religions

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Being There Even When You Are Not: Presence in Distance Preaching

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Abstract: Listening to sermons through digital media is not new. However, the pandemic pressed many preachers into a medium in unexpected ways. The need for immediate solutions did not allow time for preachers to reflect on what was happening theologically. This paper explores theological presence. The question of how one creates connection and presence when no one is even in the same room, city, or country is not a new one. The rhetorical concern of being "present while absent" shows up in the writings of ancient rhetoricians, opening the door for theological conversation. Recognizing there are ways to employ rhetorical techniques for non-virtuous ends, the pandemic also exposed that some virtuous attempts also failed the ecclesial need to build relationships online. Digital platforms and social media give churches and ministers opportunities to hold space for developing relationships and witnessing the Gospel.

Keywords: presence; absence; ethos; identification; distance; preaching; pandemic; online preaching

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Citation: Sensing, Tim. 2023. Being There Even When You Are Not: Presence in Distance Preaching. *Religions* 14: 347. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14030347

Academic Editor: Sunggu Yang

Received: 8 February 2023
Revised: 27 February 2023
Accepted: 1 March 2023
Published: 6 March 2023

1. Introduction

I first began asynchronous distance teaching in 1999. During that time, I have used four different learning management systems (LMS) to assist my teaching at a distance. While being the Associate Dean at a seminary for nine years, I reflected on all our teacher evaluations that students complete at the end of the term. While our faculty conveys a high level of pedagogical diversity, effective online faculty possessed a convergence around one theme in the student evaluations. Effective faculty, by various means, are successful because they establish "presence" even though they are absent.

What does asynchronous pedagogy have to teach preachers about preaching online?[1] More specifically, whether the event is a live stream or digital recording, "Can the preacher still be present when distant?" Specifically, "How does the preacher engender ethos?" And "How does identification engender ethos?"[2]

I define "presence" as referring to both "presence in a place" and "presence at a time." When two people are present together in space and time, they can interact; make connections; and exchange ideas, feelings, and objects. Things present in space and time act directly on our sensibility, awareness, and receptivity. Furthermore, Veling (2005, p. 163; citing Derrida 1986, p. 81) notes, "The French philosopher Jacques Derrida is well known for his ability to ground his work in the fertile phenomenality of human life. He offers the following reflection on his approach to contextuality: 'This is my starting-point: no meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation.'" (See also Derrida 1975, 1981). Being absent, or not being present, is being "out of context." Derrida names this situation as "the metaphysics of presence." When Derrida includes temporal and spatial differentiation when describing *différence*, he includes both the notions of "differing" in space and "deferring" or "delaying" in time. Knowledge itself is contextual and changes over space and time. Writers, by definition, would not need to write if they were not absent from readers in both time and geographical separation. Derrida (1981, pp. 38–39) qualifies "presence" by saying there is no "saturation" even when in context. So, it is not just the question “Can the preacher still be present when distant?” but also, “Can the preacher be present when present?” A person is always “other” to another.

If Derrida is right, then, “presence” must also be qualified by noting that even in face-to-face (f2f) contexts, “otherness” exists. Veling (2005, p. 123; citing Levinas 1969, pp. 185–219) suggests “Every face we encounter is a face of otherness. Every face says: ‘Don’t kill me; don’t absorb me into your world; don’t obliterate me by making me the same as you. I am other. I am different. I am not you.” (See also McClure 2001, pp. 31, 63–64). Preachers are often absent and not present even when preaching in the same room.

The space between people is not a new phenomenon. Online preaching simply introduces some obvious time and space obstacles that limit how I traditionally preach in a f2f sanctuary. The disorientation of online preaching, especially heightened during the pandemic, makes an old problem visible. The “distance” in digital environments delimits my homiletical options. What was taken for granted and, therefore, unattended, in a f2f space, now becomes vital. Overcoming “distance” becomes a primary objective.[3]

2. Engendering Presence

The problem of being there even when you are not is not new. Ancient epistolary theorists regarded the letter as a substitute for one’s actual conversation and presence. As written communications between two or more parties who are separated spatially, the letter functions as a substitute for being personally present. Letters provided personal information, make requests and recommendations, and promote goodwill between the sender and recipient. Classifications include letters of friendship, apologetic, paraenetic, protreptic, and others.

Cicero writes, “That there are many kinds of letters you are well aware; there is one kind, however, about which there can be no mistake, for indeed letter writing was invented just in order that we might inform those at a distance if there were anything which it was important for them or for ourselves that they should know” (Cicero 1965, pp. 100–1). A letter writer by definition is not there, and letter writing is subject to misinterpretation. The recipient cannot ask for immediate clarification. Therefore, a letter needed to be more intentional and precise than actual conversation. Clarity is essential; however, so too is the formation of ethos by establishing presence (White 1988, p. 86).

Let me illustrate with Paul.[4] Although shaped by the form of letters in his day, Pauline letters also adapted and evolved the forms. Paul’s letters are oral speech acts or recorded homilies. Paul’s letters are neither epideictic, deliberative, nor forensic; however, they often contain elements and mixtures of all three in style and purpose. Paul made alterations to the basic form of the letter to suit purposes that tell us the most about his self-understanding, intentions, and theology. True letters are personal, dialogical, and the closest literary form to oral conversation that was available until recent years. When you read a letter, you can hear the writer talking and feel the writer’s presence. Personality is revealed. Something of the situation is revealed. But, there is still distance. Letter writing gives the sense of being there and not being there at the same time. There is the blending of personal presence with the reality of absence.

1 Thessalonians exemplifies the absence motif with the words προσώπῳ οὐ καρδίᾳ; essentially, “in person, not in spirit/heart” (1 Thess 2:17). The larger context reads, “As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you—-in person, not in heart—-we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face.” This is how Paul described his absence from the Thessalonian believers. Paul felt that, although he might not share in the presence of his sisters and brothers f2f, he nevertheless shared a deep and abiding fellowship on a heart level with them that transcended the distance between them. Did the Thessalonians feel the same way? The thought Paul expresses has tremendous power, but were the feelings mutual? Did the Thessalonians feel as strongly about their connection to their teacher as Paul seems to feel about his bond with them? Theologically, the answer is “yes”, although there is no proof.

I believe that what Paul is saying back then is also in the present tense for a 21st-century congregation. Today, Paul's letters are even more asynchronous distance proclamations separated by even a wider gap in time, space, culture, and language. When the travel distance is greater, therefore, the attention to traversing the distance is more needful. It is the recipients' responses that most interest me here, whether the Thessalonians or us.

Funk (1967) identifies the travelogue as the primary place Paul communicates personal presence. He identifies five elements: (1) mention of Paul's letter writing activity, (2) mention of his relationship with the recipients, (3) statement of plans for paying a visit (desire to visit, delays in coming, sending an emissary, announcement of a visit), (4) invocation of divine approval and support for the visit (connected to a request for prayer, their prayer, or his own prayer), and (5) benefits of the impending visit of Paul to the recipients (Funk 1967, pp. 252–53). Funk goes on to describe how Paul's presence in a letter is considered the same as if he were personally present among his recipients (Funk 1967, p. 264).

> Owing to Paul's understanding of the significance of his apostolic presence to his congregation (and, of course, the significance of their presence to him, e.g., 2 Cor. 7:6f., 13b–16; 1 Thess. 3:6-8 (c.f. 2:19f.); Phil. 4:14–18), Paul gathers the items which may be scattered about in the common letter or appended as additional information, into one more or less discrete section, in which he: (a) implies that the letter is an anticipatory surrogate for his presence; (b) commends the emissary who is to represent him in the meantime; and (c) speaks of an impending visit or a visit for which he prays. Through these media, his apostolic authority and power are made effective. (Funk 1967, p. 266)

Friendship is dependent upon the presence of the parties to each other (Aristotle 1991, 1, 2.16; 2, 4:1–28). Friendship letters, especially, are key to establishing the author's presence. Funk (1967, p. 264) describes how the motif 'absent in body, but present through letter', can be traced from the beginning of the Christian era well into the Middle Ages and represents well-known formulae of Greek epistolography (e.g., 1 Cor. 5:3; Col. 2:5; Phil. 1:27, 2:12).

Being a written record, a letter transcends time and space. For example, a company receives a note from a satisfied customer who details reasons why the employees deserve commendation. The manager of the company posts the letter on the breakroom's bulletin board. Employees, over the next several months, read the letter that praises their good service. The customer's praise is copied to a newsletter and posted on the website. Finally, the letter is placed in a folder for archival purposes. There is a lasting quality due to its preservation. You can read it again. And each time it is read, even through multiple mediums, the customer's presence is felt. The customer's intent to praise impacts the employees' feelings of goodwill and prompts them to continue to act hospitably on the behalf of future customers. You see this same dynamic when students or alumni write to their professors, evaluate courses through qualitative questionnaires, or post comments on websites. And if you personally know the customer, student, or alumnus, you also experience their presence even though they may live in another region, province, or country.

Two scenes from the film version of Alice Walker's novel, The *Color Purple*, illustrate these points.[5] The first scene is set in a world controlled by abuse. Celie's abuse comes from three sources: her father, her husband, and society at large. There is seemingly no escape. The climax of Celie's initial response is seen in her desire to slit her husband's throat. She is on the front porch of the ramshackle house that imprisons her. As she shaves her abuser with a straight razor, she hesitates as she draws the blade near his jugular vein.

In the second scene, Celie discovers a set of long-hidden letters from her missionary sister in Africa.[6] Through reading the letters, she imagines a different life, she experiences the immediate presence of her sister. She imagines what life could have been. She imagines an alternative way of being in the world. Reading these texts, so to speak, from a situation so far removed from her own as to be nearly untranslatable, Celie encounters "a world in front of the letters," a world where black women can write, travel, think, mature, and be free. And when she encounters this world, a world emerging in front of these texts, her own world is enlarged. In the film, it is only after she imagines this new world and its new possibilities that she has the courage and capacity to get off the porch, leave her abuser, and change her world. As the story of Celie moves to resolution, Celie finds redemption. Celie begins to heal and live in a new way of being. The letters Celie reads were written asynchronously, from a different time and place, yet communicated a life-changing presence.

3. Engendering Presence through Ethos

Persuasion through the character of the speaker or ethos corresponds with one of the most recognizable definitions of preaching in the modern era. Brooks (1877, pp. 5, 8) stated preaching is "the communication of truth through man to men" or, as it is more often said, "preaching is truth communicated through personality."[7]

The concept of "voice" is often connected to ethos. Reid (2006, p. 12) describes voice as the "assumptions" of the preachers' stances, personas, and "implied identities" that shape their "effects" and reveal their cultural consciousness.[8] Aristotle (1991, 1.2.4) argues that a person's character as communicated in the speech is the single most important ingredient to persuasion. Aristotle (1991, 2.1.5) elaborated, "There are three reasons why speakers themselves are persuasive; for these are three things we trust other than logical demonstrations. These are practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and virtue (*arête*) and goodwill (*eunoia*)." Reid (2006, p. 17) summarizes the three canons of persuasion as follows, "Congregants come to trust wise counsel (*logos*) from the preacher who seems to possess good character (*ethos*), who becomes appropriately passionate (*pathos*) about matters that the community views as central to their corporate shared identity." Although all three—*logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*—contribute to the preacher's credibility and authenticity, *ethos* is primary.

Historically, ethos is defined in three ways. First, as a mode of persuasion that relies upon the virtue of the speaker. For example, Plato's essentialist view relied on the speaker's character. Plato defined the role of rhetoric as instruction in ideal truth. In *Gorgias*, the object of persuasion is the cultivation of the moral good. For example, "Socrates: Well then Polus, if you prefer to hear it from me, that it is better when these things are done justly" (Plato 1990a, p. 75). Only an orator with intrinsic virtue could instruct others in moral values and bring about order. Or, as seen in Isocrates (1990), *Antidosis*, who talks about the same words carry greater conviction when spoken by one with good repute than spoken by a person who lives under a cloud (p. 52). A person's life carries greater weight than his or her words. Likewise, Quintilian (1990) when discussing the importance of moral education for young pupils, argues that "no one can be an orator who is not a good [person]" (Book II XV, 33). Ethos is the embodiment of a preexisting state of virtue in the speaker. More recently, this neo-platonic view might be best seen in Booth (1974).

Secondly, ethos is defined as a mode of persuasion that relies upon the speaker creating a credible character for a particular rhetorical occasion in a single speech act. For example, Aristotle's relativistic attitude relied on the occasion of the rhetorical event. Aristotle's concern focused on rhetoric as a means of bringing about decisions in matters affecting civil life. Ethos conveys credibility. Effective ethos inspires the audience's confidence in the speaker's good sense, moral character, and goodwill. Not to be confused with the speaker's reputation or social authority, ethos must be created at the moment by the speech itself. The speaker might even adapt the speech in order to meet the expectations of different audiences. The speaker tries to anticipate the response of the audience and adjust the speech accordingly. Speakers will be persuasive, according to Aristotle (1991, 1.2, 2.1, 7–17), when speakers have characteristics we trust, namely, wisdom, virtue, and goodwill.

Cicero sounds like Aristotle, but relies more on the speaker creating sympathy in the audience. Cicero (1990, 1:31 and 2:42) states that ethos depends on securing the audience's goodwill and depends upon the speaker's ability to present a favorable character and moral conduct. Also, for Cicero, ethos or *dignitas* develops over time, and emerges from (1) natural talent for eloquence; (2) prudent character (the ability to adapt a discourse to any situation by conveying to the audience the moral issues at stake and the need to adhere to the cause he is championing); and (3) passion and commitment. Cicero did not talk about ethos under the category of invention, but under the categories of style and delivery—a trend seen often among the later stoics who downplayed ethos (as part of the exordium) and pathos (as part of the epilogue).

So, the discussion of ethos in rhetoric has either been a division between instructions for the moral good or the facilitation of decisions and actions. Sometimes this division is artificially drawn between the Greek democratic society and the Roman more autocratic society. The artificial nature of the argument is seen in Plato's *Phaedrus* (Plato 1990b), where he states that the orator should possess a good character and be knowledgeable, alert, and able to adapt an argument to the audience (p. 131).

Christians relied on a more platonic approach as seen in Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* (Augustine 1958, IV: 59–63). Augustine emphasized the piety of the preacher. Without piety, the preacher cannot interpret the Scriptures; without being able to understand God's word, the preacher cannot explain it to others. However, throughout the Middle Ages, when the emphasis was on the instruction of skills for professional and civil use, the public was taught the Aristotelian–Ciceronian approach to ethos; namely, the importance of adjusting the presentation of character to the audience's context and subject at hand.

Augustine's high view of ethos persisted in homiletics as seen in George Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Campbell 1990) and Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and the Belles Lettres* (Blair 1990). They also argued that every speaker must be perceived as a wise and good person in order to appeal to the audience's intelligence and emotions. Adjusting the presentation of the self to the expectations of those addressed involved convincing the audience. Campbell and Blair, not using the word ethos, but sympathy, argued the speaker must establish sympathy with the audience to engage the emotions that move the will.

Much of this argument about ethos anticipates Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1971), where the speaker must inspire confidence and appear to be credible. Yet, Perelman discusses ethos in the context of self-praise and attacks upon the opponent. In my reading of Perelman, while he acknowledges that the individual speech act should inspire confidence, the character of the speaker is paramount. "A worldly or irreligious cleric who goes up into the pulpit is just a phrasemonger. On the other hand, there are saintly [persons] whose character, alone, carries the power of persuasion. They appear, moved and, as it were, persuaded by their presence. The sermon they are about to preach will do the rest" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1971, pp. 318–19; citing La Bruyère 1941, p. 464). That sounds like Quintilian who says, "The same language is often natural when used by one speaker, foolish in the mouth of another, and arrogant in that of a third" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1971, p. 319; citing Quintilian 1921–1933, XI, i, 37).

It reminds me of the white college student MLK-day speaker, who said the same words and even imitated the style of King, yet appeared foolish, at least with the folks sitting in my aisle. His presence created distance. The MLK speaker's failure to bridge the distance leads me to speak of the final way ethos is established, i.e., through identification.[9]

4. Engendering Ethos through Identification

Burke (1969, p. 55) defines "identification" by saying, "You persuade [people] only insofar as you talk [their] language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with [theirs]." Identification crosses boundaries to share experiences and perspectives of another. Some would argue that instead of persuasion, Burke's identification redefines rhetoric itself.[10] Identification is portrayed in the literature as more hospitable and collaborative than persuasion. Identification is established on the common experience that is shared.

Reid et al. (1995) argue that the new homiletic is built around the experience the speech act generates. Through an examination of the Sophists, experience and ethos closely resemble Burke's identification. During the pandemic, the congregation was not in the same room.[11] Most of us experienced the alienating effects of the screen on our TVs or laptops. Reciting the Lord's Prayer in digital space felt lonely. You could say, "The church has left the building." Can I get a nod of recognition? The rhetorical idea of "identification", the nod of recognition, overcomes distance. The memetic experience creates identification.

Identification establishes affinities between two parties, so the other can experience the unfamiliar.

Identification is a way a speaker generates ethos to overcome the distance that exists between the speaker and the listener even if the two are in the same room, and even more so if separated by time and space. I speak of digging postholes and stretching barbed wire when speaking to cattle farmers in Oplin, TX. But the farmers in Trent, TX raise cotton. I do not have a hook in my experience with cotton farmers. I need a different identifier for them. Identification is a way to overcome such division, estrangement, separation, alienation, and distance. Identification creates belonging to overcome isolation and joins people together. When people identify with one another, like sharing the experience of listening to sermons during the pandemic, they share a common experience that generates an affinity between them. Not even time or space can divide people when they share common sympathies, interests, backgrounds, or other consubstantial elements. If people share a common ground, an experience, then a rapport develops. A person might develop a rapport with a character in a book, a politician on the radio, or a subject in a newsfeed. And if the sermon creates affiliation through sharing a common experience, the speaker's ethos grows, and distance is overcome.[12] And even though sharing the same "essence" or a strict consubstantiation is not always possible, there is a sense of recognition that is possible (Burke 1969, pp. 20, 65).[13]

One way to move towards an identification through resonance is by using narratives. Auerbach (2013) contrasts two literary worlds of ancient Greece and biblical scriptures. He describes how a telling of a story becomes a transformation for the reader/hearer because of their mimetic participation. I define *mimesis* as more than mirrored imitation, but a poetic/performative/representative act. Mimetic acts are representations of reality. If the story represents the lived experience of the hearer, identification increases. Has a chill overtaken you when the storyteller describes her blue lips, numb toes, and frozen breadth as the sun sets in northern Alaska? Do you recall the joy you felt after the birth of your own child when the movie gives you a close-up of a childless couple walking into the maternity wing to meet their adopted newborn daughter? Did you catch Celie's excitement when you watched a clip of the scene from *The Color Purple* on YouTube? The closer the story imitates life, the more you are drawn into the experience yourself. Identification occurs.

The word *poetics* (ποιητικός) means "things that are created, crafted, or made." The poetic arts are not copies, but are creative acts of representing realities into other mediums. When using words as the medium, by an act of imagination, the maker of the art is rendering realities or actions into language. Aristotle's *Poetics* (Aristotle 1961) primarily talks about how the Greek tragedy represents the dramatic field at its height. While Aristotle talks about other dramatic works such as comedies and epics, his work is fragmentary and only supplements what he says about tragedy. Additionally, he explicitly connects what he says about tragedy to include other artists, such as painters, musicians, sculptors, and dancers (I.4–5, II.3). The potential intersection of drama and preaching is intriguing. Aristotle (1984, VIII) notes that the arts are essential for public education. Art education is analogous to religious arts, practices, and rituals in their symbolic enactments, initiation processes, and socialization functions. The arts these poets make, by definition, represent an object by imitating the life and action of an object. The arts are representations of the countless forms the world and human life may take. If preaching is an art form, then it has the potential to create mimetic affect in order to increase identification with the audience (Sensing 2017).

When a sermon is preached online, for some listeners, the preacher will only have a delimited opportunity to establish presence through ethos via identification within the single-speech act. These stratagems might work in the context of a single oration, e.g., an attorney presenting the case to a jury that has no previous experience with the lawyer. Although professionally produced in ways that preaching fifty-two times each year cannot imitate, Ted Talks exhibit a similar effect. This is sometimes the case for a preacher too. In an online environment, the necessity of this being the case increases. How does this happen? While the ancient rhetors describe rhetorical techniques that enhance the speaker's ability to establish ethos in a single-speech act, the ecclesial demands of pastoral relationships call for something else. Presence must involve *koinonia*—participation in a communal relationship.

On the one hand, while some television evangelists use rhetorical tactics for non-virtuous ends, the issue is for them, "as long as it works, it is acceptable." Hendahl (1995, p. 67) warns, "A devaluation of the role of ethos is actually at work in television preaching. Religious programming often stresses overall context, thus diverting any critical assessment of character through emphasis on beautiful music, attire, setting, and a reassuring mix of secular and religious symbols and cliched speech."

On the other hand, when virtuous motives fund practice the question remains, "How can the preacher establish ethos in a single speech act?" Perhaps the answer lies in asking 1000 home viewers why they never miss watching a popular preacher on livestream on Sunday. Is it because the preacher engenders presence through mechanics/lighting/story/gesture, etc., because they trust the preacher's reputation, because of the preacher's charisma (being an Enneagram 3), because they know the preacher in person; so, it is about the relationship, or simply due to convenience? While the option of watching the Sunday morning worship hour is not new, the phenomenon is happening, with increasing frequency, as Christians choose to watch sermons on the internet.

Conversely, when the single-speech act does not engender the ethos desired, the number of views anticipated, or the "likes" are few, the questions about competency, calling, and significance begin to whittle down the preacher's confidence. Questions emerge as to the theological significance of a single-speech act. For presence to exist, time is necessary. Maybe the value of the single speech act is merely to open the door for more meaningful encounters. The ecclesial problem of distance is not delimited to the sermon, but the distance in relationships and community that the online environment inhabits. Online services exasperated the lack of community that already existed within the four walls of many ecclesial structures. The church is called to be a communal body, where people engage, support, and care for each other. Campbell (2020a, p. 4) notes how the concept of "social distancing is highly problematic because . . . physical separation at times of increased isolation will lead to increased fear, anxiety, and depression." She calls this situation a "disembodied" church (Campbell 2020a).

The preacher's ethos and presence develop over time. It does not emerge in a single-speech act, but listeners will tune in week after week, download multiple sermons over time, and maybe view the same sermon or podcast multiple times. My mother, for example, faithfully tunes in every Sunday to the same Facebook live feed week after week. The listeners in these cases, like my mother, have a previous orientation to the preacher and already trust the preacher's reputation, and demonstrate their affinity by coming back every Sunday. The listeners already have a predisposition that the preacher functions as father/pastor/one with authority before they press play. And like my mother, they deem the preacher as a "good and virtuous" human.

I am persuaded by Cicero's *dignitas* argument that ethos develops over time and involves multiple factors. Much of the preacher's ethos emerges from the previous pastoral relationship with the audience or that which happened prior to the sermon. Paul knew the Thessalonians well before he wrote to them. Campbell (2020b, p. 50) lists six "communication traits" that online worshippers most value about their communities that represent a dialogue about what *dignitas* might mean online. These six traits enhance the re-embodiment of the online community: (1) a sense of relationship; (2) looking for care—a "space where they can give and receive support and encouragement."; (3) looking for value; they want to be seen and appreciated as significant persons; (4) they long for connection with others; (5) looking for "intimate communication—a safe place where they are themselves and communicate openly with others."; and (6) they want to associate with others who share their faith commitments.

My convictions may lie in the fact that I am cynical about the power of one isolated speech act being able to establish *dignitas*, presence, and ethos; and I am convinced that the normative power of a sermon derives its impact over time and is built through relationships.

For example, I know a minister whose ministry in the community and in the foyer is what makes him a good preacher. Although his preaching ministry is less than five-years-old, through the lost art of "visitation", he has established an ethos in the pulpit. His ethos is more dependent upon his character and reputation than any particular speech act's ability to create sympathy.

One concrete implication of these musings on presence is that the preacher must leverage the opportunity to establish presence—sacramental priestly presence. The preacher attends to the "give and take" dynamic of personal communication, empathy, and care. Answering, responding, listening, exploring, and the other aspects of f2f presence gives an opportunity to thrive in the online environment. The technological advancements available through various digital media options enables the preacher to intentionally make these priestly connections. Often, listeners who might not speak in a f2f environment will become quite prolific online. In a f2f context, a listener might sit in the back, never interact, and leave quickly. The online environment, for these listeners, creates a safe space. They may email, make comments in the chat, or engage in other social media mediums. The more the online listener encounters your presence, your self, your pathos for the Gospel, your pathos for them, and your commitment to engagement, the opportunity for hearing increases dramatically (see Appendix A for other applications).

5. Conclusions

The speaker's need to overcome absence and engender presence is not new. Practicing the art of establishing ethos and identification existed long before technology's arrival. Distance by time, space, and otherness has long been traversed by multiple mediums for thousands of years. Digital platforms and social media give churches and ministers opportunities to hold space for developing a relationship and witnessing the Gospel.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Appendix A. Other Concrete Possibilities

While there are rhetorical techniques for online preachers that would enhance their ability to create presence in a single-speech act, for my purposes, the philosophical musings on the topic of presence by John Hadley prove helpful. I will conclude with these musings as suggestive of concrete possibilities for online preaching that cohere with ancient letter writing.

Philosophical Musings (Hadley 2005)

1. Here is a list of characteristics needed to establish a personal presence within the act of communication—an offering of the self. While Hadley is not addressing a religious context, I have taken the liberty to frame his ideas for preaching:
    a. Presence must include significant content. Attending to the logos of the act of communication is vital, although over-attention to content delivery and content coverage can also limit presence. Too much of a good thing is not so good in this instance because not all content is significant;
    b. The preacher must be open to self-disclosure;
    c. The preacher must anticipate a response from the other. Providing some feedback mechanism is vital, e.g., a chat room;
    d. The preacher is hospitable to the opportunity to form a personal relationship, e.g., invitations to one-on-one communications;

   e. And, similarly, provide an opportunity for the development of a network of relationships;
   f. Establish an environment of trustworthiness/genuineness;
   g. Provide an opportunity for the other to also offer their presence;
   h. Presence moves towards love and hope;
   i. Presence cannot be possessed, but only experienced in giving;
   j. Presence must move beyond content and emotion for it to be holistic. A whole person must move towards being fully present with another whole person.

2. Yet, there are also limits to the act of communication that exists when one is distant in either time or space:
   a. It is not just the physical distance, but also the psychological, emotional, and spiritual distance that requires attention;
   b. We can only be present to others to the extent that we have become present to ourselves;
   c. The lack of trust or ethos limits presence. We do not disclose ourselves fully or with genuineness;
   d. Recipient's lack of presence-to-self;
   e. The other is still other (Derrida). You can never know another fully.

Notes

1 In asking the question, I am not attempting to answer the questions of "how" to use technology or "how" to digitally produce the product. Those questions are better answered by others who have experience in digital media. Additionally, I am not addressing the theological question of the "real presence" of Christ in preaching often summarized by the phrase "The preached word of God is the Word of God" (The Second Helvetic Confession 1969). I am addressing the rhetorical side of the argument, not the theological side. Yet, method is a theological choice, and my theological convictions are evident as I make the following constructive theological proposal. See Knowles (2022) for a theological counter to my rhetorical argument.

2 "Ethos" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1971, pp. 60–74) and "Identification" (Burke 1969, p. 55) are acts by the speaker that are designed to persuade. But these are not the only two strategies available to the speaker. Various rhetorical devices are suggested in the literature for the overcoming of distance. *Hypotyposis* or *demonstratio*, for example, are figures "which sets things out in such a way that the matter seems to unfold, and the thing to happen, before our very eyes" (1990, Book IV. LXVIII). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1971, p. 42) also suggest several other figures of speech such as repetition, anaphora, amplification, etc. to increase presence.

3 The term "distance" is sometimes used differently from my use in the homiletical literature. Brothers (2014) advocates that some level of performative "distance" in preaching is necessary for hearing the sermon. He briefly surveys the literature (pp. 142–45) that promotes distance in preaching. I am not making that argument. I am saying that presence can be achieved or maintained even through distance. Brothers (pp. 47–87) discusses Craddock's (1986) recognition of the distance between the preacher and hearer. Craddock, therefore, speaks of "over-hearing" or indirection. Brothers, speaking of Craddock states, "Distance preserves the integrity of the biblical text, is theologically and morally warranted as a function of sermon style, is beneficial to the hearer, and thus should be used 'intentionally' as part of the sermon style and delivery" (p. 47). Brothers (2014, pp. 140–41) acknowledges that critics of Craddock's use of "distance" belongs to a cultural setting that addresses people who "already know". Craddock is addressing a context that no longer exists in post-Christian America. We live in an age where biblical illiteracy abounds. The distance that familiarity fosters is not the issue. One might argue that narrative, through indirection, is still current and needed in a digital age. Yes, story works to create identification. However, I would advocate narrative, plotted toward a concrete dénouement, is needed. As one of my teachers would say, "Do not play hide and seek with the text." The distance of "not knowing" is overcome by direct speech.

4 Note the bibliography on Paul at https://blogs.acu.edu/sensingt/resources/ (accessed on 1 March 2023).

5 The example of *The Color Purple* is borrowed from Greenhaw (2012).

6 https://youtu.be/RvTXbN7fqz4 (accessed on 1 March 2023).

7 Sometimes, though technically different, similar discussions about the preacher, author, or writer's "presence" occur when looking at the rhetorical categories of voice, stance, or tone. Voice often connects to the "authenticity" of the rhetor. Authenticity is interrelated to the speaker's character and ethos. In rhetorical studies, the connection between voice and presence is debated (see for example "authorial presence" or "authorial intention").

8 Reid's (2006) use of "voice" differs from Cicero's classical canons of rhetoric where voice is discussed under "delivery".

9 The term "identification" possesses a wide semantic field ranging from everyday language to philosophy to psychoanalysis. Burke (1969) provides an in-depth look at "identification" in rhetoric. See such categories as "identification and consubstantiality,"

"identifying the nature of property," and "identification and the autonomous," to name a few categories that push beyond rhetoric. Yet, Burke also cites the usual suspects in rhetorical studies e.g., persuasion and the use of symbols. Loscalzo (1992) is one of the few authors who incorporate Burke's work into the preaching field. Identification overcomes dissociation and alienation between the speaker and the audience. Is that not what the mystery of the incarnation is all about? To identify with the congregation, the preacher must know the people (be one with the people). The preacher will need to be aware of the real concerns, dreams, hurts, and weaknesses of the people who come expecting to hear a word from the Lord. Only then is change possible. Therefore, Loscalzo offers strategies that both enable the preacher to analyze the congregation and build sermons that will bring about identification. Loscalzo concludes with a chapter on how delivery contributes to identification.

10 As the quote above indicates, Burke himself would not make this claim.

11 A review of how churches responded to the pandemic in significant ways is found in Campbell (2020a, 2021). Additionally, worship leaders exasperated these uncharted digital waters by practicing "ministry transliteration by simply changing to digital platforms and presuming that the methodology that was somewhat effective in face-to-face context would be equally or even more effective digitally." See also Ashlin-Mayo (2020). See also research on digital preaching and the problem of presence in Bishop (2022).

12 Similarly, bonding might also occur when people share a common opposition to an idea or group. An "us" versus "them", identifying a common enemy, often bonds people who might otherwise not connect.

13 The literature on identification develops Burke's notions by exploring in-depth how narrative functions to fill the gaps between two parties. The use of identification in narrative is also seen as early as Aristotle. Identification happens when the audience connects with the "familiar" concrete situations of life and persons more than some anonymous or distant event or person (Aristotle 1961, XIV.4). And in those particulars, the hearer will glimpse something common to all (the universals). Swinton and Mowat (2006, p. 45) recognize a degree of shared experiences that are common to humans and suggest the category of "resonance". I see "resonance" as a way to mediate between mere recognition and consubstantiation. Research from a particular context is not directly transferred in a one-to-one fashion to another, but a degree of resonance can invoke a sense of identification and fittingness. While no context is identical to another, there are enough similar experiences and phenomena between two settings for someone else to utilize.

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