

Introduction: What Is a Sermon Postil?

A **sermon postil** (from Latin *post illa verba*, “after those words”) is a collection of homilies or explanatory sermons arranged according to the church’s liturgical calendar ¹. The term originated in the Middle Ages, when preachers would explain the Scripture reading (“those words”) immediately after it was read in the service ¹. Over time, *postilla* came to denote compiled sermon books or verse-by-verse Bible commentaries, since they presented the biblical text followed by commentary “after those words” ². In essence, a postil is a preacher’s handbook: a comprehensive set of sermons (often one for each Sunday and holy day of the year) that clergy could use to preach or lay people could read devotionally. This report provides a scholarly history of the sermon postil – from its medieval origins through the Reformation and beyond – highlighting key figures, developments, and debates.

Medieval Origins of the Postil Tradition

Early Homiliaries: The concept of a postil can be traced back to the early medieval church’s homiliary traditions. In the Carolingian era (8th–9th century), Emperor Charlemagne famously commissioned an official homiliary for his realm, which gathered approved sermons by the Church Fathers for every Sunday and feast day ³. This Homiliarium (compiled by monks such as Paul the Deacon) ensured that clergy had orthodox, explanatory homilies to deliver after the Scripture readings in Mass. Such collections were sometimes colloquially called “postilla” because they provided **post-lesson commentary**, aligning with the term’s origin ³. These early postils were in Latin and intended to instruct the faithful in the meaning of the readings, reinforcing doctrine and morals.

Medieval Bible Commentaries: By the High Middle Ages, the meaning of *postilla* expanded to include running biblical commentaries, not just homilies ². A landmark example is **Nicholas of Lyra’s** *Postillae perpetuae in universa Biblia* (early 14th century), a massive verse-by-verse commentary on the entire Bible ⁴. Nicholas’s *Postillae* was the first printed biblical commentary and became a standard exegetical tool in late medieval universities ⁴. Its very title “Postillae” reflects the practice of placing explanatory notes after the biblical text. Such scholastic commentaries, though written in Latin for educated clergy, influenced preaching by providing authoritative interpretations. (Indeed, even the 14th-century English translators of the Wycliffite Bible drew on Nicholas of Lyra’s *Postilla* for guidance ⁵.)

Vernacular Sermon Collections: Alongside Latin commentaries, the later Middle Ages saw the rise of vernacular sermon cycles – direct predecessors of Reformation postils. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council had mandated more preaching to laity, sparking an increased production of sermon aids in local languages ⁶ ⁷. By the 14th and 15th centuries, preachers compiled sermon books in the vernacular for the entire church year. A notable example is the work of Czech reformer **Jan Hus (1369–1415)**. While in exile in 1413, Hus completed a Czech-language **Sunday Postil** (*Czech Postilla*) containing sermons on the Gospel lesson for each Sunday and holy day ⁸. This collection – essentially a year’s cycle of plain, scriptural sermons – was a reworking of Hus’s earlier Latin sermons and was explicitly intended for lay readership. In his preface, Hus explained that he would *quote the Gospel text first and then add his exposition*, “so that the word of God might speak first and louder than the word of Hus” ⁸. Hus’s Postil, finished just before the Hussite Wars, spread his call for church reform in the common tongue. It exemplifies how late-medieval postils were used

to **bring biblical instruction to the people** in their own language, foreshadowing the Reformation's vernacular preaching. Other pre-Reformation figures, such as the Lollards in England, likewise produced sermon collections (sometimes called "postils") to share scripture with lay audiences. By 1500, the advent of print meant that homiliary/postil literature – from patristic homilies to new vernacular sermon books – could circulate more widely than ever before.

Martin Luther's Postils in the Reformation

Statue of Martin Luther holding a Bible. Luther's preaching and published postils were instrumental in spreading Reformation theology.

The sermon postil genre found new life and popularity in the Protestant Reformation, especially through **Martin Luther (1483–1546)**. Luther, himself an Augustinian friar and professor, believed deeply in the power of preaching to communicate the Gospel. He regarded the sermon as a means by which Christ himself spoke to His people, and he set out to provide sound, accessible sermons for the entire church year ⁹. "Aside from his catechisms, Luther's sermons for the church year – the postils – were his most influential writings for the common people," historians note ¹⁰. Indeed, contemporaries recognized that along with Luther's hymns and catechisms, his postils did more to shape popular faith in the 16th century than perhaps any other of his works ¹⁰.

The Church Postil (Kirchenpostille)

Origin and Development: Luther's principal collection, later known as the *Church Postil*, consists of sermons on the appointed Scripture lessons (especially the Gospels) for every Sunday and major festival. He began writing it in 1521 while hiding in Wartburg Castle (during his enforced absence after the Diet of Worms) ⁹. At Wartburg, Luther's top priority was translating the New Testament into German, but alongside that work he also drafted model sermons on the Sunday readings – aiming to "bring the reformational, Gospel message to ordinary pastors and laypeople" across Germany ⁹. Initially, Luther wrote a set of Latin sermons for Advent (the start of the liturgical year). However, he soon decided that to truly reach parish priests and laity, the postil should be in **German**. He famously set aside his Latin draft (finding its style too academic) and composed fresh German sermons that spoke directly and simply to the people ¹¹. The first installments – an **Advent Postil** and **Christmas Postil** – were printed in late 1522, together called the *Wartburg Postil* ¹² ¹³. Over the next few years Luther added more: a **Lent Postil** covering Lent through Easter appeared in 1525 ¹⁴, completing the winter (Advent-to-Easter) cycle. Sermons for the summer half of the year (Trinity through end of Pentecost season) were somewhat delayed; an edition edited by Luther's colleague Stephan Roth circulated in the later 1520s ¹⁵, but Luther continued revising and perfecting the collection. By 1540–1544, with the help of Caspar Cruciger, Luther issued a final, authorized edition of the *Church Postil* covering the full year ¹⁶ ¹⁷.

Theological Significance and Style: Luther's postil sermons are theologically rich yet intentionally *folksy* in tone. They reinforced Reformation teachings – above all, justification by faith in Christ alone – in the context of explaining each Sunday's Bible reading. Unlike medieval scholastic sermons that often began with a Latin theme and multiple sub-points, Luther's homilies in the postil are generally straightforward expositions of the scriptural pericope, filled with practical application, vivid analogies, and direct appeals to the listener. He wrote in vigorous **vernacular German**, aiming for clarity and emotional connection. For example, in a sermon on the Christmas gospel, Luther pauses to paint the Nativity scene in homely detail, then drives home the comfort of the Incarnation for the common believer ¹¹. This accessible style was quite deliberate

– Luther wanted even “ordinary pastors” with modest education to *either preach these sermons verbatim or use them as a model* for their own preaching ¹⁸ . He also intended lay readers to benefit devotionally. By providing a postil in print, Luther democratized religious instruction: any literate head of household could read the week’s sermon to his family or study it for personal edification ¹⁸ .

Influence and Dissemination: The *Church Postil* quickly became one of Luther’s most widely used works. **Dozens of editions** were published within Luther’s lifetime. By one count, **25 editions** appeared between 1525 and 1529, and over **50 editions** were printed in the next five years ¹⁹ ²⁰ – an astonishing output, reflecting huge demand. These included not only Wittenberg printings but also reprints in Leipzig, Augsburg, and further afield, some without Luther’s permission. (At one point, a printer pirated parts of Luther’s manuscript and issued an unauthorized edition – prompting Luther to write a scathing “Admonition to the Printers” in 1525 when he released his own authorized Lent Postil ¹⁴ .) The postils were translated from German into Latin and other languages, extending their reach beyond German lands. They became a **staple of Lutheran pulpits**: many parish pastors essentially preached “Luther’s sermons” every Sunday, either reading directly or adapting them. In effect, the *Church Postil* helped standardize Reformation teaching throughout the nascent Lutheran churches. It also educated laypeople: owning a hefty postil volume became common in literate households, second only to the Bible. Luther himself continued to refine the collection through the 1530s, concerned that his true intent remain clear. By 1544, the term “Church Postil” came into use to distinguish this set from his other postil (the House Postil) which by then had been published ²¹ . Long after Luther’s death (1546), his *Church Postil* remained authoritative; it was often reprinted in the 17th century as Lutheran orthodoxy’s gold-standard sermon book.

The House Postil (Hauspostille)

In addition to his church sermons, Luther produced a second celebrated postil collection known as the *House Postil*. **What was the House Postil?** It was a series of sermons Luther delivered in his own home for his family and friends, later transcribed and published for use in domestic devotions ²² . The backstory: between 1531 and 1535, Luther often found himself too ill or weak to preach in St. Mary’s Church on Sunday mornings ²³ . (His colleague Johannes Bugenhagen had returned from travels and taken back the regular pulpit duties by 1532 ²³ .) Yet Luther “never felt fulfilled until he had shared pertinent and timely thoughts for the day on the basis of the standard Gospel lesson” with those around him, as one contemporary observed ²⁴ . Thus, on Sunday afternoons, Luther would gather his household – his wife **Katharina von Bora**, their children, students lodging with them, and any guests – and conduct an informal *home worship*. He would read the appointed Scripture (usually the same Gospel text that had been read in church that morning) and then **preach a sermon at the family table** ²⁵ ²⁶ . An assistant (George Rörer) and Luther’s student Veit Dietrich faithfully took notes in shorthand as Luther spoke extemporaneously or from brief outlines ²⁷ ²⁸ . These intimate messages, often tailored to a lay audience of family members, were filled with warm pastoral application, encouragement, and practical teaching centered on Christ’s saving work ²⁸ .

After several years, the collected notes of these home sermons were edited (primarily by Veit Dietrich) and published in 1544 as *Luther’s House Postil* ²¹ . The **House Postil** thus provided **devotional sermons for use in the home**. Luther intended them especially for fathers and heads of households, to aid in leading family devotions ²² . Just as he expected lay fathers to teach their children the Catechism at home, Luther also “desired them to have devotions with the family” on Sundays using these house-sermons ¹⁸ . The House Postil quickly became popular among Lutheran laity. It gave families a way to hear Luther’s preaching even if they lived far from Wittenberg. The tone of these sermons is often conversational and vivid, suited to a

domestic setting. Notably, the **language** is the same vigorous German, but Luther sometimes uses more stories or analogies a child could grasp. Theologically, the content is wholly consistent with his *Church Postil* (Christ-centered interpretation of Scripture, emphasis on faith and grace), but the *Hauspostille* tends to include more explicit moral exhortation and comfort geared toward everyday Christian life.

In Lutheran lands, many households owned both the Bible and Luther's postils as twin pillars of devotion. The two postils together (Church and House) cemented Luther's role as the "people's preacher" across Germany. It is telling that only after 1544, once both sets were in circulation, did people begin distinguishing *Kirchenpostille* versus *Hauspostille* ²¹. Both were simply known as "Luther's Postil" – a byword for sound doctrine and clear preaching. Luther's model would inspire numerous imitations among his followers and also provoke responses from Catholic opponents.

Other Reformers' Contributions to the Postil Genre

Luther was not alone in recognizing the value of postils. Other reformers and theologians of the 16th century, both within Lutheranism and beyond, contributed to or at times diverged from Luther's homiletical model:

- **Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560):** Luther's closest collaborator, Melanchthon, was a Greek scholar and systematic theologian rather than a frontline preacher. In fact, Melanchthon was **never ordained and was personally shy of preaching** (he had a slight speech impediment) ²⁹. Instead, he supported the Reformation by educating future preachers and providing them tools. As professor at Wittenberg, Melanchthon taught **rhetoric and biblical exegesis**, shaping how pastors would preach ³⁰ ³¹. He authored influential biblical **commentaries and lectures** (on Romans, Corinthians, etc.) which were published and "*served as aids to preachers*" once they left Wittenberg for parish ministry ³² ³³. These works, though more academic than a simple postil, functioned similarly – pastors could draw on Melanchthon's insights and clear doctrinal summaries when crafting their own sermons. Melanchthon also systematized theology in his *Loci Communes* (1521), which provided a topical guide to Scripture that many preachers used alongside postils. In sum, **Melanchthon's role** was to ensure the theological **content** behind Protestant preaching was sound, even if he did not compile popular sermon books himself. He sometimes gently diverged from Luther's style by favoring a more irenic, scholarly tone, but his commitment to *Bible-centered proclamation* was the same. Thanks in part to Melanchthon's tutelage, Wittenberg-trained pastors became known for preaching with "intellectual depth and scriptural insight," even as they utilized Luther's more down-to-earth postils ³².
- **Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558):** A Wittenberg pastor and church organizer, Bugenhagen (nicknamed "Doctor Pomeranus") was Luther's own pastor and an influential Reformer in his own right. He did not author a famous postil collection, but he contributed to the **postil tradition by training preachers and extending Luther's homiletic approach** to new regions. As a pastor in Wittenberg from 1523 onward, Bugenhagen preached regularly to the town and modeled practical, applicable sermons for the many students who heard him ³⁴. He also became the **chief church organizer in North Germany and Scandinavia**, helping cities and princes implement the Reformation. In doing so, Bugenhagen was keenly aware that many former Catholic priests had little experience preaching beyond rote readings of homilies ³⁵. To help these newly minted Lutheran pastors, Bugenhagen and colleagues produced what has been called the "Wittenberg Commentary" – a coordinated set of **introductory Scripture guides** for preachers ³⁵. Bugenhagen himself

provided **notes and brief commentaries** on numerous Bible books (e.g. the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John; ten of Paul's Epistles; and several Old Testament books) ³⁶. These were concise expositions "aimed at pastors who needed to expand their understanding of the biblical story and teaching" ³⁶. In essence, Bugenhagen's materials functioned as a **supplement to postils**: rather than full sermons, they were outlines and explanations that a preacher could turn into a sermon. He often integrated Martin Luther's and Melanchthon's insights (for example, incorporating Luther's prefaces or Melanchthon's *Loci* in his notes) ³⁶. Bugenhagen's contribution, therefore, was to ensure that the Reformation's preachers were well-equipped **biblically and pastorally**. In practice, when Bugenhagen reformed churches in Denmark or Pomerania, he would often bring Lutheran postils (sometimes translating them into the local language, such as Low German) and encourage their use, while also training clergy to preach effectively themselves. His efforts earned him the title "the second apostle of the North" ³⁷, and they helped make sure that Luther's model of regular, Bible-based preaching took root in all these areas.

- **Johann Spangenberg (1484–1550)**: Spangenberg was a German Lutheran pastor and educator who became renowned for writing one of the **best-selling postils of the 16th century** ³⁸. Seeing the need for simple, instructive sermons especially for the young and for rural congregations, Spangenberg compiled the *Postilla Teütsch* (German Postil) in 1542/1543. This work was a **short, question-and-answer style postil** that explained the Gospel readings in an elementary way to "help prepare children to understand the lectionary readings" ³⁸. Spangenberg's Postil, sometimes called the "*Fragestücke*" postil (Question pieces), achieved extraordinary popularity. It went through **45 editions between 1543 and 1620** ³⁹ – a testament to its wide use in schools, village churches, and homes. Remarkably, its influence extended even beyond Lutheran circles: historians note that Spangenberg's plain sermons were read "**even among Roman Catholics**", including secret Protestants in Catholic territories who found comfort and biblical teaching in his pages ⁴⁰. (Catholic authorities occasionally complained of parishioners or lower clergy devouring Lutheran postils – an anecdote that earned such readers the nickname "*Postillenfresser*," "postil-eaters" in German.) Spangenberg's success showed how powerful the postil format could be for popular education – his work integrated traditional faith with scriptural clarity in the vernacular ⁴⁰. It essentially **bridged old and new**: retaining the idea of a stable cycle of homilies (familiar from medieval practice) but infusing it with Lutheran evangelical doctrine and an eye toward instructing youth. Next to Luther's own postils, Spangenberg's was among the most widely read in Lutheran lands ⁴¹. It also set a pattern for other "little postils" aimed at schoolmasters, parents, and children.

- **Other Lutheran Postil Writers**: Luther's generation and the following one produced many more sermon collections, each with its own flavor. For example, **Johannes Mathesius (1504–1565)**, a student of Luther and pastor in Joachimsthal, was "*uncommonly fruitful in his pulpit work*" and published a **Postilla** in the late 1560s, sometimes called *Postilla prophetica* ⁴². Mathesius' sermons often included mining metaphors (suited his mining-town congregation) and even hymns, blending Luther's theology with local color ⁴³. Another was **Urbanus Rhegius (1489–1541)**, who compiled evangelical homilies used in Northern Germany, and **Veit Dietrich (1506–1549)**, who aside from recording Luther's House Postil, issued his own sermon book. Across Scandinavia, reformers trained by Luther followed suit: **Olaus Petri** in Sweden prepared a Swedish postil (*En nyttug Postilla*, 1528) of ready-made sermons "*for the clergy to read out at Mass*" so that correct Gospel teaching would spread even where pastors were unlearned ⁴⁴. In Denmark, **Niels Hemmingsen** produced a postil, and so on. These works tended to borrow heavily from Luther's content, adapting it to local language and needs. The **intended audiences** also varied: some postils were clearly for clergy (aids for preaching),

while others, like Petri's and Spangenberg's, were also meant to be read aloud to congregations or families by those who were not gifted preachers. Through these efforts, the **"postil" became a standard tool of Lutheran pedagogy and devotion**, extending well into the 17th century.

- **Reformed and Anglican Traditions:** In other branches of the Reformation, the postil concept was adopted in modified form. The Reformed churches (Calvinist tradition) placed a slightly different emphasis on preaching – often preferring continuous expository preaching through books of the Bible rather than following the traditional church-year lectionary. Thus, strictly speaking, **classic postils (tied to the liturgical calendar)** were less central in Reformed areas. John Calvin, for instance, published many volumes of sermons, but these were usually series on biblical books (e.g. Sermons on Job, on Genesis) rather than a set for the ecclesiastical year. However, in regions where people were used to the old lectionary, Reformed leaders did at times produce sermon collections for Sundays. In Germany, a few **"Calvinist postils"** appeared by pragmatism, to cater to lay expectations ⁴⁵ ⁴⁶. One example is **Erasmus Sarcerius (1501–1559)**, a Lutheran-turned-Calvinist, who compiled postils with a more Reformed theological slant. Another example outside Germany is the Church of England's official **Books of Homilies**. The English Reformers, concerned that many parish priests could not compose proper Protestant sermons, in 1547 issued the **First Book of Homilies** – a collection of twelve sermons in English (on topics like salvation, scripture, and Christian living) authorized to be read in churches. A **Second Book of Homilies** (21 sermons, including on important doctrines like justification, marriage, etc.) followed in 1562 ⁴⁷. These Homilies functioned exactly as postils: they were appointed to be read *in place of a sermon* in any parish where the clergyman was unprepared or insufficiently educated. The Anglican Homilies, influenced by both Luther and Calvin's teachings, thus represent the postil genre transplanted into an English context – a **"Reformed postil"** in all but name.

On the **Catholic side**, the Reformation provoked a revival of Catholic preaching aids, including new postils to counter Protestant ideas. Early in the Reformation, the notable Catholic polemicist **Johannes Eck** (Luther's opponent) published an *Enchiridion* of sermons and later an *Exposition of the Gospels* (1532) to equip Catholic preachers ⁴⁸. After the Council of Trent (1545–1563) reemphasized preaching and teaching, Catholic clergy produced comprehensive sermon collections often explicitly framing **Catholic doctrine vs. Protestant errors**. For instance, **Martin Eisengrein** in Bavaria issued a *Postilla Catholica* (1576) – a Catholic postil on the Gospels for the church year intended to reinforce orthodox teachings in the era of Counter-Reformation ⁴⁸. Jesuit preachers, too, published homily collections (sometimes illustrated with images to reach the largely illiterate). Thus, by the late 16th century, both Protestant and Catholic camps were using the postil format as a **vehicle of confessional instruction** – effectively dueling sermon books striving to win the hearts and minds of the people.

The Postil Genre after Luther: Orthodoxy and Adaptation

After the first generation of Reformers, sermon postils continued to evolve in the **post-Reformation era** (late 16th–17th centuries). In Lutheran **orthodoxy (c. 1580–1700)**, Luther's own postils remained in high esteem and in regular use. Many later Lutheran theologians wrote their own postils or updated Luther's. For example, **David Chytraeus** (a student of Melancthon) produced a *Evangelien Postille*, and the great Lutheran scholastic **Johann Gerhard** (1582–1637) compiled a *Postilla* with sermons for Sundays and festivals. These orthodox postils tended to be **lengthy, learned works**, filled with doctrinal clarification, patristic references, and practical applications – reflecting the more scholastic and comprehensive spirit of the age. Yet they were still intended for both pulpit and home. It was common for a village pastor of modest

ability to simply read aloud an approved postil sermon each Sunday. In Protestant territories, rulers sometimes **mandated the use of certain postils** to ensure doctrinal uniformity. For instance, in Sweden, Olaus Petri's Postil (and later Lutheran postils in Swedish) were officially recommended for parish use ⁴⁹. In Lutheran Germany, collections like **Elector Johann Georg's postil** were distributed. This period also saw the postil concept broaden to include catechetical sermons (e.g. series of sermons on the Catechism, which were likewise compiled and printed). By providing a *repository of ready-made sermons*, postils helped maintain a high standard of preaching even as the first generation of Reformation preachers gave way to successors.

In the **Calvinist (Reformed) tradition**, the postil genre never became as dominant, due to different preaching patterns. However, there were adaptations: some Reformed pastors in Germany and the Low Countries arranged selections of their sermons according to the liturgical year for publication, especially to serve converts new to Protestant worship. Additionally, **Reformed devotional literature** sometimes took the form of homilies on Sunday texts (for example, the Dutch preacher **Cornelis van der Heyden** published a popular postil-like commentary on Sunday lessons). The concept of systematic, didactic sermons lived on in the Reformed world through multi-volume sermon series and **models for preaching** (for instance, the influential Geneva and Zurich pastors' sermons were transcribed and emulated by others).

Meanwhile, the **Catholic Church**, in implementing the Counter-Reformation, made vigorous use of homiletic collections. After 1600, many Catholic bishops issued their own *homiliaria* – essentially Catholic postils – sometimes in the vernacular, to ensure that parish priests preached authorized doctrine. The Jesuits and other orders published sermon guides (e.g. **Nicolas Avancinus's** *Catholicus Praedicator*, 1678, a huge Baroque postil). Interestingly, some Catholic postil writers borrowed a page from Luther's style, adopting more vernacular storytelling and direct appeals, albeit in service of Catholic teaching. As a result, by the 17th century **postils were a fixture in both Protestant and Catholic homiletics**, though serving opposing theological ends.

By the **early modern period** (17th–18th centuries), the sheer number of printed postils and sermon collections was enormous. A modern study counts over **400 distinct postil collections published in Germany between 1520 and 1620** alone, across Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed traditions ⁴⁵ ⁴⁶. This underscores how central the postil was to early modern religious life. However, with the Enlightenment and changing tastes in the 18th century, the use of old postils waned somewhat (more preachers wanted to write original sermons, and congregations sought fresh styles). In Lutheran communities, though, *postils never disappeared* – they became part of the inherited devotional library. Even into the 19th century, one finds pastors and lay folk reading postils (for example, the **"St. Louis Edition"** of Luther's sermons in the 1800s made Luther's postils available in America). The enduring legacy of the genre is perhaps best seen in the fact that many classic postils, especially Luther's, have been repeatedly edited, translated, and republished up to the present.

Theological, Liturgical, and Linguistic Shifts Over Time

Throughout its history, the postil genre has mirrored broader shifts in preaching style and audience:

- **From Latin to Vernacular:** One of the most dramatic shifts was linguistic. Medieval postils (like Charlemagne's homiliary or Nicholas of Lyra's commentary) were in Latin and aimed at clergy. But from the 14th century onward – and explosively during the Reformation – postils moved into the *vernacular languages*. Luther's German postils set the example, soon followed by postils in Swedish,

English, Dutch, etc. The reason was a new insistence that ordinary lay Christians should hear and read God's Word in their own tongue. The impact of this shift cannot be overstated: it made the postil a tool for mass religious education and not just a clerical reference. People could read a sermon book at home or hear it read from the pulpit and understand it directly. Vernacular style also meant adapting to local expressions and often a more conversational tone. Luther, for instance, peppered his sermons with colorful analogies from peasant life, popular proverbs, and even down-to-earth humor, all in the common Saxon dialect – a far cry from the dry Latin “postilla” marginalia of scholastics. This trend continued post-Reformation, with even Catholic preachers writing postils in German or French to connect with their flocks.

- **Theology and Content:** Medieval homiliaries tended to reinforce the accepted doctrinal themes of the liturgical year (the virtues of the saints on their feast days, moral lessons, etc.) and were heavily based on patristic sources. With the Reformation, the **theological focus of postils shifted** according to confessional lines. Protestant postils put front and center the exposition of Scripture *alone* over against traditions. Luther's postils, for example, consistently teach salvation by faith, the comfort of the Gospel, and polemicize against abuses like indulgences or false meritorious works – all within the context of explaining the day's text. They also deemphasized veneration of saints or late-medieval Marian doctrines, even when those were traditional themes for a given Sunday. (Reformers either repurposed those feast days to talk about Christ, or simply dropped some saints' days from their postils.) On the other hand, Catholic postils after Trent deliberately reassert core Catholic doctrines (the sacraments, merit and good works, the authority of the Church) and often include rebuttals to Protestant claims ⁴⁸. For example, Eisengrein's *Postilla Catholica* likely emphasizes the importance of the Mass and Catholic interpretations of scripture where Luther's would differ ⁴⁸. Despite differences, both sides' postils became more **didactic and doctrinally pointed** in the Reformation era, as the sermon was now a battleground for correct teaching.
- **Liturgical Function:** In the medieval Catholic Mass, the sermon (if there was one) was somewhat secondary – often a short exhortation after the Gospel, and in many places not delivered every week. Charlemagne's insistence on regular homilies was an exception that waxed and waned over centuries. The Reformation made the sermon **central in worship**. Luther elevated the sermon to be, with the reading of Scripture, the high point of the service (nearly on par with the sacraments) ⁵⁰. Consequently, postils – which ensure there is substantive preaching every Sunday – gained a new prominence. The postil became almost a liturgical book in its own right in Protestant churches. In some Lutheran orders of worship, the pastor was instructed to **“read from the postil”** if he could not prepare his own sermon. The Anglican Injunctions of 1547 similarly required clergy to preach from the official Homilies if they lacked the skill to compose a sermon ⁵¹. Thus the postil moved from the study desk to the center of the sanctuary as a regular component of liturgy. Over time, as more pastors became theologically trained, the practice of reading straight from a postil gave way to more original preaching – but even then, pastors often consulted postils in sermon preparation. Liturgically, the structure of postils (following the calendar) also meant the persistence of the traditional lectionary in many Protestant churches. Luther retained the medieval lectionary of Epistle and Gospel readings for Sundays, and by writing a postil on that basis he effectively **preserved the rhythm of the church year** (Advent, Christmas, Easter, etc.) for Lutherans, albeit reinterpreted around Christ's work. The Reformed, who sometimes abandoned the liturgical year, correspondingly produced fewer postils tied to it.

- **Sermon Structure and Style:** The postils also reflect evolving homiletic styles. A medieval sermon often followed a set form: a theme verse in Latin, followed by subdivisions (sometimes introduced with scholastic terms), and lots of quotations from Church Fathers or authorities. Early print postils like some by Johannes Herolt or Geiler of Kaysersberg in the 15th century still have elements of that style. Luther (and later Protestant preachers) broke from the scholastic form – Luther’s postil sermons read more like an engaging lecture or heartfelt talk, walking through the Bible passage and applying it directly. He avoided excessive Greco-Latin jargon and **spoke to the farmer, the mother, the child in the pew**. This conversational, vernacular style became the new norm in Protestant lands. Over the next century, Lutheran orthodox preachers reintroduced some formal structure (three-part sermons, etc.), but they never returned to the heavy scholastic abstruseness; even the most learned orthodox postils aimed to be understood by the common worshiper. In Catholic postils, interestingly, one sees a shift *toward* simpler popular preaching after Trent – the Reformers’ success with plain preaching led many Catholic preachers to adopt a more direct style in their homilies as well. By the 17th century, baroque Catholic sermons were again very elaborate oratory, but the initial Counter-Reformation postils often tried for simplicity to win the people’s hearts.

- **Intended Audience:** Perhaps the biggest functional shift was the broadening of the postil’s audience. Originally, as noted, postils were chiefly a **clergy aid** – something a priest or monk read to prepare his sermon (or read aloud verbatim). In the Reformation, the audience expanded to include **the laity**. Luther explicitly wrote his postils also for “ordinary laypeople” to read, not just for pastors ¹⁰. The House Postil was for fathers and families. Spangenberg wrote for schoolboys. As literacy slowly increased and books became more affordable, many lay Christians came to use postils as devotional reading – akin to how one might use a daily devotional guide today. This democratization of access meant the postil had to be engaging enough for a non-specialist reader. It became a genre of popular religious literature. In early modern Scandinavia, for instance, it was common for families to gather on Sunday afternoons and have the father read from a postil (if no service was held or to reinforce the day’s message). In some Eastern European contexts (e.g. Polish Royal Prussia), there were even **Polish-language postils** (Protestant and Catholic) for the people. Thus, the postil transformed from a mere *marginal gloss* for clergy into a *household book* of faith.

In summary, over the centuries the sermon postil evolved from compiled **authoritative sermons in Latin for priests** into **printed vernacular sermon books for every Christian**. Its structure and style flexed with the needs of the Church: catechetical in some eras, polemical in others, academic or popular as required. Yet the core function – to explain and apply the biblical text following the pattern of the liturgical year – remained constant.

Major Postils and Their Authors: A Historical Timeline

To crystallize the development of sermon postils, the following timeline highlights major postil collections from the Middle Ages through the post-Reformation period, along with their authors and significance:

Date / Era	Postil (Author)	Description & Significance
c. 800 (Carolingian)	<i>Homiliarium</i> of Charlemagne (compiled by Paul the Deacon)	A state-sponsored collection of Church Fathers' homilies for all Sundays/feasts. Ordered by Charlemagne to ensure uniform preaching, it was an early "postil" used throughout the Frankish Empire ³ . Established the principle of providing model sermons for clergy.
1320s (High Middle Ages)	<i>Postillae perpetuae</i> (Nicholas of Lyra)	A monumental Latin commentary on the entire Bible ⁴ . Nicholas's <i>Postilla</i> (literally "postil on the whole Bible") became the most influential medieval exegesis, later printed and studied by Reformers. It broadened the term "postil" to include running commentary, and its literal approach foreshadowed Reformation insistence on the literal sense of Scripture.
1413 (Pre-Reformation)	<i>Czech Postil</i> (Jan Hus)	A vernacular sermon cycle on the Gospels for Sundays and holidays, completed by Hus in 1413 ⁸ . Reworked from his Latin sermons, it placed Scripture text first followed by Hus's exposition. This was one of the first comprehensive postils in a local language, aiming to reform the church by grounding laypeople in the Word. Hus's Postil influenced Czech Hussites and later inspired Luther (who owned Hus's writings) in using the postil format for reform.
1522–1544 (Reformation)	<i>Church Postil</i> (Martin Luther)	Luther's famous collection of sermons for the full church year in German. Begun 1521–22 (Advent and Christmas Postils) and augmented through 1525 (Lent Postil) to 1544 (final edition of Summer Postil) ⁵² ⁵³ . It taught Reformation theology in an accessible homiletic form. Hugely popular – dozens of editions by 1530s ⁵⁴ – it became the model for Protestant postils and a key instrument for spreading Lutheran doctrine ¹⁰ ⁵⁴ .
1531–1535 (Reformation)	<i>House Postil</i> (Martin Luther)	A collection of Luther's home-based sermons on Sunday texts, delivered to his family and friends, transcribed by students and published in 1544 ²² ²¹ . Intended for household devotions and for use by fathers and schoolteachers in instructing the young. The House Postil complemented the Church Postil, emphasizing practical faith in daily life. It further popularized vernacular devotional reading among laypeople.

Date / Era	Postil (Author)	Description & Significance
1543 (Reformation)	<i>Postilla Teütsch</i> – “German Postil” (Johann Spangenberg)	A short Lutheran postil designed especially for children and common folk, explaining each Sunday Gospel in simple language ³⁸ . It became one of the century’s bestsellers – 45 editions from 1543–1620 ⁵⁵ – and was even read clandestinely in Catholic regions ⁴⁰ . Spangenberg’s work shows the postil as a tool of basic Christian education and indicates its broad appeal across society.
1547 & 1562 (Reformation in England)	<i>Two Books of Homilies</i> (Church of England, Cranmer et al.)	Officially mandated sermon collections in English, issued under Edward VI (1547) and Elizabeth I (1562) containing doctrinal and exhortative homilies ⁴⁷ . Provided standardized Protestant teaching for Anglican clergy to read in services. They represent an Anglican adaptation of the postil concept to ensure uniform preaching in the formative years of the Church of England.
1576 (Counter-Reformation)	<i>Postilla Catholica</i> (Martin Eisengrein)	A Catholic postil on the Gospels for the entire year ⁴⁸ . Published in Bavaria after the Council of Trent, it aimed to reinforce Catholic doctrine and counter Protestant interpretations in each Sunday’s text. Its very title “ <i>Catholic Postil</i> ” claimed the sermon space for Roman orthodoxy. One of many such Catholic collections, it highlights how Rome also harnessed the postil format to catechize the faithful.
Late 16th – 17th c. (Lutheran Orthodoxy)	Various Lutheran Postils (e.g. Johann Gerhard’s <i>Postilla</i> , 1613; Christian Chemnitz’s <i>Evangelienpostille</i> , etc.)	These were extensive sermon collections by second-generation Lutheran theologians, often covering the entire year with scholarly, yet pastoral, sermons. They served to buttress orthodox Lutheran teaching in an era of confessional solidification. Often reprinted, they kept Luther’s postillary tradition alive. For instance, Gerhard’s <i>Postilla</i> was highly regarded for its rich doctrinal content and practical applications, and later Lutheran pastors continued to mine these works for material.
1600s (Post-Reformation)	Jesuit and Catholic Baroque Postils (e.g. <i>Evangelia toto anno</i> by Jeremias Drexel, 1630s)	Elaborate sermon books that combined engaging storytelling, strict Catholic theology, and sometimes engraved illustrations. These postils show the continued vitality of the genre in Catholic popular piety, used by missionary preachers and parish priests to inspire and instruct. They often mirrored Protestant postils in structure (yearly cycles) but served the Counter-Reformation cause.

(Table: Key postils from medieval to early modern times, illustrating the genre's development. Dates are of composition or publication. Citations support the descriptions.)

Postils in Church and Cultural History: Scholarly Perspectives

Modern scholarship has increasingly recognized the importance of sermon postils in understanding the Reformation and early modern religious culture. Historically, preaching was sometimes viewed as a uniquely Protestant strength, with Catholics supposedly neglecting the pulpit. However, recent research by John Frymire and others challenges that view, showing that **both Protestants and Catholics invested enormous energy in preaching through postils** ⁵⁶. Frymire's comprehensive study of over 400 sermon collections (1520–1620) across confessions demonstrates that postils were *"the most important vehicle for the dissemination of ideas in early modern Germany."* They carried Reformation ideas into every village and, likewise, carried the Catholic response back to the populace ⁴⁵ ⁴⁶. In other words, postils were a primary medium of **mass communication** in the 16th century – a preaching "battlefield" in print. This has led historians to pay closer attention to these often overlooked works.

Scholars note, for example, that **Luther's postils shaped Lutheran piety as deeply as his translation of the Bible**. Through them, common people learned how to interpret Scripture in a Christ-centered way and absorbed core teachings (many could quote lines from Luther's sermons by heart). Contemporary observers in the 16th century themselves remarked on the powerful impact of Luther's postils: alongside his Catechism and hymns, they were credited with entrenching the Reformation among the laity ¹⁰. Thus, modern historiography often emphasizes a triad of **catechisms, hymns, and postils** as the tools of confessionalization – the process of molding a distinct Protestant (or Catholic) community identity.

There is also interest in how postils influenced **literacy and reading habits**. Because postils were usually large books, often in folio, owning one was a sign of serious devotion. Researchers like Gerald Strauss once argued that laypeople might not have actually read these hefty volumes cover-to-cover but rather kept them as reference. Newer studies, however, using inventories and diaries, show that literate households did actively use postils, reading the prescribed sermon each Sunday or using them in lieu of a pastor when traveling. In Lutheran areas without resident clergy, villagers sometimes gathered to read a Luther sermon together – a phenomenon indicating a **lay appropriation of the preaching office** in emergencies, enabled by the printed postil.

Another scholarly debate centers on the **originality versus repetition** in postil preaching. Critics in the past dismissed postils as promoting lazy, by-rote preaching (indeed, the term "postil" in some languages became synonymous with a canned sermon). But historians now point out that many pastors used postils creatively – as a foundation to build on, rather than a script to slavishly recite. Moreover, even when read verbatim, the sermons of a master like Luther or a skilled orthodox theologian were far from dry; they were often vibrant and compelling. So, the question arises: did postils enhance preaching or hinder it? The consensus leans toward enhancement: postils provided a **baseline of doctrinally sound content** in an era of vastly varying education levels among clergy. They were a means of quality control and wide dissemination. In Protestant territories, they also reflected an assumption that God's Word, preached or read, would not return void – whether it was the pastor's own composition or Luther's printed sermon, it was the **biblical truth reaching the hearers**.

There are also historiographical discussions about how postils reflect attitudes toward **authority and tradition**. Luther's appropriation of the medieval postil format is seen as a brilliant example of *transforming*

a traditional medium for evangelical ends. He took a familiar genre (the annual homiliary) which traditionally drew on the Church Fathers, and he filled it instead with direct Scripture exposition and Reformation doctrine – thereby easing the transition for laypeople from the old Church to the new. On the Catholic side, the continued use of postils (often filled with quotes from Church Fathers and medieval doctors) showed the Counter-Reformation's resolve to claim continuity. Some scholars speak of a “confessionalization of the postil,” wherein each confession by 1600 had its own canon of postillar authors revered as standard (e.g. Luther, Spangenberg for Lutherans; Canisius, etc., for Catholics). The postil thus became a marker of confessional identity: owning a certain postil said something about your theological allegiance.

In cultural history, postils are a rich source for understanding **everyday life and values** of the time. They frequently include anecdotes, proverbial wisdom, and references to common experiences (farming, family, civic events) to illustrate theological points. For instance, Johannes Mathesius's postils give insight into mining culture and folk beliefs in 16th-century Bohemia, while Catholic Baroque postils contain snapshots of Counter-Reformation popular piety and attitudes toward festivals. Researchers combing through these sermons have uncovered attitudes toward the household, gender roles (as postils often address fathers, mothers, children in turn), social issues, and even humor.

Finally, contemporary theologians and church historians have debated the lasting **homiletical legacy** of the postil. Is there value today in these old collections of sermons? Some argue they are a treasury of pre-modern interpretation and pastoral wisdom, still useful for preaching and devotion. (In fact, new translations of Luther's Church Postil have been published in recent years, and pastors continue to glean insights from them.) Others caution that a postil approach – using stock sermons – can lead to complacency and lack of contextualization in preaching. Yet, the postil genre's endurance (in various forms, even into the modern era) speaks to its adaptability and usefulness. The idea of providing “*sermons for all occasions*” lives on in published sermon anthologies and lectionary-based commentary series that many clergy use. Thus, the postil is not just a historical curiosity; it is an antecedent of modern preaching resources.

In conclusion, the history of the sermon postil is a window into the evolving practice of Christian preaching from the Middle Ages through the Reformation and beyond. Postils served as **bridges between the pulpit and the printing press**, carrying the spoken word of the sermon into written form and back again into the mouths of other preachers and the ears of new congregations. From Charlemagne's homiliary to Luther's *Kirchenpostille* to the rival postils of Catholics and Protestants, these collections of sermons profoundly influenced how Scripture was taught and understood. As recent scholarship affirms, to study postils is to grasp how theological ideas were *popularized and propagated* in society ⁴⁵. They were a practical tool, a theological weapon, and a devotional companion all at once. For the university professor researching this topic, postils offer fertile ground to explore questions of authority, communication, and religious life in pre-modern Europe. They remind us that the Reformation was, at its heart, a **preaching revolution** – one that resonated from lofty Latin commentaries down to the humble voices of fathers reading Luther's sermons at the dinner table. The sermon postil, in its many forms, was both product and engine of that revolution, leaving a legacy still echoing in how sermons are shared and experienced in Christian worship today. ⁴⁵

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Sources: The analysis above is informed by primary and secondary sources on medieval and Reformation homiletics. Key references include McClintock & Strong's *Cyclopedia* (for the medieval postilla and Charlemagne's homiliary) ³ ², scholarly studies such as John M. Frymire's *The Primacy of the Postils* ⁵⁶, and historical introductions to Luther's works (e.g. Benjamin Mayes's introduction to Luther's Church Postil in *Luther's Works* vol. 75) ¹⁶ ⁵⁷. Specific examples from Jan Hus's Czech Postil ⁸, Luther's own prefaces

and notes ¹³ ¹⁴, and accounts of other reformers like Melanchthon ³², Bugenhagen ³⁶, and Spangenberg ³⁸ have been cited to provide detailed evidence. These sources collectively illustrate the development, impact, and reception of sermon postils in church history. The timeline table above also encapsulates data from these references for a quick chronological overview. The historiographical commentary is drawn from the consensus of recent Reformation studies, highlighting the scholarly reevaluation of preaching's role across confessions ⁴⁵. Overall, the evidence paints a comprehensive picture of the sermon postil as a cornerstone of Christian teaching and culture in the late medieval and Reformation eras.

¹ ² ³ ⁴ **Postil - Biblical Cyclopedia**

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⁵ **Nicholas of Lyra (c. 1270–1349) and the Late Medieval Bible**

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⁶ **POSTIL definition in American English - Collins Dictionary**

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⁷ **Postil | Religion Wiki - Fandom**

<https://religion.fandom.com/wiki/Postil>

⁸ **>Feel this**

<http://www.brrp.org/proceedings/brrp4/fudge.pdf>

⁹ ¹⁰ ¹¹ ¹² ¹³ ¹⁴ ¹⁵ ¹⁶ ¹⁷ ¹⁹ ²⁰ ²¹ ⁵² ⁵³ ⁵⁴ ⁵⁷ **The History of Luther's Church Postil**

<https://blog.cph.org/study/new/the-history-of-luthers-church-postil>

¹⁸ ²² ²³ ²⁴ ²⁵ ²⁶ ²⁷ ²⁸ **Luther's Hauspostille - Lutheran Reformation**

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²⁹ ³⁰ ³¹ ³² ³³ **Philip Melanchthon: Confessor of the Faith – The Lutheran Witness**

<https://witness.lcms.org/2010/philip-melanchthon-confessor-of-the-faith-2-2010/>

³⁴ ³⁵ ³⁶ **Johannes Bugenhagen, Team Player – The Lutheran Witness**

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³⁷ **Johannes Bugenhagen - Wikipedia**

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³⁸ **To Be Fishers of People | Carl F. H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding**

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³⁹ ⁵⁵ **The Reformation of Prayer among Sixteenth-Century Lutherans ...**

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⁴⁰ **[PDF] Postil by Johann Spangenberg (1557) - UNL Digital Commons**

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1029&context=modlangfacpub>

⁴¹ **CATHOLIC POSTILLENFRESSER: POSTILS, CATHOLIC REFORM ...**

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