

## Q&A: How do we know the Bible includes the right books?

by Jonathan Morrow

**D**id the Roman emperor Constantine (ca AD 272–337) dictate which books were included in the New Testament, all in an attempt to forge political and religious power alliances? Popular books like *The Da Vinci Code* and documentaries on the History Channel say yes.

But could it be that the books included in the New Testament are there because they accurately report Jesus's life and teachings? Which view best fits with the faith and preaching of the early church as represented in the New Testament? Do early Christian beliefs and practices seem devised for building political power structures and suppressing outsiders, or do they more naturally fit with the sort of teachings one would expect of an expanding, hope-filled movement that drew adherents from every corner of society?

New Testament scholar Darrell Bock points to three kinds of New Testament texts that show what the earliest Christians believed.

**Schooling:** Passages included within the New Testament contain doctrinal summaries, which Christians would have memorized and read alongside Old Testament texts when they gathered for worship (Rm 1:2–4; 1Co 8:6; 15:1–5).

**Singing:** The New Testament reveals that early Christians sang their theology in hymns, showing their devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ (Col 1:15–20; Php 2:5–11).

**Sacraments:** The New Testament shows that baptisms and the Lord's Supper were regularly practiced by the early church. These pictured the basic elements of the gospel as core theology (Mt 28:19–20; 1Co 11:23–26; Eph 4:4–6).

These verses reflect the earliest realities of Christianity, and it is clear they do not fit with the cynical theory that Constantine teamed up with politicians and priests to invent Christianity. With that in mind, by what process did early Christians identify which books should be included in the New Testament canon?

First, books written by apostles or an associate of an apostle were accepted. Mark was accepted because he was an associate of Peter; Luke was accepted because of his relationship to Paul. If a book was written later than the first century, it was not accepted because it could not be traced to the apostles who were taught and commissioned by the risen Jesus.

Second, to be acceptable, books had to conform to the teachings of other accepted New Testament books. In some cases, this helped non-apostolic books (like Hebrews) gain acceptance.

Third, if a book was widely accepted early among churches that were spread throughout the region, it was likely accepted into the New Testament canon.

Early Christians believed the New Testament books held authority from God since they were inspired. Hence, they did not *decide* which books were Scripture, but, rather, they *recognized* books as Scripture. By the end of the second century—long before Constantine—the four Gospels, Acts, and the letters of Paul were already recognized as authoritative and were used as Scripture in the churches.

Some of the other New Testament books were long debated by representatives of the Eastern and Western churches, but even these were widely embraced as Scripture in the earliest churches. While there was no *universal* declaration concerning the final list of New Testament books, the canon was effectively closed by the time of the Council of Carthage in AD 397.