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Christian History Made Easy (Rose Bible Basics)

14. The Futile System — Feudalism, Islam, and the Splitting of the Church

This chapter traces the early Middle Ages after Rome's collapse, when land and lords replaced central government. It follows four forces that reshaped Christianity: the feudal system, the sudden rise of Islam, the crowning of Charlemagne, and the long, bitter split between the Roman and Eastern churches that ended in two separate communions.

Key takeaways

- With no empire to hold things together, land became wealth. Lords ran self-sufficient manors, knights gave protection, and peasants became 'vassals' who farmed for survival. Lords picked their own priests, so loyalty to earthly lords often crowded out loyalty to God.
- Islam exploded out of Arabia after Muhammad (from 610). Within a century Muslims held the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain, partly because they allowed limited protection to Christians and Jews, and some rejected Eastern Christians (like the Copts) went along.

- The 'Smashers vs. Kissers' fight over icons was settled by the Second Council of Nicaea (787): icons were allowed for reverence, but icon-worship and three-dimensional images were banned.
- The Franks became the West's power. Charlemagne forced conquered tribes to be baptized—even beheading 4,500 who refused—and in 800 Pope Leo III crowned him emperor. For the first time the church created an emperor, reviving the dream of a Western Empire.
- Three blows split the church: the added 'and the Son' (filioque) in the Nicene Creed, Humbert's harsh bull of excommunication in 1054, and above all the Crusades.
- The Crusades began nobly (freeing pilgrim roads) but turned bloody—Jerusalem's slaughter in 1099, then the Fourth Crusade's sack of Constantinople in 1204, where Crusaders raped and killed fellow Christians. The East never recovered, and the split into Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox became permanent.
- The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) locked in transubstantiation and laid groundwork for the Inquisition.
- The chapter's closing plea: don't dismiss medieval Christians. For every corrupt pope there were thousands of sincere believers. What guards us from the same failures is grace, not our own good deeds or theology.

Passages worth keeping

“Muslims are merciful compared with these men who bear Christ's cross on their shoulders.”

An Eastern writer on the Crusaders sacking Constantinople—the moment the church's division became final.

“Be critical only after you've tried to comprehend. Even then, speak with compassion.”

The chapter's key concept and moral takeaway.

How it connects

The whole chapter is a warning: power, sincerity, and even 'Christian' zeal can drive terrible harm when comprehension and compassion are missing. The author turns the history back on the reader—we, too, condemn before we understand.

Scripture referenced

- **Hebrews 12:1** -- Cited for why Eastern Christians kiss icons—past saints 'surround' present worship.
- **John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7** -- Offered for readers weighing the Roman vs. Eastern view of how the Spirit proceeds.
- **Galatians 4:6** -- Also given to test the two views of the Trinity behind the filioque dispute.