

SAVED BUT NOT SAFE: WOMEN DISCUSSING THE ABSENCE OF SAFETY IN THE CHURCH

A Case Study of Kabaku Parish Church

By Esther Mombo and Heleen Joziase, St. Paul's University

In a recent survey among female staff members of theological schools in Sub-Saharan Africa, more than half of the respondents (57%) observed that the Bible is used to support violence against women. At the same time 43% of the respondents stated that the church is not a safe place for women to look for help for domestic violence, rape and abuse.¹ Why is this the case in communities that confess to be Christian? In John 10: 10 Jesus says, 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' How then do women in places where they don't feel safe, connect salvation and safety?

In this paper we examine the views of women and men in a local Christian community, on whether there is a connection between being saved and being safe. We conclude that in the theology of salvation as taught in the churches, the (faith-) experiences of women are not included. There is a need to materialize and relationalize the meaning of salvation to make the church a safe place for women.

1. Wholeness and the research in Kabuku

In her book *Introduction to African Women's Theology*, Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001:64) emphasizes that in African women's Christology there is no distinction between salvation and liberation, or as quoted by Susan Rakoczy (2008: 118): 'To be saved is to be free; to be free is to experience the saving work of Christ. In the holistic African view of life "Jesus is experienced as responding to the totality of life."' ²

Other women theologians underline this biblical notion of holistic salvation. Nasimiyyu (2003: 130), for instance, writes:

The African woman's experience calls for a Christology that is based on a holistic view of life. She needs the Christ who affects the whole of her life, whose presence is felt in every corner of the village and who participates in

¹ See H. Jurgen Hendriks, 'HIV&AIDS, curricula and gender realities' in H. Jurgen Hendriks, Elna Mouton, Len Hansen, Elisabet le Roux (eds), *Men in the pulpit, women in the pews? Addressing gender inequality in Africa*, Stellenbosch: SUN PRESS 2012, p. 48.

² See Susan Rakoczy IHM, 'Jesus the Christ: Can a Male Saviour Save Women? In *In Her Name. Women Doing Theology*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2004, p 118. See also Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001 p. 64.

everything and everybody's daily life. (...) This God, the Christ, is the one who takes on the conditions of the African woman - the conditions of weakness, misery, injustice and oppression.³

Having noted this emphasis on wholeness – which is apparently longed for but not present - , this paper seeks to analyze the views and experiences of women and men in a local parish, exploring the link between salvation and being safe.

The research for this paper was conducted in St. John's Anglican Church in Kabuku, Kenya, and we were supported by students who spoke the local language.⁴ This parish was the site of previous research on Christology,⁵ and so the women of the parish were already familiar with research meetings, although this time the research also included men.

Kabuku is a rural community approximately 30 kilometres from Nairobi. All members of this church belong to the Kikuyu ethnic community and speak and worship in the local language, Kikuyu. The women of this church are mainly small scale farmers while others have small businesses. A few women have formal jobs outside the home but within the same locality. The majority of the women are members of the Mother's Union organization of the Anglican Church.

After having attended two church services in the morning and a shared lunch with all the parishioners, we introduced ourselves and talked about the final goal of this meeting: the writing of an article about salvation and safety in the church as perceived by women.

The topic of being safe and saved was introduced through a contextual Bible study of John 8:1-11. We used the Contextual Bible Study Method since through this method the readers of the Bible are reading and interpreting the text within their own context, cultural background and life experience, with the aim of achieving personal and societal transformation (Nyabera and Montgomery, 2007: 5)⁶. Eighty-five women

³ Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, *Christology and an African Woman's Experience*, in: *Jesus in African Christianity*, Nairobi: Acton Publishers 2003, p. 130.

⁴ The research was done on the 10th of February 2013 by a team from St. Paul's University and apart from the authors of this paper, there were 2 male and 3 female students from St. Paul's assisting us who speak Kikuyu fluently: John Kibicho, David Kariuki, Fridah Kaimuri, Rachel w. Ruoro and Grace Wangechi. In a preparational meeting they were informed about the topic, the methods and the goals of this meeting. The sermons in the morning were conducted by Canon Gideon Byamugisha, a visiting scholar from Uganda, who also joined the men's group discussion later on.

⁵ On the 9th of November, 2011 we visited this parish for the first time and we discussed their views about Jesus. The outcomes are to be published in: Esther Mombo, Heleen Joziassse, *'Jesus, a man above all other men. Kenyan women questioning traditional masculinities'* (forthcoming, 2013).

⁶ The Contextual Bible Study method is a way of doing Bible study in which all group members are active and participate equally in bringing the scripture to life through their own stories. This method is explained in: Fred

and forty men joined this Bible study as well as the group discussions which were conducted later on. In every group a report of the discussions was written by one of the members. After one hour the participants joined a plenary concluding session in the church in which every group presented an answer to two of the questions. All three groups also reported about their proposals to make the church a safer place.

Later, these written reports were discussed with the assisting students who translated and explained the notes. The information in this paper is based on these reports.

2. Contextual Bible Study John 8:1-11

First the topic of "safety" was discussed and linked to the upcoming general elections, talking about national safety, safety in the area, in the homes, and in the church.⁷ Then the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11) was read both in Swahili and Kikuyu, followed by a plenary discussion which was guided by the following questions:

- What is the text about?
- Who are the main characters and what do we know about them?
- Are there women like this in our community today?
- What does this story tell us about safety? Are our churches safe?

Both women and men agreed that the story in John 8 is about hatred between men and women. It is about hypocrisy since it seems as if only women are involved in adultery, and most of the time only women are seen as adulterers, while there are many male adulterers too. The story is thus about insecurity for women. It is also about forgiveness, since the woman is forgiven by Jesus.

According to the participants, the main characters in the story are the Pharisees who act as the accusers. They pretend that they are righteous, but inside they are "haters". They use religious arguments to accuse the woman and they quote the law of Moses.

In this story the woman is the accused, depicted as being humble. She doesn't talk after she is brought before Jesus. She doesn't even refer to the absent character in this story - the man with whom she must have been caught "in the act". The woman

Nyabera and Taryn Montgomery, *Contextual Bible Study Manual on Gender-Based Violence*, Nairobi: FECCLAHA, 2007, 5-19.

⁷ These election were scheduled for 4th March 2013, causing a lot of fear of outbreaks of ethnic violence as was experienced after the 2007 elections.

is silent. The participants in this Bible study emphasized that even if the woman had talked, people would not have listened to her.⁸

It was noted that the Bible itself is also silent about the absent character. In this Bible study participants speculated about who this man was. They argued that it was definitely not her husband and if the woman had a husband he would have defended her.⁹ Finally they observed how remarkable it was that the woman didn't run away.

About Jesus, the next main character in this story, it was noted that he forgives. He is a true judge since he listens to both the accusers and the accused and he doesn't condemn the woman.

The question of whether we have such women in our society was answered in an affirmative way: There are many such women in Kabuku, but there must also be many men who act like this woman. This raised the question of why, in the present society and in the church, only women are blamed for extra-marital affairs. Is it women who invite men or do men ask women? It was agreed that traditionally men take the initiative and women, for several reasons, cannot resist. Men in the discussion group objected, however, that they should not get the blame since this is the way they were created. Women noticed that this "natural" behavior of men creates insecurity for women.

Finally, the participants agreed that only the woman (caught in the act alone) was brought to Jesus due to the fact that men are pretenders and accusers. It was concluded that our churches are not safe. There is no safety, although we are saved.¹⁰ This was further discussed in the group discussions.

3. Group discussions about "saved and safe"

After the plenary Contextual Bible study the women went into two separate groups led by female students, while the men went for discussion in their own group led by male students. They discussed the following questions:

1. When we say that we are saved, what do we mean?
2. Is there a link between salvation and being safe? What does being safe mean?

⁸ Women in Kabuku easily identify with this woman since they are used to humbling themselves; they have to remain silent and when they speak it is trivialized.

⁹ They interpret the text from their own context and realize that this woman without a husband is helpless – as is the case in their own society.

¹⁰ Different questions were raised such as are women clean, which kind of safety are we looking for and what was Jesus writing down?

3. Is the church a safe place? What things make the church safe or not safe? Are women and men equally safe in the church?
4. Was the woman caught in adultery safe?
5. How can we make the church a safe place for both men and women?

3.1 The meaning of "being saved" and "being safe"

The women in Kabuku viewed the meaning of the words "we are saved" in line with the church teachings. They emphasized the spiritual aspects of salvation as 'being washed by the blood of Jesus', that 'there is forgiveness of sins', and that 'it has an impact on your personal conduct'. When you are saved Jesus is your special friend who gives you wisdom in how to behave - for instance to say "no" in daring circumstances, all with the help of the Holy Spirit.

There was a significant difference between how women explained the work of Jesus,¹¹ especially when asked 'Who is Jesus for you' and the way in which they explained what "salvation" means. It seems as if women have not claimed the term "salvation" for their own experiences with Jesus, since the women in these discussions didn't mention anything about "material" or immediate "physical" *salvation*: being saved from hunger, threats, violence, cultural violence, etc.¹²

On the contrary, it appears from their reports that salvation is seen by women as being molded into the Christian hierarchy. For instance, they brought forward that to them, "being saved" meant that they were more patient with their husband and children. 'We are submissive and try not to argue with our spouse, for instance when the husband comes home late and is drunk.' Salvation seems to be explained as having peace of mind with being submissive. However, some women questioned this theology of submission and perseverance. They argued that women should not be patient in a foolish manner so that one has to persevere even in the context of domestic violence or violence in the church.

In the end, the women concluded that when you are saved, God gives wisdom in times of trouble and God changes things from bad into good. This implies that the suffering of women is incorporated in a theology in which salvation is spiritualized and in which women themselves are "helpless". Prayer is seen by women as the only "legitimate" means to bring about safety.

¹¹ In an earlier study we concluded that "being saved" is seen by women in line with the Biblical stories where Jesus guides, comforts, heals, protects, feeds, empowers and liberates from cultural oppression. See E. Mombo, H. Joziase, 'He is Every Wonderful Thing to Me, Christology and the Experiences of Women in Theology and Ministry', in: *JCT* (16) 2, 2010, 169-190. See also paragraph 5 of this paper.

¹² We further analyze this in paragraph 5 and 6.

Men on the other hand defined salvation using the theological terms in Kikuyu of “being healed”, “being protected”, “being separated” and “being forgiven our sins”.¹³ They didn’t dwell on the meaning of these words.

Being “safe” was described by women as being protected from evil. God is your defender. To be safe is to have somebody who fights for you: Jesus. Women defined safety in relation to other people, for instance their children, their husband, their neighbours, and the drivers on the road. They argued that these people who accompany them are the ones who bring safety or make life unsafe.

Men, however, defined being safe both materially and spiritually. According to them being “safe” means: Not being afraid, having freedom, being protected against all forms of danger, not vulnerable to attacks, not hungry or sick. Being “safe” according to men also means: Having peace, having assurance in Christ-Jesus ‘as we are in Christ and Christ is in us’. Thus the men clearly emphasized the “here and now” aspect of being “safe”, while women in the discussions emphasized their being unsafe and their dependence on Jesus/God for safety.

4.3 A link between salvation and safety?

Asked if there is a link between salvation and safety, women answered in an ambivalent way: For some there was no link because ‘being saved is not a safeguard from being hurt’. This view is in line with the women’s explanation of salvation being mainly a spiritual affair. They observed that accidents and other bad things can happen, but spiritually they are safe because they are saved.

Other women explained that it is difficult to link the two since ‘we live with other people who are not saved’. ‘When saved, you are not safe, but you keep on fighting against evil, e.g. your children and your neighbours, by praying for them.’ Here the communal and the individual aspect collide: safety needs the community, while salvation can occur alone. These answers clearly reflect the common teaching of *personal* salvation, which does not encompass communal and social aspects of salvation.

Other women observed that while you are saved there is no safety, because as a saved person you are to go through many obstacles or sufferings. This suffering is explained positively, since it brings you closer to God. Therefore, some women argued: ‘As long as we are saved, our sufferings bring us closer to God.’ It seems that the absence of safety – for instance in the homes, but also in the church – is

¹³ This is the translation of “Kuponywa”, “Kuzingirwa”, “Kutengwa” and “Kusamehewa”.

theologically affirmed through a positive view on suffering as a consequence of following Christ, which ironically is especially imposed on women.¹⁴

During the discussions some women were challenging this female suffering: 'Since we cannot suffer always, does it mean that when we are *not* suffering we are not close to God?' It was further noted that suffering is not an end in itself but a way to succeed in life. Jesus is with us even in our suffering: 'God will help'. This idea of suffering as a sign of salvation anticipates and refers to an eschatological view of salvation: In the end we will live "saved and safe" with Jesus.

Finally, some women explained the link between safety and salvation: 'When I am saved, I am safe because when I am in hardship God gives me strength to overcome.' Salvation is defined as being dependent on the Holy Spirit who guides and protects you. One woman therefore explained: 'To be safe is to have somebody to fight for you, Jesus.' However, the kind of safety that Jesus brings was not clearly defined in physical or material categories.

Men didn't dwell long on this question, but simply assumed that 'a safe person on earth has an assurance of salvation and the promises of God'. They seem to presume safety on earth.

4.4 Is the church a safe place?

To some women the church is a safe place, as it is the place to worship God and to fellowship together. It is a place where disturbed hearts get peace and issues of concern are addressed: 'We are fed spiritually and feel that God has a purpose for us despite challenges.' To other women the church feels safe not only spiritually but also materially, because the church takes care in cases of sickness and death.

The men observed that in recent years the church as a building was not a safe place, because people who ran for safety were killed in the church.¹⁵ Some men argued that the church is safe because in the past the clergy has used the pulpit to condemn repressive regimes, for instance during the Kenya African National Union (KANU) era. Yet, the same pulpit has also been used to insert ethnical hatred and especially in the 2007-2008 post-election violence the church was criticized for initiating hate speech.

¹⁴ Mercy Amba Oduyoye explains the importance of living a sacrificial life referring to Jesus as the "Sacrificial Lamb", but she emphasizes that 'a true and living sacrifice is that which is freely and consciously made'. See Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion. Third World Women Doing Theology*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988, p. 44.

¹⁵ There are many cases in which the church was expected to be a safe place in times of war or political unrest; however the recent history in Kenya shows that people who took refuge in a church in Eldoret during the ethnic clashes were brutally killed.

However, both women and men predominantly declared the church *not* to be a safe place. Some women expressed that they view the church as a physically dangerous place because of bombings that have taken place in recent times¹⁶.

Most women emphasized first and foremost the psychological unsafety in the church caused by poor relationships. It is a place where we pretend and corrupt ourselves instead of it being a place of love. The church appears to be a place of envy, hatred, accusations, gossip, and social isolation of some groups of people, especially single mothers and widows. Since women come to church for spiritual support it is very disappointing to them to find the church to be a place of slander.

Apart from these reasons, women also view the church as unsafe because of sexual harassment and abuse by men, including those in leadership positions, who harass and abuse children, youth and women.

Men, on the other hand, argued that clergymen are vulnerable to false accusations. Also it was mentioned that when women report men to the clergy about domestic violence, men feel the church is not a safe place for them. This topic of the church being a safe place became a forum for raising issues of domestic violence, which appeared to be rampant, but the parish had not created space to talk about it or there were no mechanisms of helping those that were trapped in domestic violence. Unsafety is enhanced through an atmosphere of accusations and discrimination in the church.

4.5 Are women and men equally safe in the church?

From the above discussions, it was observed that there is a difference between men and women when it comes to safety in the church: Men feel safer than women. Reasons given are: First, the predominantly male leadership in the church where men are more protected than women. Second, the fact that women are physically (seen as) weaker, but women are not more protected than men.

The women observed that they are less safe both physically and spiritually since 'women carry all the burdens in the home and in the church'. They emphasized that because there is no equality in the church, women feel unsafe. The men agreed with this observation, arguing that they feel superior to women. They base their arguments on Genesis 2 where it is narrated that men are created first. The men confessed that they use the hierarchical set up of the church and their "being created first" as an argument to rule over women.

¹⁶ In 2012 there were a number of attacks on churches in Garissa, Mombassa and Nairobi.

Men too experience the church as an unsafe place, but they explained that this is mainly caused by the fights over leadership. Surprisingly they also point to the Christology taught in the church as a cause of feeling unsafe: In the church it is emphasized that you should 'love Jesus' and thus men feel cheated since women are encouraged 'to love another man'.

Thus, safety in the church, or the absence of it, is mainly attributed to the inequality in status and position between men and women in life and church-life. Women are encouraged to look for solace in faith in Jesus to the extent that they look to the church for the affirmation which husbands at home don't provide: They find peace in their relationship with Jesus. This is threatening to men, since their position as the head of the family is being challenged.

When we combine the answers as reflected above, it appears as if men and women have very different expectations of the church. They also receive different messages about what salvation entails, and they perceive safety in a different way. Women mentioned that being saved and prayerful can help in living a Godly life. They tended to emphasize this spiritual safety and salvation, but men didn't talk about a prayerful life as a contribution to safety. Is this because they don't need spiritual refuge, since they are physically safer?

4.6 Was the woman caught in adultery safe?

All participants agreed that this woman was not safe. Women argued that she would have been killed if Jesus had not been around, since the men didn't have mercy and they did not ask questions about how it happened, but rather wanted to beat her up. Only in the hands of Jesus did she find safety.

What came out strongly in the women's discussion groups was that the woman was not safe because she had no husband, she was single.¹⁷ The women shared how even nowadays single women are discriminated against in the church. They cannot go into church leadership and also they cannot be full members of the Mothers Union. One participant explained:

I am a single mother and if I want something repaired in my house and I ask a carpenter and the work is going to take three or four days, people out there, and especially church people start pointing fingers at me. They accuse me of having a man in my house. How safe am I?

4.7 How can the church become a safe place?

¹⁷ It is their assumption that if she had a husband he would have protected her.

Before concluding the discussions, women and men were asked to give suggestions of how the church can become a safe place. They made the following proposals:

- Women should be empowered psychologically, spiritually and materially to speak up on issues that make the church unsafe. The men also suggested that the church will be safe if there is a cultural shift in aspects that are discriminatory towards women.
- Church leadership should be inclusive of both women and men and be more democratic: For the church to be a safe space, leadership must be balanced at all levels, and women must support women who are chosen for leadership positions. Leaders who are not disciplined or who are harassing others should be rejected.
- In order to make the church a safe place both men and women agreed that both boys and girls should be socialized to be responsible for each other. In cases of moral indiscipline, both should face the consequences.
- All groups should feel safe in the church, including single parents and widows.
- Men also pleaded for open discussions between the church management/leadership and the congregation, and for the involvement of all church members and their talents.

5. Salvation reconsidered

Feminist readers of the Bible remind us that the biblical notion of salvation entails liberation, wholeness, peace, and blessing of all life. Aligning with liberation theologians, feminist theologians recognize salvation as holistic *shalom*, social and physical wholeness and harmony. Salvation is understood relationally, between human beings and in relation to God. Only that kind of holistic approach can equip the church to fulfill its task in promoting justice, peace, and wholeness.¹⁸

In earlier research we concluded that African women explicate salvation in Christ through a variety of images of Jesus.¹⁹ Salvation is seen by women in line with the Biblical stories where Jesus guides, comforts, heals, protects, feeds, empowers and liberates from cultural oppression. Women emphasize salvation as belief in a victorious transcendent Christ who - once and for all - conquered death and life-denying forces. At the same time Jesus is, for women, the paradigm in discerning what is "salvific" and what is "sin" or "evil" in everyday life:

¹⁸ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen. *Christology. A global introduction*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003, p. 202.

¹⁹ See E. Mombo, H. Joziase, 'He is Every Wonderful Thing to Me, Christology and the Experiences of Women in Theology and Ministry', in: *JCT* (16) 2, 2010, 169-190.

Jesus is a Shepherd, He helps us in our daily lives. He died for us and He hears us as we go and come. He guides our children, he died for us.

Every time Jesus is my hope and my friend. When things are good and when things are bad, He makes me walk, stand, eat, sit, etc.

He is our light, He brightens our future, in our children, our homes, in our husband, etc. He is also a light in our heart through salvation. He is a light in our lives when our husbands become drunkards, unfaithful, when they beat us, not only physical beating but also "cold war".

Jesus is our light in sickness. Even when the woman is giving birth and the husband is not there, when there is pain and uncertainty, Jesus is our light.²⁰

All these aspects together constitute how Jesus saves women. When they experience wholeness, affirmation and transformation, it is an affirmation of the presence of Christ: 'He saves!' Where there is absence of wholeness in situations of illness, quarrels, hunger, joblessness, etc. "Christ-like power" is needed.²¹

Yet, when listening to the women and men in Kabuku and analyzing their views, we have to conclude that a link between "being saved and being safe" is not obvious and not easily made. While African women theologians such as Oduyoye and Nasimiye time and again call for a holistic approach of salvation, a concept which can be traced back to the Biblical stories, such as the story of the woman who was caught in the act alone, and which is also visible in the lives of ordinary women, it seems not to be part of the theology preached in the churches. It also seems not to be internalized by the women and men in the churches.

In the New Testament the meaning of salvation is captured in all sorts of images and ideas, both expressing who Jesus is and what He did. These meanings should be interpreted in every context anew. However, in the Christian theological tradition and in the practices of the church this variety of ideas and metaphors related to "salvation" has been narrowed down to what became theologically right and orthodox²². Although no church council ever gave a definition of the work of Christ and its meaning for us, the dominant paradigm of salvation is the belief in Jesus as the Son of God who died for our sins and through this sacrifice or atonement (through his blood), has set us free.²³

²⁰ These answers were given in the same St. John's Anglican church Kabuku. See note 3.

²¹ See Mombo and Joziase, 2010, p. 187.

²² See Toinette M. Eugene, 'Redemption/Salvation' in Letty M. Russell, J. Shannon Clarkson (eds.), *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1996, 236.

²³ An example is given in article two of the 39 Articles of religion of the Anglican Church by David J. Wilson, 1997, Anglican Community, What we believe. Retrieved from

Ruether states that already in the New Testament we can find two important shifts in the definition of redemption. First, there is the shift from a "this worldly" social definition to an individualistic "other worldly" definition. Second, she observes a shift from an egalitarian definition of salvation that overcomes gender (ethnic and class) discrimination to one that reinforces gender and class hierarchy in the church, the family and the society, while promising a neutralizing of these distinctions in "heaven".²⁴

Both tendencies are intertwined, since "spiritualizing" and "privatizing" are part and parcel of a hierarchical or patriarchal theology which seeks to consolidate male hegemony and is not interested in the practical implications of the full humanity of all people. In fact it thrives on the fact that there is a hierarchical difference between people divided by gender, race, and class.

Both these tendencies are theologized and visible in the responses of the people in Kabuku: The gender hierarchy, leading to the exclusion of women in leadership positions in the church, the questioning of the humanity of women and their being created in the image of God, and the individualistic, spiritualized, heaven-oriented definition of salvation. The effect is that questions of safety are spiritualized and dealt with in a way that doesn't promote safety for women.

6. Conclusion: How will the church become a safe place?

The women and men in the church in Kabuku clearly define how the church can become a safer place. They mention the empowering of women (and girls) and equality in positions and leadership, together with a less hierarchical church. According to them, these are the main avenues to safety. Women suffer from hierarchy and subordination, which they also have internalized; they are not even safe for each other. A shared leadership and a less hierarchical church will increase safety in the church, in the same way as a shared leadership in marriage will increase safety at home.

But will these changes take place and be effective without a radical shift in teaching and preaching about salvation? Since women are not part of the leadership and the decision making bodies, they are not in the centre of formulating and theologizing.

<http://www.anglican.nb.ca/faith/believe.html#39Articles> 25 March 2013: The Son, which is the Word of the Father, begotten from everlasting of the Father, is one Christ, very God, and very Man; who truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, to reconcile his Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for actual sins of men.

²⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, p. 12.

On a deeper level it becomes clear that salvation as preached in the church is not being defined or "owned" by women. It seems that women perceive salvation in another way, but since this is not embraced or promoted by the church, there is a disconnect in their views of "what Jesus does for them" and "what salvation entails". Salvation as proclaimed in the churches is not about liberation and equality; no holistic sermon is preached. The dominant message is not John 10:10 ('I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'), but a message of hierarchy and perseverance in suffering. As we noted in the group discussions, women hesitantly and sporadically dare to question whether this "gospel" actually brings them salvation and safety.

Unless the theological idea of salvation is "redeemed" by women from its docetic clothes, and lands in the bodily reality of women and men, salvation remains a spiritual affair and a "safe" message only for those who have the power. The belief in the incarnation should be radicalized and brought down to earth to make it relevant, to end the suffering of women in their churches and in their homes. Salvation means being freed from sin and freed from corrupt relations. While salvation is predominantly preached as a spiritual freedom which is to be gained here and now and in the future, to women salvation implies the freedom to speak out, to relate to others on an equal footing. Salvation and safety for women are relational and defined from living in a community, instead of hierarchical and individualistic.

Closely tied to the redemption of "salvation" is the redemption of the notion of "sin". The woman who was caught in adultery adjusted perfectly in the patriarchal society: She remained humble and silent and was condemned alone. What brought about her safety? The fact that Jesus rebuked the dominance and false interpretation of men? Is it because Jesus listened to her and gave her space? It was because Jesus' solution implicated gender inequality in defining "sin": 'Fellow brothers, who of you is without sin?' Equality should not be spiritualized or defined as a future event, but be brought into the physical/material life of the church.

In conclusion, salvation is much more than being saved from morally sinful acts, as we read in the gospels. Salvation means in the end that the tears will be wiped off each face, that we are safe from the claws of death – is this not far from spiritual? It is timely that we search the scriptures anew to formulate the deepness and broadness of the meaning of being saved and safe. In this endeavor the experiences of women should guide us.