent in previous Lausanne declarations.

I think that the emphasis on the life of local churches, as an integral element of the mission mandate of evangelisation and discipleship, is extremely important—at least in the European context with which I am familiar, where there is a tendency to disconnect 'believing' and 'belonging'. Many people experience or seek 'spirituality' outside organised and institutional church life. Moreover, missionary and other para-church organisations are easily becoming a parallel circuit for their workers, operating beside local churches and without accountability to the latter.

Clear stance on sexuality, gender, marriage and family

A striking aspect of the Seoul Statement is that it pays so much attention to the practice of our faith, the moral norms and values to which we adhere as disciples of Jesus Christ. Three ethical issues are singled out, issues that have not been dealt with in previous Lausanne congress documents. Together they cover more than half the document.

What strikes the reader in particular is that the bulk of this half is devoted to ethical issues in the area of sexuality, gender, marriage and family. Apparently, the authors felt the need to address these issues in depth and take a clear stance, because this section is by far the largest one, counting for 30 percent of the whole statement. And it is even put before the section on discipleship! What is the link with the communication of the gospel?

Today, the world is absorbed with the question, 'What does it mean to be human?' This makes the Christian doctrine of the human person critically

important. How we answer this question has profound implications for our witness in the world and our life in the church. It goes to the very heart of the great upheavals in the world with regard to issues such as identity, human sexuality, and the implications of advancing technologies. (IV, introduction)

And so, the section opens by recalling biblical anthropology. (1) Human beings are uniquely created in the image of God. (2) Human sin affects the degree to which human beings can fully reflect the image of God and corrupts our human nature and capacities as well as our relationships with others. (3) The image of God in us is restored in Jesus Christ. 'As the preeminent and perfect image of God, he is the human ideal to which every believer is being transformed by the Holy Spirit' (IV, 51). This scheme of creation, fall and restoration is the context in which the Seoul Statement places the norms and values by which we live as disciples, and the foundational reference for discussing ethical issues.

The statement continues with an extensive discussion of sexual identity and gender, marriage and singleness, same-sex relations and same-sex marriage. Western societies are increasingly abandoning the traditional norms and values that are rooted in Christian morals and biblical anthropology, as they have been taught for ages by the church. The new morality is cultural liberalism with its so-called progressive values of gender diversity, individual desire as the highest ethical norm and, in these areas, inclusiveness and tolerance.

This morality is secularised and post-Christian. It is also gaining ground in churches, and even making inroads in the Protestant evangelical world, at least in Western societies. As for evangelicals in Europe, we can observe a difference between the northwestern part, where a minority of churches accept homosexuality and transgenderism, and the rest of the continent, where churches almost unanimously reject these practices as going against the teaching of the Bible and therefore incompatible with discipleship. That is also the position of evangelical churches and theologians in the Global South and East.

It is no doubt due to the weight of the non-Western voices in global evangelicalism that the Seoul Statement takes a clear and unambiguous position. It affirms what all the streams of Christianity agreed upon until a generation ago, and what we now call a 'traditional' or 'conservative' view—conservative in the sense of conserving, maintaining what we adhered to in the past. In this respect I cannot do better than quote the two key paragraphs. Referring to the biblical doctrine of creation, they affirm:

Humans are created as sexual beings with clearly identifiable physical characteristics as male and female and relational characteristics as man and woman. The 'sex' of an individual refers to the biological characteristics that distinguish male from female, whereas 'gender' refers to the psychological, social, and cultural associations with being male or female. ...

We lament any distortion of sexuality. We reject the notion that individuals may determine their gender without regard to our createdness. Although biological sex and gender may be distinguished, they are inseparable. Maleness and femaleness are an inherent fact of human createdness—a fact to which cultures give expression in distinguishing between men and women. We also reject the

notion of gender fluidity (the claim to fluctuating gender identity or gender expression, depending on situation and experience). (IV, 56–57)

Taking these principles as a lead, the statement affirms that marriage is 'the exclusive bond of one man and one woman', and as such 'the only legitimate context for sexual intercourse'. It 'laments' that some churches 'define same-sex partnerships as biblically valid marriages' and 'grieves' that they 'have acquiesced to the demands of culture and consecrate such relationships as marriages' (IV, 59–61).

It further deplores that the pursuit of sexual freedom has 'downplayed the pro-creational aspect of marital sex, which has often led to the devaluing of children and the dramatic increase in abortions' (IV, 63).

The authors pay special attention to singleness, saying single persons 'are fully able to fulfil the Creator's will and bear witness to Jesus Christ'. They call local churches to support both singles and married couples through teaching, mentoring, and networks of mutual encouragement and practical support. Together, they witness to the power of the gospel by modelling the biblical values of deep friendships, love and faithfulness in marriage, the honouring of parents, and the dedicated nurture of children (IV, 65–66).

After a short exegesis of the four passages explicitly condemning homosexual practice, the Seoul Statement draws the 'inescapable conclusion that God considers such acts as a violation of his intention for sex ... , and therefore sinful' (IV, 68).

The authors reaffirm the classical evangelical adage, 'God loves the sinner but rejects sin.' Following that guideline, they call for pastoral care of believers who experience same-sex attraction. Churches should accept them as brothers and sisters while showing them the way of sexual abstinence and singleness. No word about 'healing' or 'changing into heterosexuals' and 'getting married' (with someone of the opposite sex). Instead, there is a call to 'repent from lack of love in the Christian communities towards believers who face challenges because of their sexual attraction' (IV, 69).

In this respect, I would like to quote the Norwegian mission theologian Rolf Kjøde, who was present at the congress in Seoul. He has this to say:

Communication about same-sex attraction from a classical Christian perspective at times lacks the necessary personal identification that gives a touch of relational understanding and empathy. Vaughan Roberts addressed these issues from a biblical and personal perspective in a plenary speech at the congress. This was an important address as it was the first open encounter for many of the participants with an evangelical leader with same-sex attractions.³

Finally, the authors warn against the tendency to single out homosexual practice among other forms of trespassing biblical norms, when they write that 'the biblical insistence to resist temptation and maintain sexual holiness, in both desire and behaviour, applies equally to heterosexually attracted individuals' (IV, 69–70).

3 Rolf Kjøde, 'Seoul Statement, a Review', *Vista*, issue 46, December 2024. <https://vistajournal.online>.

Conduct and witness

One could be surprised that a declaration on evangelisation deals with such questions of conduct, because this is not at all customary. But it is quite logical given the whole thrust of the Seoul Statement that evangelisation and discipleship belong together and that our entire walk as believers is part of the calling to mission and holiness. The sexual conduct of believers is clearly relevant to their integrity as witnesses of Jesus Christ in words and deeds.

A voice to be listened to, especially in the Western world

While most historical mainline churches and also some evangelicals in Europe will certainly have a problem with the Seoul Statement on these questions, I belong to those evangelicals who find themselves in agreement with the pastoral approach and with the way in which the statement upholds biblical norms.

I am persuaded that this voice needs to be heard in Europe, and especially in countries where evangelical pastors have become reluctant to give clear guidance to believers in their teaching and preaching, because of a ‘pastoral’ concern for Christians who have adopted a liberal position in these issues, and/or out of fear for the legal consequences—one might be accused of discrimination and condemned by a court of justice.

Other issues: nationalism and technology

The Seoul Statement deals with two other ethical issues, albeit to a far lesser extent. First, it addresses conflicts between peoples and nationalism. While the section on sexuality, gender and marriage was clear, this one, entitled ‘The Family of Nations’, is a bit confusing. The thrust seems to be that Christians should be known as people of peace, and that they should contribute to the reconciliation among peoples in conflict—‘whether as frontline peacemakers between conflicting parties or through negotiation, influence, and intercession in the background of the conflict’ (VI, 78).

But then the focus shifts to the opposite, to the phenomenon that Christians often ‘fail to condemn and restrain violence by remaining silent, by promoting nationalism, or by unjustly supporting conflicts through deficient theological justification’. The list of examples includes the history and legacy of racism and black slavery; the holocaust against Jews; apartheid; ‘ethnic cleansing’; inter-Christian sectarian violence; decimation of indigenous populations; political and ethnic violence; Palestinian suffering; caste oppression and tribal genocide (VI, 80–82).

Nationalism: lack of clarity

Particular attention is given to nationalism, which is defined as ‘the belief that every state should have a single, national culture and no other’, and ethnonationalism, ‘the belief that every ethnic group should have its own state’ (VI, 85). The authors seem to condemn nationalism categorically, but their definitions are incomplete and defective. There are several forms of nationalism, ranging from a patriotic love for one’s country to a militant and aggressive ideology that sets up one nation against others. How should evangelicals relate to the nation or nation-state of which they are part? The Seoul Statement does not clarify this. It also leaves aside the question

of how the universality of the church and the gospel relates to our nationhood and the national identity of the disciples of Jesus Christ. Granted, there is in the evangelical world at large a dearth of biblical teaching on this subject, and this statement is no exception to that. In this respect I would like to refer the readers to my article and the articles of others in the recent issue of *Vista*, which dealt with this very issue in the context of Europe.⁴

At the end, the section returns to the initial theme of peacemaking, calling believers to serve the peoples that are in conflict, to labour for peace among the nations, to pray for the persecuted church, and to pray for those who govern us in order that they allow the gospel to be proclaimed to all the peoples.

Technology: a positive critical stance

The second issue is technology. Several modern innovations lend themselves to the merging of humans with technology, or the creation of immersive environments in which humans may become subjected to technology's domination. These potentialities arise from areas such as genetic engineering, cloning, biotechnology, mind-uploading, digital media, virtual reality and artificial intelligence. These technologies raise moral and ethical concerns in terms of their impact on society and on the planet.

This section begins with a recap of the doctrines of creation and of man created in the image of God, and it then focuses on the mandate of stewardship of creation, including the stewardship of these technological advancements:

Biblical wisdom is vital to enable the church to be discerning and definitive about the moral and ethical implications of emerging technologies, even as it embraces and stewards the fruit of God-given human creativity and innovation, including in ways that accelerate evangelism and discipleship (VII, introduction).

As for me, I would like to endorse this positive-critical position. Interestingly, the Seoul Statement also deals with the way in which new technologies affect the worship services of the churches, and the communication of the Gospel. In the first case, the authors call for caution, but in the second case they 'applaud the church's evangelistic drive that has led to increasing technological adaptation and unprecedented opportunities for sharing the Gospel' (VI, 96–97).

Omissions and matters of debate

What the documents did not mention

So far, I have looked at and commented what the Seoul documents say. But I also notice that some important topics are *not* dealt with. Given their absence from the text, I can only mention them briefly.

With respect to the theology of mission, there is no mention of the idea of *missional* churches and missional discipleship, for which there is so much attention among Christians in the secularising societies in Europe, North America and elsewhere. The 'missional' approach is gaining ground, as an alternative to the traditio-

4 See *Vista* issue 45, 'Nationalism in Europe Revisited', <https://vistajournal.online/news-and-events/vista-45-nationalism-in-europe>.

nal ‘missionary’ approach. I would have liked to see this reflected in the Seoul Statement, all the more so since discipleship is a key concern of the ‘missional’ movement.

Neither do we read about the specific challenge of evangelisation in a post-Christianised society, where the message of the Bible is generally seen as ‘old news’ instead of ‘good’ news, where the Christian faith is relegated to a past and surpassed stage of history, and where the church suffers from a bad image as it is associated with cultural domination, colonialism, antisemitism, capitalism and what have you.

As a third point, there is no word about being witnesses of the truth in a ‘post-truth society’ full of fake news and conspiracy theories, and in a postmodern culture marked by cultural relativism and a deep mistrust towards any claim to absolute truth.

Coming to the area of ethical issues, I am surprised, to say the least, by the total lack of any reference to the huge ecological problems of pollution, climate change, climate refugees, and so on. They constitute one of the most pressing issues in today’s world. How is it that the Seoul Statement remains silent on these issues? And why do the authors, for all their emphasis on discipleship, not mention the biblical mandate of stewardship of creation? Surely, this can be qualified as a ‘great omission’.

Matters of debate

The Seoul Statement has aroused reactions of approval as well as critical reactions among the more than 3,000 delegates, representing the various streams in the evangelical world.⁵

One matter of debate is the issue of sharpening the focus on evangelisation or keeping the wider perspective of integral mission that includes social action. This debate is as old as the Lausanne Movement itself and it is far from settled yet. During the congress, a group of 235 delegates signed an open letter asking for a revised version of the Seoul Statement that would include issues of integral mission, such as the vast climate and nature crisis that we all encounter. In general, they ask for a bolder prophetic voice.⁶ At the same time, others expressed their concern that the statement did not sufficiently emphasise the priority of evangelism and its indispensability to our mission. Already before the end of the congress, one of the delegates, well-known American missiologist Ed Stetzer, published an article in which he argued that ‘we need a greater focus on evangelism’s place in the holistic mission.’⁷

Are these two perspectives incompatible? Some might think that evangelical mission leaders simply have to agree to disagree on this point. But I do not think we should settle for a draw between the two opposing camps, so to speak, and leave the matter aside. A better way of dealing with this question is to recognise that there is

5 For an interesting article summarising the ongoing discussion, see Morgan Lee, ‘Lausanne Theologians Explain Seoul Statement That Surprised Congress Delegates’, *Christianity Today*, 26 September 2024, <https://christianitytoday.com/?p=308177>.

6 I owe this information to Rolf Kjode, ‘Seoul Statement, a Review,’ in *Vista*, Issue 46, December 2024. <https://vistajournal.online>.

7 Ed Stetzer, ‘Responding to the Lausanne Seoul Statement: We Need a Greater Focus on Evangelism’s Place in the Holistic Mission’, *Churchleaders*, 25 September 2024. <https://churchleaders.com/voices/497595-ed-stetzer-my-appeal-to-lausanne-dts.html>.

a tension, and to always keep the two perspectives in mind at the same time. That was indeed the reason why the congress chose the theme 'let the church declare and display the Gospel together.' I find myself in agreement with the comments of two European delegates whom I quoted already above. Rolf Kjode writes:

These strong emphases need to be repeated at every major crossroads such as the Lausanne congresses. With a frequency of coming together and give global statements on mission every 15 years, the movement cannot afford to leave any of the sides out on any occasion.⁸

Jim Memory corroborates:

The word 'together' in the theme of the Congress mainly refers to the unity imperative among churches and organisations, but also to the imperative to 'declare' and 'display' together. We cannot collapse this into one as primary and the other secondary. There will always be voices at the two extremes arguing with great passion that right now that the priority is one or the other, and in a given context and moment they may be 100% correct, but not in the universal sense. These two are to be held together, held in tension, but not averaged out to some 'mean position' that loses its prophetic edge where we need the challenge of the poles.⁹

He observes that many churches in Europe think that they are doing their bit for world mission by giving to humanitarian projects, and he adds that such churches need to be challenged to proclaim the gospel. But he recognises that in other places it will be the opposite.

A second matter of discussion is the organisation of the Lausanne 4 congress in Seoul, L4 for short. Much of the process and the outcomes of the meetings were to a large extent planned in advance. One of the delegates who had a problem with this kind of procedure is Jan Wessels, co-director of the European Evangelical Alliance. When asked for a reaction, he quoted a passage from the blog of another delegate, Jay Matenga, saying that 'this perfectly summarises my struggle to make anything of the congress.' Here is the passage:

Such an event brings together three types of people. Let's call them: path makers, path bakers, and path takers. ... In my experience of Lausanne over the years it has promoted itself on being a community of expert leaders and its congresses as the gathering place for such experts. It led me to expect that this congress would be a place where path makers met and together mapped new ways into the future for global Evangelicalism and its missions, to co-create a vision for path bakers to grow, support, and promote, and path takers to follow and work out. ...

However, it became abundantly clear that the intention of the congress was to reach the path bakers and teach the path takers. Lausanne Central was not interested in hearing from path makers at L4. They would probably argue that they 'listened' prior to the event, but those listening forums were little more than information extraction exercises. ... No opportunity was planned to allow us to

8 Kjode, 'Seoul Statement, a Review'.

9 Jim Memory, email correspondence with author, 17 November 2024.

influence thinking at the event itself (unless a collaborative or interest group protested, as some did).¹⁰

In a similar vein, some delegates have criticised the fact that the Seoul Statement was written before the congress, and that there was no possibility to give further input and have the text of the statement amended on certain points. But apparently this is not definitely ruled out, since the organisers have left open the possibility of publishing a revised version at some time after the congress.

Conclusion and recommendation

So much for the omissions and matters of debate. Despite the critical remarks that can be made, my overall evaluation of the Seoul documents is positive. I commend them to a wide readership, in academia, in mission circles and in churches. The Seoul Statement presents in a concise way a promising model of mission that has the potential to bring together theologians and practitioners with different foci: evangelisation first, integral mission, church planting, discipleship formation, etc. The same can be said of the theology of the Great Commission in the excellent opening article in the SGCR. Practitioners and educators alike will certainly profit from the wealth of statistical information and the elucidating regional reports.

¹⁰ Jan Wessels, email correspondence of 17 November 2024. For the blog of Jay Matenga, see <https://jaymatenga.com/14-reflections/>.