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Refiner's Fire: The Soteriology of Sacrifice in the Work of William Porcher DuBose

ROBERT B. SLOCUM

[This article is a sequel to "Living the Truth: An Introduction to the Theological Method and Witness of William Porcher DuBose" which appeared in the December 1990 issue of the St. Luke's Journal of Theology. DuBose (1836-1918) was the second dean of the School of Theology (1894-1908) and a leading Episcopal theologian. His primary theological theme was soteriology. This article elucidates that theme.]

The soteriology of William Porcher DuBose (1836-1918) is a "blood theology," that is to say, it is rooted fundamentally in Jesus's sacrifice on the cross. Our redemption and salvation are the benefits of Jesus's self-emptying sacrifice and offering. Sacrifice and offering are the ways by which we most fully know and share Christ's benefits. DuBose explains in *The Ecumenical Councils* that

The whole spiritual science of the New Testament is to show us in Jesus Christ how the divine humanity was realized for us and is to be realized for us and is to be realized in and by us. Our Lord himself expressed it in that one word, the cross; the cross which is the eternal symbol of self-sacrificing love; love, in which God lost and found himself in us and in which we lose and find ourselves in God.¹

The cross is then both source and example for our salvation. It is the source of the saving benefit available to us, and it is the example of the means by which we can make it our own. The cross is the objective basis for our salvation and the "instrument" by which we personally receive the saving benefit in our lives. This process will involve sacrifice.

In *High Priesthood and Sacrifice*, DuBose's commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews, he notes that "Life in God cannot be accomplished save through death in ourselves. Every veil between us and God, everything that separates between us and God, must be rent, though the rending be

¹William Porcher DuBose, *The Ecumenical Councils* (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1896), 341.

with blood.”² Sacrifice is at the core of this saving process: “the Wilderness, the Garden, and the Cross teach us clearly enough that the work of the spirit, the strife against sin, is won only by resistance unto blood, is finished only in death.”³ So it is the cross that dominates DuBose’s understanding of how we are saved: “It is the cross that raiseth us; the pain of the world is the lever by which God lifts us to himself.”⁴

Sacrifice, Susceptibility, and Blessedness

DuBose’s soteriology of sacrifice is not, however, a “works theology” of so much grace achieved for so much suffering endured. DuBose is no Pelagian. He explains in *The Gospel According to Saint Paul* that “Sufferings are not in themselves, and by no means to all, means of exaltation. Only in one way or event do they become or are they made so,—when they are used by God and received by ourselves in the direct line of their final cause or purpose.”⁵ It is through the experience of suffering and sacrifice that we encounter our human limitations and become most open to the power of God’s grace in us. It is in the emptying of ourselves through suffering and sacrifice that we can be most filled with God’s love. It is through offering ourselves in suffering and sacrifice that we most fully know and join in our Lord’s saving offering for us.

DuBose explains the importance of sacrifice for “susceptibility” to grace in terms of the Beatitudes. In *The Soteriology of the New Testament*, he notes that “The first element in a true spiritual susceptibility for God is a sense of incompleteness, and that impulse to what is necessary for its completion. . . . Our Lord uttered the first and deepest of spiritual truths in that first word of His great sermon, ‘*Blessed are the poor!*’ . . . The glory and fundamental blessedness of man lie in the depth and extent of his poverty. He is *infinitely* poor, because he has a capacity for infinite riches; and because he is capable of being infinitely enriched and increased from without himself, and so of becoming infinitely more and greater than himself.”⁶ DuBose’s soteriology is no “self-help” course. It is rooted in Jesus’s self-offering and sacrifice, which constitute our salvation and show us the way to receive the saving benefits. DuBose explains that

²DuBose, *High Priesthood and Sacrifice* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), 212.

³DuBose, *The Reason of Life* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1911), 89.

⁴*Ecumenical Councils*, 85.

⁵DuBose, *The Gospel According to Saint Paul* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), 270.

⁶DuBose, *The Soteriology of the New Testament* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1892), 173. See Matthew 5:1-12.

The Beatitudes were but a declaration of His [Jesus'] own beatitude. It was because He knew to the bottom the bitterness and the blessedness of that human emptiness and poverty which God has made to receive and contain His divine fulness; the human sorrow without which there can be no divine joy; the meekness that inherits and possesses the earth; the hunger and thirst which is the condition of all fulness . . . that He taught as He taught. He did indeed teach Himself and was Himself all that He taught. He does not say, I will tell you the way, and teach you the truth, and declare to you the life; but I am the way and the truth and the life.⁷

Jesus lived the way of sacrifice through his death on the cross. His offering is the source of our salvation. As we offer and empty ourselves in love, we follow his example. We receive the saving benefits of Jesus's offering by living his "way."

Salvation Authored and Shared Through Sacrifice

DuBose emphasizes that by Jesus's obedient endurance and suffering, the way is opened for all to share the saving benefits of his victory through the cross. Jesus is the "pioneer" of our salvation. In *High Priesthood and Sacrifice*, he notes that "It was proper or necessary for God, in bringing us all to glory, to perfect the author or first attainer of our salvation through sufferings, including, of course, in order to be perfect, the supreme and extreme suffering of death."⁸ Through our own human obedience and sacrifice, we share our Lord's way and receive his saving benefits. DuBose explains in *The Gospel According to Saint Paul* that "the only way from faith to fruition, from what we believe in and aim at to what we shall attain and be, from life in Christ for us to the life of Christ in us, is the way of suffering. The many sons of God can be brought unto glory only as the One Son, the Author and Captain of their salvation, was brought—by being made perfect through sufferings."⁹ Jesus is the author of our salvation, which we share through sacrifice.

Living the Soteriology of Sacrifice

The way of sacrifice is therefore the way of salvation for DuBose: "The Cross, as our own personal death to sin and the world, and life in and to God

⁷Ibid., 290-291.

⁸*High Priesthood and Sacrifice*, 23. See Hebrews 12:1-2.

⁹*The Gospel According to Saint Paul*, 134. See Hebrews 2:10. DuBose also discusses this point in *The Gospel in the Gospels* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1906), 60.

and holiness . . . what else or other than the Cross of Christ can be the way by which we may come to God?"¹⁰ DuBose likewise believes that the times of trial, hurt, and loss are not as "bad" as they might seem because they can be instrumental for our salvation. These "bad" times can be the occasion for our following the way of sacrifice. DuBose notes in *The Reason of Life* that "human or earthly conditions, the most difficult and the most painful, are not things to be set aside for us in the matter of our salvation; we are to be saved, not from, but through and by them."¹¹ In *High Priesthood and Sacrifice*, he explains that "the good and ill to us of all things are not in the things but in us and in what we are through them. The so-called evils that are the conditions and the means of all that is great and good and blessed in us, how then can they be called evils at all?"¹²

DuBose urges that the "bad" times can be very good for us, and we should even meet them with rejoicing: "St. Paul says that, if in the enjoyment of present grace we rejoice in the hope of future glory, then must we rejoice also in tribulations; for these are the conditions and instruments of all the glory that shall be revealed in us."¹³ Similarly, in *The Gospel According to Saint Paul*, DuBose encourages us to "rejoice in our tribulations" because our patience and endurance in the face of evil will be won through the love of God in us:

tribulation worketh, not merely a more passive patience, but a more active endurance. The word may be made to include every high and holy reaction on our part against every possible assault made upon us from without; such an attitude towards, such a resistance to, such a survival of, whatever may assail us, as will in itself be a victory over every form of evil that the world can oppose to us. All such opposition to and power over evil can be nothing else than dependence in and the power of the opposite and opposing good. There is no hatred of the devil but the love of God, and there is no power over evil but the power of good.¹⁴

The way of sacrifice is the way of salvation, but it is no escape from the hardships and evils of mortal life in the world. It is rather through facing these hardships and embracing sacrifice that we come to know our Lord's saving benefits more nearly. As we follow our Lord's example of sacrifice, we receive the benefits of his sacrifice. Our sacrifices will be made through

¹⁰*High Priesthood and Sacrifice*, 41.

¹¹*The Reason of Life*, 114.

¹²*High Priesthood and Sacrifice*, 246.

¹³*Ibid.*, 244. See Romans 5:2-3.

¹⁴*The Gospel According to Saint Paul*, 136-137. See Romans 5:2-3.

the hardships and losses of life in the world. These “bad” times can be for our benefit and are, thus, instrumental in our salvation.

Thus, for DuBose, salvation means sacrifice. It is only through our Lord's sacrifice that salvation is available for us, and it is only through our following the way of sacrifice that we share the saving benefits. The cross was necessary for Jesus, and the cross of sacrifice is necessary for us. We should not seek escape. DuBose explains that “There is a grace that is sufficient for us, a power made perfect in our weakness, which we could not know to the uttermost if all thorns were extracted from our flesh. God spared not His only begotten, His one perfect Son. He was perfect only through being perfected, and He was perfected only through not being spared.”¹⁵ DuBose seems to admit that this emphasis on sacrifice may sound like “foolishness” to some, but he adds: “As St. Paul says, the cross of Christ is foolishness and a stumbling block only to the earthly wise and the self-righteous. To them that are saved, or are ever so little being saved, it is the wisdom of God and the power of God.”¹⁶

The way of sacrifice is the way for us to receive salvation. DuBose explains in *The Gospel According to Saint Paul* that “The sinlessness or holiness of Jesus could no more than ours be a painless experience. Given human nature, human condition, and human temptation, and the possibilities, the solicitations, the deceptions of sin, the toil, the difficulties, the pains of holiness are not to be met and overcome without suffering.”¹⁷ We are called to take up our cross as we follow Jesus on the way of salvation. This process involves our capacity to choose. DuBose notes that

The death of Jesus Christ is not only something which we must suffer, it is something which we must do. Death is for us a moral opportunity, a moral requirement, a moral act. We acquire our moral, free, rational, and right personalities, we make or become ourselves, through our opportunities and acts of not being something and of being something else, of ceasing to be one thing and becoming another thing.¹⁸

DuBose adds that “There is a regeneration in being baptized with the baptism wherewith Christ was baptized, which nothing short of the actual dying His death can work in us.”¹⁹ This means the cross, “the eternal symbol of self-sacrificing love . . . in which God lost and found himself in

¹⁵*High Priesthood and Sacrifice*, 231.

¹⁶*The Gospel in the Gospels*, 284-285. See 1 Corinthians 1:23-24.

¹⁷*The Gospel According to Saint Paul*, 173.

¹⁸*High Priesthood and Sacrifice*, 19.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 231.

us and in which we lose and find ourselves in God.”²⁰ We are called to make our sacrifice and empty ourselves of everything that separates us from God.

An Exposition of DuBose's Soteriology of Sacrifice

DuBose's soteriology has a universal appeal because it is based in experiences that we all face sooner or later, such as loss, suffering, grief, emptying, and sacrifice. In terms of sacrifice, we may encounter occasions for both "active" and "passive" sacrifice. By "active" sacrifice, I mean those occasions in which we willingly take the initiative for sacrifice in a situation. For instance, the soldier who jumps on a live grenade to protect his friends is making an "active" sacrifice. The fireman who climbs into a burning building is making an "active" sacrifice of his safety. On the other hand, we are constantly being presented with occasions that involve the loss, the emptying, the sacrifice of what is dear to us. An athlete may find that speed and strength diminish with the passage of time. A model's beauty may fade with age. The life process of aging will involve us in some forms of giving up and loss, whatever our choices. These changes and losses reflect our mortality. The ultimate loss is death, which we all face.

As we encounter the prospect of sacrifices, both "active" and "passive," we may wonder about the meaning of life in the world and our relationship with God. If God is a loving God, and if God loves us, why should we suffer? Why should we have to know loss? We quickly realize that the world is an imperfect place. Things go wrong. Accidents happen. Mistakes are made. Hopes are crushed. People get sick and die.

DuBose reminds us that even though the world is not a perfect place, it can be the perfect place for our salvation. It is through life in the world that we see our own limitations, our own finiteness, our own need for help beyond ourselves. The hurtful times can puncture our illusions of self-sufficiency. In the times of suffering and loss we can be most open to the saving benefits of God's grace. We can put our ultimate dependence in nothing less than God. We can give the first priority in our lives to nothing less than God.

The "worst" times can be the "best" times for us because of their saving result in our lives. DuBose reminds us that we must understand things in terms of their final outcomes and so understand that the bad times of life, the times of hardship and sacrifice, can be the path of our salvation. It is the bad times that may call out our greatest virtues as we seek the patience and endurance to survive. The times of our most significant growth and advancement may well be times of crisis and threat rather than times of

²⁰*The Ecumenical Councils*, 341.

stability and comfort. In loss, in grief, in pain, in hardship, we may discover our Lord present in a powerful way that we should not have known otherwise.

Sacrifice is the way of our Lord, and he calls us to live "his way." Salvation through his sacrifice is complete, an objective fact, and available to us. But the saving benefits of Jesus's sacrifice must become ours, subjectively, in our lives. His way must become our way, and that calls for sacrifice. The way of sacrifice is the way to know our Lord more nearly and to receive the saving benefits of his cross.

God shares life with us, and we know God most fully as we receive and share that life. To know Christ is to know his benefits. We best know our Lord's love when we are loving. We know our Lord's forgiveness when we forgive and are forgiven. We know the benefits of our Lord's sacrifice when we make our own sacrifices and live "his way." Our sacrifice may mean risking our life for another, or simply offering up our losses as we empty ourselves of everything less than God. Our sacrifice may be a reordering of life so that things less than God are put back in perspective. Our sacrifice may even be a sacrifice of our prejudices and preconceived notions, so that we may recognize the truth if and when we find it. In any case, our sacrifice will be our cross.

The cross is the instrument of our salvation. It is through Jesus's cross that new life is offered us, and it is through our crosses that we receive salvation as our own. The crosses in our lives will be the occasions for our emptying, offering, and sacrifice. We can take up our own cross and follow Jesus's way. As we empty ourselves in love, we can be filled with God's love. As we give ourselves away, we can receive the gift of life that God offers. As we come to own the sacrifice of Jesus's cross, we shall come to know salvation, its benefit. He will be ours, and we shall be his.

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