CHAPTER FOUR

EXCURSUS:
CALVINIST POSTILS?
THE PRAGMATISM OF GERMAN REFORMED POSTILLATORS

Zwingli, Calvin and other Swiss reformers may have adamantly rejected the pericopic system and postils born of it, but during the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Reformed preachers in Germany realized that the tradition, now over seven hundred years old (or so they thought), would not simply go away.1 The standard weekly readings were too integral to the fabric and rhythms of religious life, and on more occasions than just Sunday sermons, which is why a number of Calvinists who worked for converted territorial princes acquiesced to this reality and produced Reformed postils intended to function similarly to those of their Lutheran and Catholic counterparts. They hoped populations gradually converted to Calvinism would forget the pericopes.

1 From what I can see, the phenomenon of German Calvinist postils is known but very little research has been done. Already in 1869 August Nebe noted the use of the genre in German Calvinist lands. He cited the postils of Olevian (published posthumously in 1587), Bernard Textor (of Dillenburg, 1599), Jodokus Nahum (1600), Wilhelm Zepper (1605), and Abraham Scultetus (whom I discuss below); Nebe, Die Evangelischen Perikopen des Kirchenjahres. Wissenschaftlich und erbaulich Ausgelegt, 1: Einleitung in das Perikopensystem uberhaupt und Auslegung der Perikopen des Weihnachtskreises (Wiesbaden, 1869), 55f. Hans-Henrik Krummacher provided relevant passages from a few Reformed church ordinances in Der junge Gryphius und die Tradition. Studien zu den Perikopensonetten und Passionsliedern (Munich, 1976), 51, n. 11. Although Thomas Kaufmann acknowledges Calvinist postils (“freilich mit Einschränkungen”), his documentation—which is usually thorough—is limited to two sources (neither postils, the newest dated 1623) and no secondary literature; Universität und lutherische Konfessionalisierung. Die Rostocker Theologieprofessoren und ihr Beitrag zur theologischen Bildung und kirchlichen Gestaltung im Herzogtum Mecklenburg zwischen 1550 und 1675 (Gütersloh, 1997), 508 & n. 452. The best reference works are satisfied with the traditional distinction: Lutherans retained the pericopes (which were, eventually, debated), and Calvinists preached solely the lectio continua. See, e.g., Albrecht Beutel, “Predigt VIII. Evangelische Predigt vom 16. bis 18. Jahrhundert,” TRE 27: 296–311; here 298f. (1.2–1.3) and 300f. (2.1); and Peter C. Bloth, “Schriftlesung I,” TRE 30: 520–58; here 532–38, on Luther and Calvin (including the treatise of Joachim Westphal discussed above, 32f.). Bloth, however, makes no mention of either Calvinist or German Calvinist pericopic preaching, implying via Zwingli, Calvin, and others that all Reformed preaching followed the lectio continua.
One of the earliest German Calvinist postils was also the most detailed in its explanation and defense of the genre. Balthasar Cop had preached in Neustadt (Pfalz) since at least the early 1570s, and published in 1591 a *Hauskirchen Postill* based on the pericopic sermons he had delivered there between 1574 and 1576. In the eighteen-page dedication to his prince, Johann Casimir, Cop provided nothing less than a history of Christian preaching from apostolic times to the present. The Church had remained true to its preaching mission for eight hundred years, Cop insisted, up through Beda and Alcuin: “these two men highly learned in the scriptures, languages, and liberal arts were the last who preached through entire biblical books (*homiliae perpetuae*) in the churches.” It was at this time that the calendar of epistle and gospel readings emerged, after which it began “to snow and rain postils.” He hardly considered them a Lutheran invention. Cop was unsure exactly whom to pin the blame upon, but insisted that during the ninth century and thereafter the majority of priests and monks—the majority of whom were drunks—came to rely on postils for preaching. Admittedly the art of printing did not yet exist, which created a shortage of books that perhaps explained the introduction of the pericopes and creation of the “homiliary patched together out of the works of the patristic fathers.”

Despite the best intentions of medieval clerics, in Cop’s lifetime “people much more learned” such as Calvin had come to reject the

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