

When we become acquainted with the legacy of our Christian heritage, we connect our stories to those of the faithful who came before us. Use this teaching guide to lead your group through the historical accounts and spiritual encouragement found in *Forerunners of the Faith*.

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CONTENTS

Foreword	6
How to Use This Manual	7
Introduction	9
Part I: The Apostolic Age (1st Century)	
1. The Biblical Framework: Identifying the Pillars of the Faith	17
2. From Pentecost to Patmos: Peter, Paul, and the First-Century Church	27
Part II: The Patristic Period (2nd–5th Centuries)	
3. The Disciples of the Apostles: Clement, Polycarp, and the Early Church Fathers	37
4. Contending for the Faith: Justin, Irenaeus, and the Pre-Nicene Church	45
5. Defending the Deity of Christ: Athanasius and the Council of Nicaea	53
6. Grace and Truth: Augustine, Chrysostom, and the Post-Nicene Church	61
Part III: The Middle Ages (6th–15th Centuries)	
7. Controversies and Councils: Doctrinal Debates in the Late Patristic Period and Early Middle Ages	71
8. Schisms, Scholars, and Soldiers: Anselm, Bernard, and the Crusades	79
9. Forerunners to the Reformation: Waldo, Wycliffe, and the Pre-Reformers	85
Part IV: The Reformation and Modern Period (16th–20th Centuries)	
10. After Darkness, Light: Luther, Calvin, and the Protestant Reformers	93
11. From Reformation to Revival: Edwards, Whitefield, and the Great Awakening	101
12. The Gospel Goes Forth: Carey, Judson, and the Modern Missions Movement	109
13. The Battle for the Bible: Faithful Believers in the Face of Modernism	117
Notes	125

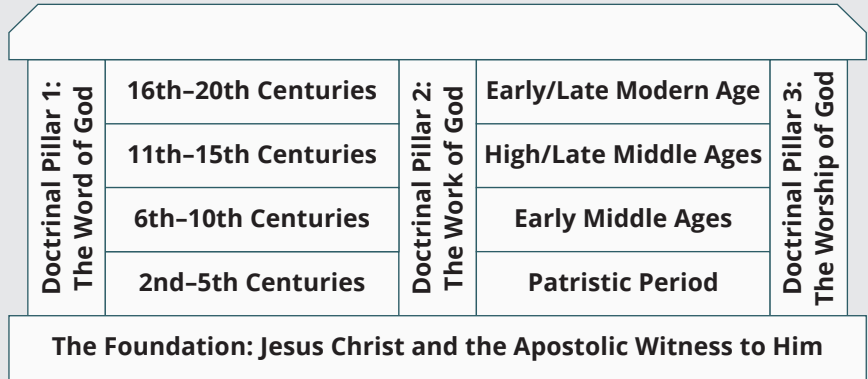
Lesson 1

THE BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK

Identifying the Pillars of the Faith

KEY PASSAGE: 2 Timothy 1:13–14

“Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you.”



I. PICTURING THE CHURCH AS A BUILDING

One of the New Testament metaphors for the church is that of a building. Jesus Himself promised to build His church, and guaranteed that it would not fail (see Matt. 16:18).

Scripture points to Christ (and the truth about Him) as the foundation on which the church is built.

1 Corinthians 3:9–11—“For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building . . . For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

Ephesians 2:19–22—“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.”

1 Peter 2:4–5—“And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house.”

- Peter continues in vv. 6–8 to explain that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone—the foundation stone on which the church is built.

The universal church consists of believers who have embraced the Lord Jesus in saving faith. They have built their lives on the foundation of Christ and His Word. As Jesus Himself explained in the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 7:24–25—“Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock.”

❖ **For Discussion:** Read 1 Corinthians 3:16–17. How does Paul’s description of the Corinthian congregation fit with the metaphor of a building? What are the consequences for false teachers who would try to destroy the church?

II. THREE DOCTRINAL PILLARS

Following the metaphor of a building, we might ask: “What are the essential doctrinal pillars that define biblical orthodoxy and characterize the true church?”

The New Testament identifies three of these doctrinal pillars.

The true church is characterized by its commitment to:

1. The Supremacy of the Word of God The true church looks to Scripture as its final authority for doctrine (what to believe) and practice (how to live). Followers of Jesus submit to Him by submitting to His Word (John 10:27).
2. The Sufficiency of the Work of God The true church understands that the redemptive work of Christ accomplished everything necessary for salvation. Sinners are justified by God’s grace through faith in Christ, apart from their own merits or works.
3. The Sanctity of the Worship of God The true church worships the triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in spirit (purity of devotion) and in truth (purity of doctrine). It rejects false forms of worship and repudiates anything that might distort or distract from its sincere devotion to God.

By contrast, the New Testament confronts and condemns those who would (1) undermine the authority of Scripture, or (2) add works to the gospel of grace, or (3) contaminate the undefiled worship that God requires.

In this lesson, we will develop these points from the Bible. These three pillars provide a doctrinal grid through which we can evaluate church history.

A. The Supremacy of the Word of God

The true church embraces and submits to the Word of God.

Because Jesus is the Head of the church, His Word is the authority for His people. Paul highlighted both the authority and sufficiency of Scripture when he told Timothy:

2 Timothy 3:16–17— “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

Conversely, false teachers seek to undermine the Scriptures. For example, in the book of 2 Peter, Peter denounced those who deny the Word of God by distorting its teaching or seeking to thwart its authority (2 Peter 3:16–17).

In Mark 7, Jesus made it clear the Word of God is authoritative over the traditions of men. When the Pharisees confronted Jesus because His disciples were not following the extrabiblical traditions of first-century Judaism, He rebuked them:

Mark 7:5–13—“The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, ‘Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?’ And He said to them, ‘Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written:

“This people honors Me with their lips,
But their heart is far away from Me.
“But in vain do they worship Me,
Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.”

Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.’

He was also saying to them, “You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. . . , thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that.”

As Jesus explained, the Word of God supersedes religious tradition. Scripture is the authority over tradition, not the other way around.

This is an important principle for thinking biblically about church history. As traditions begin to develop throughout the centuries, they must be evaluated through the lens of biblical truth.

❖ **For Discussion:** Read John 10:27. According to that verse, what is one of the defining marks of the followers of Jesus? How should that reality apply to the church and its relationship to the Word of Christ (Col. 3:16–17)?

What About Apostolic Tradition?¹

Certain segments of broader Christendom, like Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, elevate religious tradition to a level of authority equal to Scripture. This is because their systems include beliefs and practices not found in the Bible.

To justify their elevation of religious tradition, they point to verses in the New Testament that speak of apostolic tradition.

Those verses include the following:

1 Corinthians 11:2—“Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.”

2 Thessalonians 2:15—“So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.”

2 Thessalonians 3:6—“Keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.”

While these verses mention the word “tradition,” do they really justify the non-biblical traditions that developed over the centuries in church history?

To answer that question, consider the following four points:

1. The word “tradition” comes from a Greek word that means “that which is given over.”
The Latin word, *traditio*, means “that which is handed down,” and it is from that Latin word that we get the English word *tradition*.

So when we see the word “tradition” in the New Testament associated with the apostles, it is not referring to an elaborate liturgical system of non-biblical customs—like those found in Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy today.

Instead, it is referring to apostolic instruction that was given to the church, either through teaching and preaching or through writing.

Hence, we must not read later patristic and medieval customs back into the word “tradition” in the New Testament. To do so would be both anachronistic and erroneous.

2. Apostolic tradition has been preserved for us in the writings of the New Testament.
When we read the New Testament, we find exactly what the apostles taught.

We do not need to wonder about the content of apostolic tradition, because it is recorded for us on the pages of Scripture.

When we evaluate extrabiblical tradition in light of the New Testament, we are bringing the authoritative instruction of Christ and the apostles to bear on that tradition.

We are right to evaluate anything that claims to be apostolic or authoritative against the standard of what we know to be apostolic and authoritative. Said another way, we ought to evaluate extrabiblical tradition against the standard of Scripture.

3. Believers are instructed, by the New Testament, to evaluate all teachings and traditions in light of God's Word.

The New Testament repeatedly warns the church about the threat of false teachers.

Paul urged the Thessalonians (in 1 Thess. 5:21) to “examine everything carefully.”

He issued a similar warning in Colossians 2:8:

Colossians 2:8—“See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men.”

We avoid the errors of false teaching and heretical traditions by carefully examining everything according to the standard of divine truth—the Word of God.

In 2 Timothy 3:16–17, Paul’s statement about the inspiration and sufficiency of Scripture comes after his warning about false teachers. What is the antidote to false teaching? The Word of God.

Believers can differentiate between truth and falsehood by evaluating it in light of the Scriptures.

Even the apostle Paul invited that kind of scrutiny. That is why Luke can say of the Bereans, who heard the teachings of Paul, that they were “more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

Though he was an apostle, Paul welcomed the Bereans' eagerness to test the veracity of his teaching against the standard of written revelation.

When we evaluate extrabiblical traditions through the lens of Scripture, we are doing exactly what the apostles themselves tell us to do in the New Testament: to examine everything carefully and do so by searching the Scriptures.

Thus, we can safely say that any tradition that fails to measure up to Scripture's standard is neither apostolic nor authoritative.

4. The early church viewed the writings of the apostles as inherently authoritative. They understood that any non-biblical traditions must be evaluated against the standard of Scripture.

Many examples from early church history could be given to illustrate this point. Consider the following two:

Irenaeus (c. 130–202): “We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us [that’s a reference to the apostles], which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us [a verb form of the word ‘tradition’] in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith.”²²

Irenaeus recognized that what the apostles taught orally, they handed down to the church in the writings of Scripture.

A century and a half later, Basil of Caesarea talks about his theological battles against the followers of Arius—a false teacher who denied the deity of Christ. Notice what Basil says:

Basil (330–379): “I do not consider it fair that the custom [or tradition] which obtains among them should be regarded as a law and rule of orthodoxy. If custom is to be taken in proof of what is right, then it is certainly competent for me to put forward on my side the custom which obtains here. If they reject this, we are clearly not bound to follow them. Therefore let God-inspired Scripture decide between us; and on whichever side be found doctrines in harmony with the word of God, in favor of that side will be cast the vote of truth.”²³

For Basil, when it came to conflicting traditions between the followers of Arius and the defenders of sound doctrine, the solution was to look to the Word of God. Scripture is the umpire over tradition, because it trumps tradition. Only what accords with the Word of God can be considered true.

Other examples could be given but the point is this: the true church submits to the Word of God as its final authority, even over religious tradition.

❖ **For Discussion:** Can you think of an example of a non-biblical religious tradition? If you were to evaluate that traditional belief or practice from a biblical perspective, what would you say about it?

B. The Sufficiency of the Work of God

When we speak of the work of God in this lesson, we are focusing specifically on the work of salvation.

False teachers and errant movements are marked by a wrong understanding of the gospel. They attempt to add some form of human effort to that which Scripture teaches is entirely a work of God.

The biblical gospel asserts that sinners are justified before God on the basis of His grace alone (Luke 18:14). Salvation is the gift of God received through faith, apart from our works, based solely on the finished work of Christ.

In response to those who tried to add self-righteous works to the gospel of grace, the apostle Paul issued this stern rebuke:

Galatians 1:6–8— “I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!”

In Acts 16:30–31, when the Philippian jailer asked, “What must I do to be saved?” Paul’s response was simple: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved.”

In his letter to the Romans, Paul reiterated the idea that “a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law” (Rom. 3:28). In chapter 4, he presented Abraham as an example of being justified by faith. And in chapter 5, he reiterated that because we have “been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1).

Consider some of Paul’s other statements about God’s grace in salvation:

Romans 11:6— “If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.”

Ephesians 2:8–9— “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Philippians 3:8–9— “. . . not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.”

Titus 3:4–7— “But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

Throughout his ministry, Paul emphasized the truth of the gospel, because he recognized the vital importance of what was at stake (Gal. 2:5).

❖ **For Discussion:** Given the importance of the gospel, how would you explain it to someone? What verses would you include in presenting the good news that sinners can be saved through faith in Christ?

C. The Sanctity of the Worship of God

The true church worships the triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in both purity of devotion and purity of doctrine.

Conversely, false teachers either distort the truth about God or introduce competitors to the pure worship that He alone deserves.

As Jesus told the woman at the well:

John 4:23—“An hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.”

In this verse, we see that the worship God requires is pure both in spirit (devotion) and truth (doctrine). Let's consider these two facets of acceptable worship in more detail.

1. Purity of Devotion: Undefined worship is reserved for God alone. It removes _____ distractions _____ and rejects _____ competitors. _____

The Old Testament is replete with mandates regarding the exclusive and undistracted worship that God is rightly due.

- According to Isaiah 42:8, the Lord God is a jealous God who does not share His glory with any other.
- The second of the Ten Commandments condemns those who worship idols, including those who would create a graven image for the purpose of worship (Ex. 20:4).
- One interesting Old Testament account involves the reforms made by King Hezekiah:
2 Kings 18:4— “He removed the high places and broke down the sacred pillars and cut down the Asherah. He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan.”
- The bronze serpent that God commanded Moses to make for the Israelites in Numbers 21:8–9 had become an object of veneration for them by the time we come to Hezekiah's day. It was competing with and contaminating the pure worship of God. As a result, Hezekiah destroyed it.

In the New Testament, all forms of idolatry are similarly condemned.

- Paul told the Corinthians to “flee from idolatry” in 1 Corinthians 10:14, while commending the Thessalonians because they “turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9).
- The apostle John similarly warned his readers in **1 John 5:21**—“Little children, guard yourselves from idols.”

As these passages demonstrate, the worship God requires is a worship that is pure. True worship loves Him with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. Thus, it is not distracted or diminished by any hint of idolatry.

2. Purity of Doctrine: Undefined worship requires an accurate view of _____ who God is. _____

To reject or distort the truth about who God is, as He has revealed Himself in His Word, is to worship the wrong god.

Various heretical groups deny the deity of Christ, reject the truth of the Trinity, or teach that there are many gods. The worship offered by these groups is false worship because their understanding of God is erroneous.

Numerous places in Scripture make this point. We will focus on the writings of the apostle John, with specific reference to the Lord Jesus Christ.

- In his first epistle, John states that those who deny that Jesus is the Messiah are false teachers.

1 John 2:22—“Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son.”

- Later, he adds that those who deny the humanity of Christ are also false teachers. This was in response to an ancient heresy called *Docetism*, which taught that Jesus’ human body was just an illusion. Docetism denied the reality of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Against that error, John writes:

1 John 4:2-3—“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.”

- John adds that the true church is the one that embraces the Lord Jesus as God the Son:

1 John 5:20—“And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.”

These same themes are repeated in other places throughout John’s writings: the truth that Jesus is the Messiah, the truth that He became fully human in His incarnation, and the truth that He is God the Son.

In fact, we see all three noted in the first chapter of John’s gospel:

John 1:1—Jesus’ Deity—“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

John 1:14—Jesus’ Humanity—“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

John 1:17—Jesus’ Messiahship—“For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ [the Messiah].”

To deny the deity, humanity, or messiahship of the Lord Jesus constitutes a serious error, which is why John so strongly condemned the false teachers who distorted the truth about Christ (2 John 7-11).

The principle is clear: those who worship God the Son must worship Him in truth. And we can extend that principle out to the other Members of the Trinity. Those who worship the triune God must worship Him as He truly is.

❖ **For Discussion:** Review John 4:23. What can you do to make sure your worship is characterized by both purity of devotion (“spirit”) and purity of doctrine (“truth”)? What are some potential obstacles to that kind of God-honoring worship?

III. APPLYING THESE PRINCIPLES TO CHURCH HISTORY

As we’ve seen in this lesson, the true church is like a building—established on the foundation of Jesus Christ—and defined by its commitment to several core doctrinal pillars:

1. **The Supremacy of the Word of God:** Scripture alone is our authority.
2. **The Sufficiency of the Work of God:** We are saved by grace alone through faith apart from works, based solely on the finished work of Christ.
3. **The Sanctity of the Worship of God:** We are called to worship God in purity of devotion and purity of doctrine.

If we extend the building metaphor to the whole of church history, we might picture the centuries after the apostolic age as the superstructure of the church—which rests on the foundation of Christ and continues to be defined by the pillars of biblical orthodoxy.

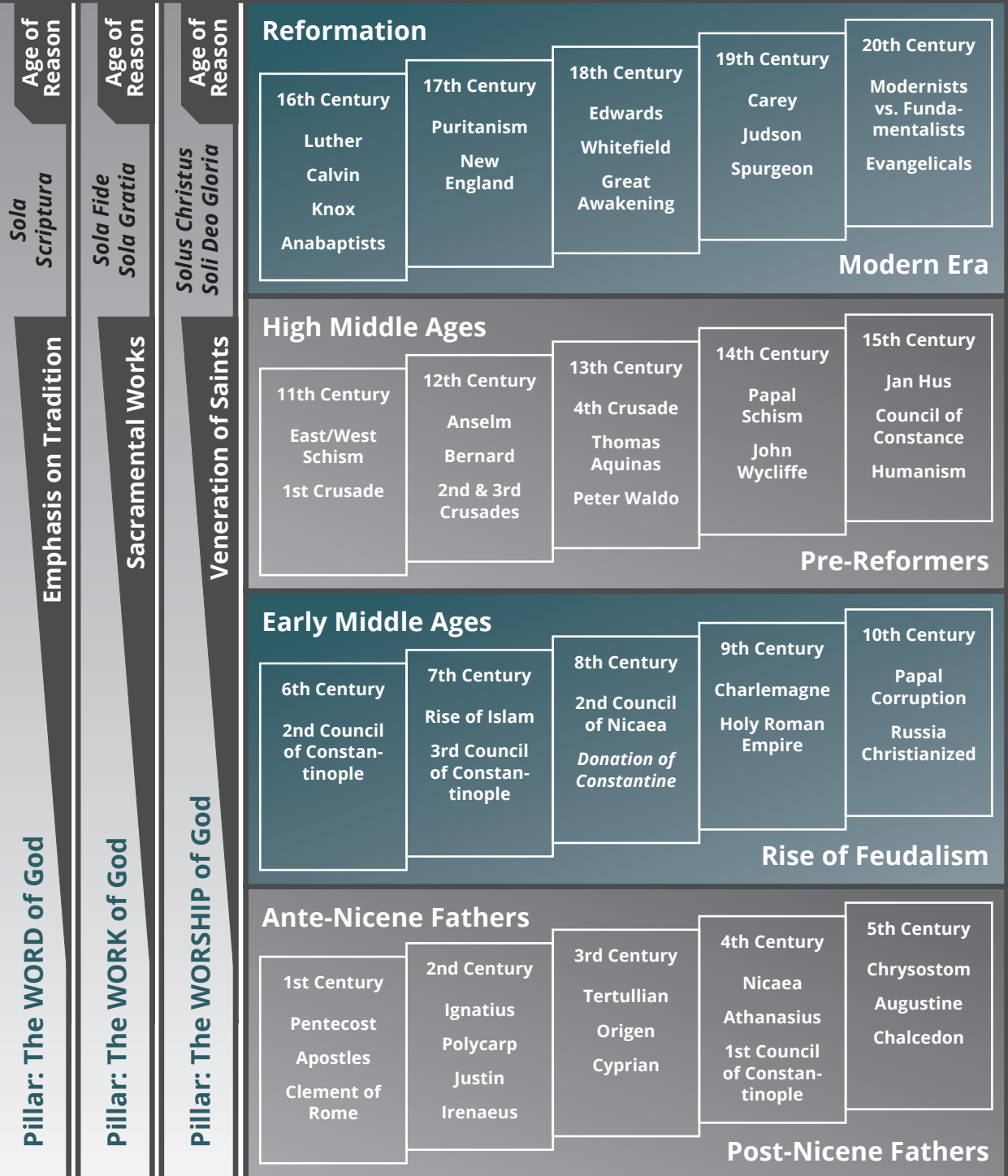
The doctrinal pillars discussed in this lesson provide a helpful grid for evaluating church history through a biblical lens. We will reference them again in future lessons.

The chart on the next page provides an illustration of this idea. For some people, learning church history with a chart like this is easier than an extended timeline.

❖ **For Discussion:** How can Christians today practically apply the three doctrinal pillars highlighted in this lesson? What can you do to put the authority of Scripture, the accuracy of the gospel, and the authenticity of worship into practice in your life?

AN OVERVIEW OF CHURCH HISTORY

Over time, these pillars of biblical orthodoxy are corrupted by the elevation of man-made traditions and philosophies.



MODERN AGE

MIDDLE AGES

PATRISTIC AGE

The Foundation: The Lord Jesus Christ and the Apostolic Witness to Him
(1 Cor. 3:11; Eph. 2:20; 1 Peter 2:4-6; see also Matt. 16:16-18)

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