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Christian History Made Easy (Rose Bible Basics)

17. The City of God in the Medieval Church

This chapter surveys about a dozen medieval Christians who stayed inside the one established church yet lived with their eyes on Augustine's 'City of God.' The point is the KEY concept: even amid corrupt clergy, crusaders, and political power, God never stops working. It groups these people under five callings—missionaries/monks, mystics, mendicants, and scholars.

Key takeaways

- Medieval Christians couldn't imagine starting their own churches; to be Christian meant staying part of the 'one, holy, apostolic church.'
- Missionaries and monks: Boniface and his sister Lioba evangelized Germany; monasteries spread the faith through advanced farming that drew pagan curiosity.
- Cluny (founded 909 by Duke William, led by Berno) renewed monastic obedience to Scripture and Benedict's Rule, and reset the standard for holy clergy across Europe.
- John Damascus defended icons by distinguishing icon-reverence from icon-worship; falsely convicted of treason, he lost his hand and status but kept writing hymns.

- Cyril and Methodius translated the Bible into Slavic and invented an alphabet; their Moravian mission failed, but God turned it into Bulgaria's conversion and the lasting Cyrillic script.
- Mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux (Cistercians) and Hildegard of Bingen stressed love for and direct experience of God; Bernard's focus on Jesus' humanity reshaped medieval art and devotion.
- Mendicants preached town to town: Waldo's Bible-focused 'Poor Folk' were condemned and hunted, while Francis of Assisi and Clare embraced radical poverty and were approved.
- Scholastics united reason with revelation: Anselm ('faith seeking understanding,' the ontological argument) and Thomas Aquinas, mocked as 'Dumb Ox,' who wrote the Summa Theologica.
- Mysticism is judged by a caution: helpful when it engages the whole person, harmful when feelings or private visions outrank Scripture.

Passages worth keeping

"The reason for our loving God is God... He sought you before you began to seek him."

Bernard's core teaching that God's love comes first, drawing the believer in.

“All that I have written seems to me nothing but straw, compared to what I have seen.”

Aquinas after a vision—even the greatest theology is small next to knowing God.

How it connects

The recurring frame is Augustine's 'City of God': faithful believers living inside a flawed institutional church, evidence that God works even in unlikely places—and an invitation for the reader to join that work.

Scripture referenced

- **John 5:17** -- 'My Father is always at his work'—the chapter's thesis that God never stops working.
- **Mark 12:30** -- Cited to defend mysticism—loving God with your whole being, feelings included.
- **2 Corinthians 12:1-9** -- Paul's mystical experience, used to show Scripture itself describes such encounters.
- **Matthew 10:8-10** -- The lectionary text Francis applied to himself, launching Franciscan poverty.