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LUTHER'S WORKS, Volume 75, Church Post Edited by Benjamin G. Mayes and James Langebartels

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LUTHER'S WORKS, Volume 75,
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Church Postil I. Edited by Benjamin
T. G. Mayes and James L. Langebartels.
St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House,
2013. 460 pages. Hardcover. \$49.99

This is the first of four volumes of a new English translation of the 1544 edition of the *Church Postil*, or as it is referred to here, the *Luther-Cruciger Church Postil*. This volume contains epistle and gospel sermons for the Advent and Christmas seasons. Martin Luther recognized the need for and potential value of material to support preaching early in his career as a reformer. The tools he created became the starting point and foundation for subsequent collections of sermons that represented his preaching with varying degrees of fidelity and success.

The story of those collections, various editions of what became the *Church Postil*, is told with remarkable clarity by Ben Mayes in the introduction. The *Church Postil* can be divided into two main parts: sermons (or sermon material) for Advent through Lent prepared for publication by Luther himself and known as the *Winter Postil* and sermons for the rest of the church year prepared by editors from Luther's sermons, Luther's lectures or other works, or from other sources entirely and known as the *Summer Postil*.

Stephan Roth was the first to attempt to complete what Luther had begun in the *Winter Postil*, and Luther generally approved of his work, though he wrote prefaces for the editions without necessarily reading them. Roth reproduced Luther accurately when he had a work by Luther in front of him, but he felt free to include other material in his editions when he lacked something by Luther. This was especially the case in his *Festival Postil* that provided sermons for saints' days and other festivals. This in itself eventually caused Luther and his colleagues to question Roth's efforts, but the breaking point came only when they discovered that Roth was earning money from these editions. Later, Luther had the idea of revising the postils not only because Roth's versions were lacking but because decades had passed and the situation had changed. There was a new version of the German Bible in use and many of his earlier criticisms of Rome or accommodations to the piety of his hearers that the sermons reflected were no longer necessary. Luther managed a 1540 revision of the *Winter Postil* but quickly lost his enthusiasm for the task, so revising the *Summer Postil* became the job of Caspar Cruciger. His revision appeared in 1544 and later appeared together with Luther's portion as the *Church Postil*. This is necessary background for understanding the present translation itself and the larger editorial decision behind its publication.

The introduction argues that the *Luther-Cruciger Church Postil* is the definitive form. The earliest modern editions of the *Church Postil*, beginning with Philipp Jakob Spener's in 1700, are faulted for not following this final version of the text, that is, for privileging Luther's

own early work and the contributions made by Roth. The Walch and St. Louis editions of Luther's works more or less followed Spener's tradition, as did John Nicholas Lenker's English translation. More recently, volume 52 of *Luther's Works*, the only volume of the first part of the set dedicated to the postil tradition, presented selected sermons from the Christmas section, texts that most clearly bear Luther's imprint as author.

This text in this volume is a revised and updated version of Lenker, since these sermons are part of the *Winter Postil*. (The *Summer Postil* will be a new translation, since that will follow Cruciger rather than Roth as Lenker did.) The updated English is nicely rendered. Where awkwardness or infelicity remain, it is almost always the fault of the text itself rather than the translator. The revision of the text in subsequent volumes, too, can be commended for offering readers a variation of the *Church Postil* that has not previously been available in English. Whether an English version of this variant is entirely necessary is another question.

Readers have two reasons to be interested in the content of these sermons: to know what Luther himself preached on a given Sunday and to understand what kind of Lutheran teaching was disseminated through sermons in the sixteenth century. The *Luther-Cruciger Church Postil* presented here cannot be used without qualification for answering either question. While it is true that Luther edited the winter part of these postils, he did it unevenly and even haphazardly. Cruciger, for his part, was quite free with his sources in the summer portion that he edited. The introduction

explains: “Whereas Roth’s edition presented the contents of his stenographic notes from Luther’s preached sermons with little emendation, Cruciger’s edition shaped his sources into a uniform whole, which Luther was able to claim as his own intellectual property. Luther’s desire and intention was not at all to present to the reading public a literal transcript of his pulpit utterances. . . . That is to say, Roth catches better what Luther said; Cruciger captures better what Luther meant to say” (xxiv). So the *Church Postils* are of limited value for those interested in what Luther himself actually said, or even wrote, about a text. We are still left with the question of the dissemination of Lutheran teaching through such sermon collections. We stand on firmer ground with the use of this text, but its influence should not be overestimated. The flap of this volume’s dust jacket advertises a text whose “publication remained strong for the remainder of Luther’s life and long after his death in 1546.” Yet the introduction to the volume states, “After the late 1560s, the popularity of Luther’s *Church Postil* waned” (xxv). This leaves a period of about twenty years when this version of the postils was heavily used. What that means is it served a single generation of Lutheran preachers in the middle of the sixteenth century. By way of contrast, earlier versions of these sermons served two generations in the crucial formative years of the Reformation.

Nevertheless, this volume makes a legitimate contribution by presenting a different text of the postils in English translation. In addition, the introduction itself is a valuable piece that clearly and carefully explains the complicated and contentious history of the *Church Postil*. Whether the differences are significant enough to demand four new volumes, however, depends on what the reader is looking for in the text.

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