

## Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566)

Bartolomé de las Casas, a Dominican friar, writer, and advocate for the humane treatment of the indigenous people of the Americas, was one of the most important religious figures of the 16th-century Spanish world. As Spain struggled to develop a policy regarding the peoples of the New World, Las Casas, spent years attempting to expose the abuses that the native population was subjected to under the encomienda system. He also devoted a great deal of energy trying to convince the Spanish Crown that its mission to spread the Christian faith in the Americas did not have to deprive indigenous people of their freedom, sovereignty, and property rights.

Las Casas's early years gave no indication he would become such a fierce advocate for indigenous rights. He was born in Seville at the cusp of Spain's age of exploration. His father, Pedro de Las Casas, sailed with Christopher Columbus's second expedition to the New World, returning to Spain in 1499 with little gold but a treasure trove of stories about the lands and people he had seen. At age 18, Las Casas sailed to the Caribbean with 2,500 men and women who planned to settle there permanently. On Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic) he found favor with the governor who soon granted the young man land and one hundred native laborers.

Las Casas returned to Spain a few years later and traveled to Italy where he was ordained a priest in 1507. Five years later, as the chaplain of a Spanish expedition, he arrived in Cuba. After witnessing a brutal massacre of indigenous Americans by the Spanish in 1514, he renounced his property and began to preach against the cruel subjugation of the native people in the Spanish colonies. Devoting his life to relieving their suffering and converting them to Christianity in a kind and loving way, he wrote that "everything perpetrated on the Indians in these Indies was unjust and tyrannical."

For several years, Las Casas unsuccessfully attempted to establish a colony of farm communities made up of Spaniards and indigenous Americans in what is now Venezuela, but his efforts were disrupted by saboteurs who stirred up violence against the natives. He returned again to Spain and focused his writings on his campaign for indigenous rights. His arguments influenced the New Laws of 1542, which prohibited the enslavement of indigenous people, called for the establishment of

institutional mechanisms to protect native people from labor abuses, and promised the end the encomienda system. However, questions about how to incorporate the native people into the Spanish colonial order and legal system continued to be controversial, as larger forces conspired against Las Casas's ideas.

*The cause by which the Christians have been driven to kill and destroy so many—such an infinite number of souls—has been simply to get the Indians' gold.*

- Bartolomé de Las Casas

In 1550 at the request of King Charles V, Las Casas participated in a debate about the treatment of the indigenous people with Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, a leading Spanish scholar, at the Council of Valladolid. The objective of debate was to discuss the intellectual and religious capacities of the native people, questions that were tied to the larger issue of the right that Spaniards had to make war upon them, rule over them, and to take over their properties. Sepúlveda argued that the Indians were "natural slaves" (an Aristotelian concept that posited that there are people who by their nature or lack of rational capacities are born to be ruled by others) and that it was therefore legitimate to reduce them to slavery or serfdom. His arguments were popular among the colonists and landowners who benefited from the system in Spanish America, while members of the monarchy and the Catholic Church tended to side with Las Casas, in part because they wanted to decrease the power of the encomenderos.

The debate, which lasted for five days, was declared a draw by the judges, and did not have a clear outcome or effect on the treatment of the native population. Las Casas's ideas, however, had already left their mark on the New Laws of 1542 and helped to bring about the decline of the encomienda system.

After the debate, Las Casas returned to writing and spent the rest of his life fighting for the rights of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. He inadvertently helped to ignite a propaganda campaign against Spain known as the "black legend" with his *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552). This searing indictment of Spanish greed and brutality in the New World was used by the country's adversaries as evidence of Spanish ruthlessness. Historians from England, France, the Netherlands and elsewhere used the book not only to vilify Spain but to try to advance the interests of their countries in the New World.

# Scriptures on Missions and Missiology

## The Great Commission

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:16-20, ESV)

## Peter's Dream

The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven. (Acts 10:9-16, ESV)

## Paul's "Freedom" and Duty

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I

might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:19-23, ESV)

## Jonah's Disappointment and Lesson

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4, ESV)