

# **“To Become” Justified or “To Be” Justified: The Views of Aquinas, Erasmus and Luther on Free Will** (An abstract)

**Jason H. Yeung**

Professor

(Theological Studies)

China Graduate School of Theology

Hong Kong

This paper attempts to analyze the meaning of freedom of will in the context of Salvation. We begin by tracing the meaning of freedom to as far back as to Aristotle, where we see the prevalence of the spirit of Scholasticism. Aristotle maintains that the will of man, by nature, tends to pursue goodness, for that is the internal purpose of man. Then we move on to Aquinas, whose teachings prove influential as sources for both Catholic and Protestant theological thinking.

Aquinas believes that Grace is the only element in Salvation. However, free will of man can contribute to one's becoming righteous. He claims that there are two kinds of grace: sanctifying grace and gratuitous grace. Salvation is based on the former, but the means of grace, such as liturgy or Biblical teachings, is related to the latter. So free will has its contribution to gratuitous grace, while Salvation is to be achieved through both.

Erasmus stresses the role of free will in conversion, which means that people should follow their free will during the conversion process. Although man, as the slave of sin, has lost his freedom, he has not lost it completely. He has partial freedom in the sense that a slave still has his limited

freedom. So, in becoming a Christian, it is important for a man to make his choice. Luther, on the other hand, opposes this idea of partial freedom. His argument is based on Augustine's teaching, that the free will has been totally damaged after the fall. While man seems free to make choices within his secular life, he does not have the power to choose what is right in relation to God's will, and so his will is totally dead before God. The only way for him to become converted is to be awakened by the Holy Spirit—in other words, through Grace alone. The free will of man plays no role in one's justification before God, and that is what Luther means by "justification by faith only."

The Council of Trent, in condemning Luther's teaching, declares that justification is by faith as well as by gratuitous grace. Gratuitous grace comes from a co-operation between God and man. The Council of Trent thus reserves a place for man's free will in the attainment of salvation. They reject Luther's teaching that justification is by grace alone (and not by work of any kind, whether liturgy or good works).

Both Roman Catholic and Reformation theologians uphold the principle of "justification by faith." However, with their respective views, they are trapped by the different renderings of grace and work. A clarification of the misunderstanding involved in this debate should contribute to the prospect of reconciliation.