The starting point in Zwingli’s doctrine of justification is the person of Christ, who is described as God. Christ is the centre between creation and the end of the world. Justification is identified with the person of Christ and Zwingli clearly says that Christ is our justification.\(^1\) This provides a unified soteriology, in the sense that both the Old Testament people and the New Testament people are saved by the work of Christ. In this particular context, the concept of faith is introduced in order to show the way the work of Christ was applied for the salvation of humanity. For Zwingli, the people of the Old Testament were saved by faith in the Christ who was to come and the people of the New Testament were saved by the Christ who had come. Although the people before Christ offered sacrifices for their salvation, these sacrifices were performed for the only true God, who accepted them on the basis of the faith manifested by those who brought the sacrifices. Accordingly, their sacrifices are related to the unique sacrifice of Christ. Thus, it is not important whether anyone lived historically before or after the ministry of Christ on earth and it is not important whether anyone was a Jew or a Gentile before the ministry of Christ because this distinction was not important during and after the ministry of Christ either. Salvation is by faith, not on the basis of ethnical affiliation. It should be said here that, in Zwingli, the particular language of justification is oftentimes mixed with the more general terminology of salvation. Thus, he speaks primarily about salvation, rather than justification, but the latter may often be inferred.\(^2\)

The Jews were truly justified by their faith when they offered sacrifices to

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God and the Gentiles or the godly pagans were also justified when they accomplished the law by grace or by faith or by the Spirit of God. For Zwingli, these three are the same. It is the Spirit of Christ who justifies anybody who exercises his faith in his relationship to God. Our salvation or justification is necessarily based on the death of Christ. Nevertheless, justification does not depend on the proclamation of Christ and his saving death in word and sacrament, like in Luther’s theology. Justification totally depends on the sovereignty of God in election and is fundamentally based on the atoning death of Christ. God’s sovereignty is not limited historically to Israel. God created the whole world, not only Israel, but he only produces a true piety in those he elected, whoever they are. In this case, justification applies to the Gentiles, in the sense that a Gentile is a Christian even if he does not know Christ. Nevertheless, the person and the work of Christ are essential to salvation and justification. Zwingli’s theological training in the spirit of patristic and medieval theology is obvious. The dominant note in Zwingli’s doctrine of justification is anselmian. Like Anselm, he believed that Christ died in order to save us from the bondage of Satan. By our sins, we rightfully belong to Satan, but God sent Christ to die so that he could pay the ransom to the devil, with the specific purpose of getting us back. Following Abélard, Zwingli wrote about the compelling power of God’s love shown in Jesus Christ. Christ recapitulated everything that happened in Adam and, in this respect, Zwingli promoted the theology of Irenaeus. Then, following Athanasius, he held the view that Christ became human, so that we might become divine.³

Zwingli presented the death of Christ as a victory over or a liberation from sin, death and the devil. In Zwingli’s opinion, humans failed to keep God’s law. Moreover, we cannot keep God’s law because we are sinners. Therefore, we all deserve God’s punishment. God is righteous and he must punish sin. But God is also merciful; this is why he sent his Son to accomplish God’s will and to die for us, in order to satisfy God’s righteousness. The righteousness of God or of Christ is actually the righteousness that Christ obtained by dying and making satisfaction for us. This particular righteousness becomes ours by faith, which is

the gift of God through the Spirit of God. By the righteousness of Christ at the
cross we are righteous and reputed righteous before God. The righteousness of
Christians is to trust in Christ and to be therefore adopted into him. The
righteousness whereby we stand before God is the righteousness of faith. This
righteousness is never simply imputed but also imparted. Christ does not only
teach true righteousness, but he also bestows it to us. The righteousness
imparted to us by Christ is an inward righteousness, which is the same with the
Holy Spirit. Christ also gives us an outward righteousness, which flows from the
inward righteousness. Thus, the righteousness of Christ is not only the
atonement for our sins but also the initial and the continuing source of our life,
which must grow to be like the life of Christ.  

Within the larger theme of salvation, justification and election, the concept
of the righteousness of God must necessarily be related to the idea of the justice
of God. Zwingli clearly presented the idea that it was God’s goodness that he
elected whom he willed, but it was because of his justice that he adopted and
united the elect with himself through his Son, who was made a victim to satisfy
the divine justice for us. In this respect, justification is equalled with
reconciliation, because the sacrificial death of Christ is the way God established
for the reconciliation of the world with himself. Salvation totally depends on
Christ, because he is both God and man. Because he is God, Christ can fulfil the
will of God and because he is man, Christ can be a sacrifice for the satisfaction of
God’s righteousness. God cannot suffer; this is why humanity was necessary to
salvation.  

The doctrine of salvation and justification in the theology of Zwingli has a
distinct pneumatological dimension. Salvation is by faith but the source of faith
is the Holy Spirit. Thus, the spirit creates faith in whomever he wills. Moreover,
faith is the confirmation of election, a complete trust in Christ and a protection
against our own sinful nature:

For he that has real faith trusts the Lord and fears not what all the assaults of
flesh will do unto him. He, then, who is thus protected by the shield of faith
knows that he is elect of God by the very security based on his faith. And this

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is the pledge by which the Spirit binds our souls to himself, so that we give to him our love, our reverence and our trust [...] For they that possess the light and power of this faith are sure that neither death nor life can take from them that treasure for which they have sacrificed all to buy it. And their election is such that it is known not only to God, but also to the elect themselves.⁶

Very early in his theological career, Zwingli advanced the view that it was God who remitted sin only through Jesus Christ, his Son, our Lord. It is common knowledge that, concerning justification, Luther firmly attacked works as false means of obtaining God’s favour. In this respect, Zwingli launched a fierce attack on idolatry. Should anyone ascribe salvation to the creature and not to God, he would deprive God of his glory, which is a veritable idolatry and obviously includes works.⁷

Thus, Zwingli reiterated the idea that salvation and justification are by faith, not by works. Faith must always be placed in God, not in idolatrous images, processions and pilgrimages, because they all make Christ and his death secondary and even dispensable. Again, true faith always includes a genuine trust, is the source of justification and the confirmation of election:

Christ and the apostles make the whole aim of their teaching to show that there is no other justification or absolution than that of faith. Those who have faith are the heirs of the everlasting glory. By all these we learn that faith is given to those who have been elected. And those who have faith are justified, that is, absolved, so that do damnation awaits them. Not as if faith were a work to which forgiveness of sins was due as a reward, but because those who have faith in God know beyond all question that God has become reconciled to them through his son and the record of their sin has been blotted out, for it is only sin which precludes and shuts us out from entering upon the heritage. If that be taken away, we return into favour with God, just as bodies of water rush together if the space or barrier between them be removed.⁸

For Zwingli, faith is utterly a gift of God, which is obvious as he wrote that:

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⁷ Zwingli had a good reason to attack idolatry and this must be understood within the historical context of Zürich, where, at that time, a significant increase of images, processions and pilgrimages was recorded. Stephens, Zwingli, 68.
⁸ Zwingli, Early Writings, 198.
"Mercifully and freely are we made whole and kept whole through faith and belief (which God has mercifully wrought in us), and that too not from us: it is a gift of God, not from our works, so that no one could boast."9

Salvation is totally from God and realized in God. Thus, salvation begins with God’s election and depends on his will and purpose. Our will and our purpose have nothing to do with salvation. Nevertheless, God’s election is in Christ, which is a direct reference to the divine Christ who lived in history. For Zwingli, faith is fundamentally faith in God and faith in Christ, as opposed to faith in anyone or anything that is not God. True faith has two dimensions. Firstly, there is a historical faith, whereby we believe that Christ was born, suffered and then was raised. By the historical faith, we also believe that Christ was the Son of God. Secondly, there is a justifying or a saving faith, which comes only from the Spirit of God.10

The initiative of salvation belongs entirely to God, because man would have never turned to God by his own accord. Because of God’s initiative in salvation, man sees both the predicament of his sinful condition and the grace of God. In this respect, God’s initiative was realized in Christ and by the death of Christ on the cross. Nobody can satisfy God’s righteousness; it is only God who found a proper way for this, namely by the death of Christ. Christ is both man’s creator and restorer. Man’s sins are forgiven in Christ’s name and when man receives this news by faith, he is actually saved. Forgiveness of sins must be accompanied by repentance, which comes from the Holy Spirit. Repentance presupposes a complete change of life according to the example of Christ and must be a constant feature of a normal Christian life.11

Thus, Christ was born, suffered, died, rose and ascended to heaven for the salvation of mankind. For Zwingli, this is the objective side of salvation. As far as the subjective side of salvation is concerned, this is not accomplished in us until the Spirit leads us to faith. In Zwingli, salvation is entirely the work of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit in both his aspects, objective and subjective. The

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importance of faith is stated again as the right basis for our salvation or for our standing before God. Works are totally irrelevant as sources of salvation, but they do matter as confirmation of salvation. Living faith must necessarily produce good works, as every Christian believer must follow the example of Christ. Our works are good if they are done in Christ. Therefore, our works are good to the extent that they are gifts of God and are done from the Spirit of God. Zwingli is very careful to mention that good work are only the sign of genuine faith.\(^\text{12}\)

For Zwingli, who stands in the humanist tradition, the example of Christ is extremely important for the life of the Christian, which must be ethically pure, in accordance with the example of Christ. The ethical dimension is essential to Zwingli’s theology. Faith makes the believer righteous, which is a clear indication of the importance of moral integrity. The righteousness of faith must be based on the obedience to God. Furthermore, the righteousness of faith, which comes from God, is always in contrast with the self-righteousness of the man who does not believe. Zwingli rarely used the term “justification“ and he preferred to work with the concept of ”right belief“. The man who has a right belief is justified. But right belief necessarily leads to a moral life. Hence, justification is apparently subordinated to regeneration. In this respect, Zwingli is really concerned with the new moral character of the person who was born again (wiedergeborene und neue Mensch).\(^\text{13}\)

Thus, the life of a true Christian should be nothing else than a sincere acknowledgement of his sinful nature, a firm trust in the mercy of God through Christ and a continuous building of holiness and innocence according to the example of Christ.\(^\text{14}\) Zwingli even wrote about the reality that a true believer was deified or changed into God.\(^\text{15}\) In salvation, the believer is actually united with Christ.\(^\text{16}\) The example of Christ is important for the doctrine of sanctification and the righteousness of Christ is important for the doctrine of justification. Nonetheless, this is only a didactic distinction, because, in reality, sanctification

\(^\text{16}\) Locher, *Zwingli’s Thought*, 165.
and justification are very closely connected. Unlike Luther, for whom justification consists in the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, Zwingli believed that justification consisted in the impartation of Christ’s righteousness. This means that the righteousness of Christ is not only considered to be ours, so that we might be reckoned righteous, but it is truly imparted to us or given to us, so that we might follow the example of Christ. The very fact that justification and sanctification are so closely related in Zwingli’s theology leads to the conclusion that we are justified when we are made righteous. Thus, faith leads to justification, which consists of the forgiveness of sins, worked out by God for the sake of Christ. All these are to the benefit of the believing sinner who is given eternal life. This is why Zwingli wrote that “faith is the grounds of salvation. He who believes shall not see death forevermore.”

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17 Stephens, Zwingli, 71.