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Reimagining Presence and Absence: Luke 24 as a Model for Christophanic Multipresent Church

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Abstract—**The blending phenomenon of offline-online religious practices is considered a solution for today's churches struggling to reconsider their identity and expression in communicating the faith during the pandemic. However, this hybrid approach still cannot provide theological conviction for the churches to adopt it. Therefore, the contribution of biblical-historical studies in this discussion is required by observing the early church's religious practices, which are rooted in the life and work of Jesus Christ. By investigating Luke 24 utilizing a cognitive linguistic approach, this research displays Luke's ecclesiological motif and relevance in providing a biblical-historical foundation for today's churches. Research Contribution: Luke 24 demonstrated a christophanic presence of Christ as a prototype for religious practices of the early church, which opening up space for contextual expression on the formation of today's church identity, community, and authority during the blending offline-online world.**

Keywords—luke 24; christophanic multipresent church; digital religio;, offline-online; figure-ground

I. Introduction

During the pandemic disruption, the church has been facing complex decisions. The worship and fellowship can no longer be performed regularly as usual. Switching to the online digital platform is considered a temporary solution for the church in a situation where face-to-face encounter is prohibited. Some church leaders, who emphasize embodiment as irreplaceable, perceive the online expression of the church as only an emergency, temporary, and inferior solution [1]. On the other hand, those who are open to digital media utilization and do not hesitate to make it a sacred space refer to the church's history using various media, such as letters and print media, to communicate their faith [2]. The theological argument is also given that the omnipresent God is among his people wherever they are [3]. Meanwhile, considering the long-drawn pandemic situation and the limited implementation of onsite meetings due to health protocols, the church has adopted a hybrid approach, conducting online and offline activities simultaneously, which is considered a solution that can unite the two previous different views [4].

The above phenomenon has been highlighted in the research on digital ecclesiology as a part of digital religion [5]. The study of digital religion can be observed from the utilized theoretical approaches and the ongoing development trends. There are at least three theoretical approaches based on how religious groups utilize media technology. Campbell proposes a Religious-Social Shaping Technology (RSST) approach, observing how religious groups actively evaluate, negotiate, and adopt the utilization of certain media technologies based on their history, traditions, values, as well as their core practices and beliefs [6]. On the other hand, Hjarvard proposes the mediatization concept, perceiving the media as an independent institution with its logic and rules. It simultaneously influences and integrates within other social institutions such as politics, culture, and religion [7]. Hutchings considers RSST and mediatization as two complementary approaches when he used ethnography to observe the development of online churches that utilize digital media based on their offline religious beliefs and practices, despite being also shaped by the media logic [8]. Observing development trends over the past three decades, Campbell and Evolvi state that digital religion research has entered the third wave and is heading towards the fourth, which examines the interconnectedness between online and offline settings and their ethical impacts [9]. In line with the current trend, Campbell suggests the concept of networked religion, which explores context, understanding, and religious practices intertwined online-offline and has the following five charac-teristics: networked communities, storied identities, shifting authorities, convergent practices, and multisite reality [6].

These digital religion investigations conclude that the offline and online religious practices have blended, so the boundaries are no longer clear when religious people integrate their religious practices into the digital media context [9]. However, since the digital religion research above is based on studies of contemporary socio-religious phenomena, the results are also influenced by the social phenomena of today's society that shape and be shaped by digital media culture. Furthermore, since Christianity is rooted in Jesus Christ's life and work in the first century, which exerted a strong influence on his followers to continue his mission throughout the world, the digital ecclesiology research should also consider the identity

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and experience of the early church. In this regard, biblical-historical studies of the early church can provide theological conviction for today's church conversations in adopting a hybrid approach. Therefore, this paper fills these gaps through the analysis of Luke 24. This text was selected considering that Luke is the only writer who connects Jesus's life and works with the following disciples' missionary movement. In addition, the position of Luke 24, which connects his Gospel with the Acts of the Apostles, becomes a transition from Jesus' mission to his disciples' mission in the early church.

II. METHOD

The mental image method from linguistics and cognitive psychology was employed to analyze Luke 24 [10][11]. It will analyze the mental space of each character in Luke 24's narrative to discover the perspective of each character, known as mental space, and compare it with the narrator's perspective or base space. In addition, the mental space of each character was also analyzed by applying Gestalt or figure-ground principles. It aims to reveal how Luke drew the reader's attention to particular perceptions of the characters experiencing changes or new perceptions expected to occur in the readers. The figure-ground reversal alternately indicated Luke's efforts to lead his gospel readers to understand and believe that the risen Jesus is constantly present among his disciples in various situations, both physically and nonphysically. Luke 24 is also intertextually linked with Acts 20:7 to reveal Luke's ecclesiological motif.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Thematically, Luke 23:54–24:53 is a unified narrative, consisting of three interrelated parts or known as a triptych: (1) the two angels' testimonies in the tomb to the women that Jesus had risen (23:54–24:12); (2) the risen Jesus was present in the midst of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus (24:13–35); and (3) the risen Jesus was present in the midst of the eleven disciples and the others (24:36–53) [12].

A. The Presence of Jesus on the First Day of the Week in Three Different Events

TABLE I. ANALYSIS OF FIGURE AND GROUND BETWEEN MENTAL SPACES OF THE WOMEN AND BASE SPACE

Mental Spaces of the Women	Base Space (Angels/Luke/Reader)
figure: Jesus' dead body in the tomb (23:55)	
ground: the death of Jesus (24:1)	ground: the resurrection of Jesus Christ (24:5)
figure: absence (invisible) of Jesus (24:2–4a)	figure: "He is not here. He has risen!" (24:6–7), (invisible) presence of Jesus through his speech-act in Galilee that now becomes actual (9:22; 18:31–33)
figure: remember (24:8), invisible presence of Jesus	
the figure becomes ground: "He has risen," the invisible presence of Jesus becomes the testimony of the women (24:9–10)	

Table 1 presents the changes in the women's mental spaces due to the angels' testimonies. They came to the tomb with the mental space that Jesus was dead, confronted by the angels' testimonies, stating that Jesus had risen and was present in an invisible way in the form of his words in Galilee, which is being fulfilled now. The women remembered Jesus' words appropriately, so they came to an understanding and belief that all events that Jesus experienced, such as his betrayal, suffering, crucifixion, and death, were prophesied in the Scripture and had been fulfilled in his resurrection [12]. The angels' testimonies causing missionary impact: the women became the first witnesses to proclaim Jesus' resurrection to the eleven and others. The resurrection of Jesus and his invisible presence had become a mental base space or a new reality for the women. However, the women's testimonies were considered λῆρος (nonsense) by the apostles and other disciples.

TABLE II. ANALYSIS OF FIGURE AND GROUND BETWEEN MENTAL SPACES OF THE TWO DISCIPLES AND BASE SPACE

Mental Spaces of the Two Disciples	Base Space (Jesus/Luke/the Women/Reader)
ground: Jesus' death, resurrection is λῆρος (24:11)	ground: the resurrection of Jesus (24:5–6)
figure: the absence (invisible) of Jesus (24:16)	the ground becomes figure: the (visible) presence of Jesus (24:15, 31a, 32), διανοίγω the Scripture and their eyes
figure: recognition, visible presence of Jesus (24:31ab)	
the figure becomes ground: Jesus ἄφαντος, visible presence becomes invisible presence (24:31c)	
ground: the resurrection of Jesus (24:34)	

Table 2 presents the changes in the mental spaces of the two disciples walking to Emmaus after their encounter with Jesus. The two disciples returned to their old lives disillusioned with Jesus' death that was inconsistent with their messianic expectations (21a). The appearance of Jesus amid the two disciples was regarded as Luke's attempt to continuously present Jesus by changing the ground, i.e., the women's testimony on the invisible presence of Jesus, into the figure, i.e., the visible presence of Jesus. However, from the perspective of the two disciples' mental spaces, Jesus remained absent. Neither the testimony of the women witnessing the invisible presence of Jesus nor the visible presence of Jesus could not convince them to recognize him since, in their mental spaces, he had died. Yet, they still experienced the invisible presence of Jesus, which was through his words interpreting the Old Testament in a Christocentric way. It was only later in the breaking of bread event that the two disciples experienced διανοίγω (their eyes opened) and recognized Him physically. However, at the same time, Jesus ἄφαντος (disappeared or hid his physical presence). At this moment of reversal between figure and ground, the two disciples experienced a change in their mental space. They realized that, along the way, Jesus was present among them through his words that διανοίγω (opened) the Scripture, so their hearts rejoiced. Experiencing Jesus' invisible presence also had a missionary impact: they immediately returned to Jerusalem to share their experience of

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his presence. Jesus who ἄφαντος also went back nonphysically to Jerusalem with them [10]. Now they have the same mental base space as the women: Jesus had risen.

TABLE III. ANALYSIS OF FIGURE AND GROUND BETWEEN MENTAL SPACES OF THE ELEVEN AND BASE SPACE

Mental Spaces of the Eleven and others	Base Space (Jesus/Luke/the Women/Two disciples/Reader)
ground: Jesus' death, resurrection is λῆρος (24:11)	ground: the resurrection of Jesus (24:5–6)
figure: the visible presence of Jesus (as a ghost), 24:37	ground becomes figure: the visible presence of Jesus to prove his bodily resurrection (24:36–43)
figure becomes ground: (invisible) presence of Jesus through his words, διανοίγω their minds to understand the Scripture and the fulfillment of God's salvation through His death and resurrection, to install them as witnesses with promised future heavenly power (24:44–49)	
figure: Jesus led them out as far as Bethany (24:50)	
figure becomes ground: the disappearance of Jesus into heaven, the disciples believe in the (invisible) presence of Jesus as they worshipped him, returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple blessing God as they waited for the promised future heavenly power (24:51–53; Acts 1:1–11).	

Continuing from the previous section, Table 3 reveals that Jesus confirmed the testimony of the two disciples from Emmaus by presenting himself physically among all the disciples at that time. His presence became a climax which confirmed the certainty of his bodily resurrection. Even though the disciples could see him, hear him, and touch him, they remained in the mental spaces of fear and doubt, so they assumed Jesus was a ghost. Therefore, Luke turned Jesus' figure into the ground through his words which διανοίγω (opened) their minds to comprehend that what was prophesied in the Old Testament had been fulfilled in his death and resurrection as God working out his plan of salvation. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus also revealed his true personal identity to replace their old mental space reflected in verse 19, i.e., the false messianic expectation [13]. Jesus' words also had a missionary impact by sending all disciples as witnesses to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations. The departure of Jesus into heaven marked the end of all his physical presence among the disciples and initiated his permanent nonphysical presence in his words which opened a new understanding of the Scripture. Thus, Jesus' words, which interpreted the Scripture in a Christocentric manner, were also christophanic. The use of the word διανοίγω throughout this chapter indicates that what Jesus had opened would never be closed again so that the new understanding would never be lost [10]. So then, the disciples already had and believed in a new mental base space (reality), which was the certainty of the nonphysical and permanent presence of Jesus in his words. It was shown by the disciples' attitude worshipping him, who then returned to Jerusalem with joy.

B. The Ecclesiological Motif of Luke 24

From the cognitive linguistic analysis above, it is evident that Luke emphasized the continuous presence of Jesus amid

the disciples in three events. Even though they were spatially different, the appearances of Jesus in these three events were combined into one temporal mental base by employing the phrases τῇ δὲ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων (on the first day of the week, v.1), ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ (on the same day, v.13), and αὐτῇ τῇ ὥρᾳ (on the day, v.33). Luke's effort to unite all the risen Jesus' appearances in just one day reflected the ecclesiological motif he wanted to highlight, namely identifying all the appearances that occurred on the first day of the week as a prototype for the religious identity and practices of the early church. Besides in Luke 24, Luke also mentioned the phrase "the first day of the week" in Acts 20:7 when Paul gathered with the believers in Troas to break bread and speak to them (cf. 1Cor 16:2; Rev 1:10). The meeting in Troas was the first clear indication of the early church meeting on Sunday [14][15]. Two practices in the meeting of Troas that have parallels to the events in Luke 24 included (1) the breaking of bread, which referred to the Eucharist (cf. Acts 2:42, 46); and (2) reading and homily from the Scripture (cf. 1Tim. 4:13). First, Luke indicated that the customary practice of breaking bread in the early church meetings was an extension of Jesus' act of breaking bread and distributing it (ἐπεδίδου αὐτοῖς in imperfect tense) to two disciples at Emmaus. The gesture of Jesus breaking the bread and distributing it continued in every eucharistic meal of the early church [12][16]. Second, Luke also indicated that the practice of reading, interpreting, and preaching the Scripture in the early church was an extension of Jesus' act of explaining the Scripture in a Christocentric manner. The use of the verb διήνοιγεν with imperfect tense indicated that every time the church gathered, recited, and listened to the Scripture being recited, Jesus was present in the word and spoke to them [16]. In addition, an important parallel to note was that the presence of the risen Jesus was clearly reflected in the Troas' meeting. The transition from the darkness at midnight when Eutychus fell and died to the lightness when he was brought back to life represented the life of Christians as they followed Jesus on a journey through death to life.

TABLE IV. FIGURE/GROUND MOVEMENTS IN LUKE 24, ADAPTED FROM TILBORG AND COUNET [10]

Figure	→ becomes	Ground
Experienced presence	→ becomes	Narrated presence
(1) The appearances of Jesus	→ becomes	(1) Narration (24:9–10, 34, 35, 44–48)
Material fact	→ becomes	Revealed truth
(2) Jesus' past words in Galilee (9:22; 18:31–33)	→ becomes	(2) Testimony of angels (24:6–7), Jesus' present words in Jerusalem (24:44)
(3) Jesus' christocentric and christophanic interpretation of the Scripture (24:25–27, 45–47)	→ becomes	(3) The kerygma of early church (Acts 10:38–40; 1Cor. 15:3–5)

As shown in Table 4, the ecclesiological motif is increasingly perceived when Luke changes events and conversations in the figure into the truth, testimonies, or stories believed as realities on the ground. It discovered that, in the end, all the events in Chapter 24 had become creed, kerygma,

and even reality believed by the early church. To his gospel readers who had not met Jesus physically like the apostles, Luke wanted them to believe and experience his presence sacramentally-substantially through his words and the Eucharist in the Holy Spirit wherever they were [16]. He wanted his readers to realize that the physical presence of the risen Jesus was no longer a normal way to indicate his presence [12]. The church relationship with Jesus now took place spiritually. Thus, the early church can be identified as a christophanic multipresent church.

C. The Ecclesiological Relevance of Luke 24

In the current study of digital religion, it is revealed that three areas become the focus of religious groups' religiosity amid the intertwining of the online and offline condition, namely identity, community, and authority [9]. The ecclesiological motif of Luke 24 has relevance for today's churches to reconsider the meaning of their identity, community, and authority. First, the ecclesiological motif of Luke 24 helps reimagine the church's identity, especially during the limitations that no longer allow the church to gather physically with the same intensity as before. The church's identity still the same: followers of Jesus who gather to remember and witness his presence in words through the Holy Spirit and then deploy to witness his presence in their daily lives. Figure 1 indicates that under any circumstances, churches can continue to practice their religious identity dynamically and alternately, both when they gather physically as a visible church or when it is not possible to gather physically, as an ecclesia invisibile, invisible church [17].

Second, Luke 24 is also relevant to reimagine the meaning of presence in the churches today (see fig. 1). Presence is no longer perceived dichotomously (physical or nonphysical) but substantially, including words, emotions, will, actions, relationships, and openness. This notion supports that risen Jesus remains present sacramentally and substantially amid his congregation [18][19]. Therefore, either the congregation gathers physically or virtually through digital media, they can continue to practice and perceive the presence of one another substantially through the intercession of the presence of Christ, who unites them as one body. By understanding the presence substantially as openness for others' presence, authentic encounters can still occur even though they are mediated by digital media [19]. As a community that celebrates the risen Jesus' presence, the church also becomes a witnessing community that embodies his presence in this world that gives hope to those who groan.

Third, regarding the authority aspect, Luke 24 presents Jesus as a leader reinforcing the disciples through his authoritative words and his presence that changes their mental perspectives, reunites those who were scattered, and empowers them to be witnesses who continue his mission in the world. The women who were deemed unworthy to be witnesses at that time were instead highlighted by Luke as faithful and trustworthy witnesses whom Jesus commissioned in proclaiming his resurrection [20]. The authoritative figure of Jesus as a leader is highly relevant and contextual for the role of church leaders today. At present, church leaders need to lead and reinforce their congregation with the words of Christ and uniting those who are scattered in various places due to the pandemic situation. One of the crucial factors that church leaders should consider in establishing close relationships among their congregation is maintaining the connection, cohesion, and consistency of online church expression with offline church practices [5]. The identity and mission of the church in the online context are necessary to be articulated precisely and clearly; thus, they are coherent with the identity and mission of the church in the offline context. Responding to shifting authority in networked religion characterized by equal distribution of leadership functions, church leaders must build authentic leadership by empowering the congregation to be actively involved as leaders and authentic witnesses, both online through digital media and offline in everyday life [6].
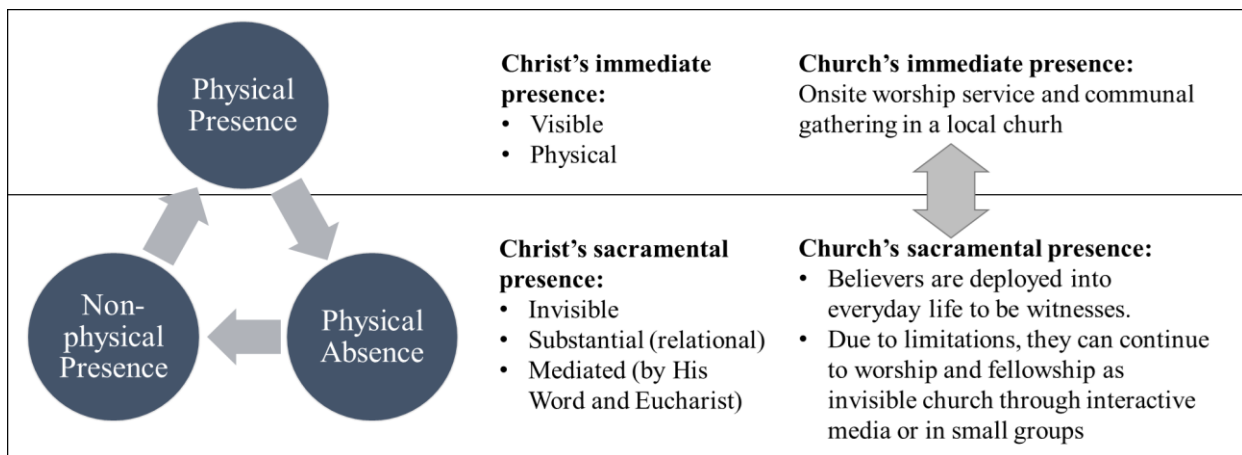

Fig. 1. Reimagining Presence in Christophanic Multipresent Church

IV. CONCLUSION

The cognitive linguistic investigation of Luke 24 has demonstrated the continuous presence of Jesus amid the disciples both physically and nonphysically in three different events and locations. Jesus was present to justify their mistaken identification and reveal his true identity in God's salvation plan by involving them as his witnesses. By assembling three events into one day on the first day of the week, Luke conveys an ecclesiological motif to identify the whole chapter 24 as a biblical-historical prototype for the later religious practices of the early church. To his gospel readers who had not met Jesus physically like the apostles, Luke aims to assure them that Jesus remains present in a nonphysical way through his words and the Eucharist in the Holy Spirit wherever they were. Therefore, the early church can be identified as a christophanic multipresent church that always presents Jesus in their fellowship and witnessing in the world. This ecclesiological motif of Luke 24 also has ecclesiological relevance to the struggles of today's church amid the pandemic disruption by reimagining the meaning of identity, community, and authority. Those three aspects have biblical-historical roots in the early church's experience and continue to provide spaces for church expression, which also is contextual with the current digital religion phenomenon that blends the offline-online world.

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