

Anne Hutchinson: Trial Excerpt (1637)

The Puritan community that dominated the Massachusetts Bay Colony was disrupted by two notable dissenters. In 1636, Roger Williams was banished due to his outspoken belief in the separation of church and state. His declaration that “forced religion stinks in God’s nostrils” challenged the Puritan theocratic society which had no room for alternative spiritual thought. Upon leaving Boston, Williams founded Providence. Within time, Rhode Island became recognized as a haven for religious tolerance (as did Quaker-dominated Pennsylvania later).

Another Puritan, Anne Hutchinson, also threatened Puritan orthodoxy. She held religious discussions in her home, publicly condemned some of Boston’s most famous clergymen as deficient, and claimed that she received direct revelation from God. When the charges against her were on the verge of being dismissed, she suddenly blurted that God had informed her that her enemies would be destroyed. Within the Puritan framework, this was blasphemy because it contradicted the belief that God spoke only through the Bible. Hutchinson was also charged with heresy and, when she tried to recant, further accused of lying. She joined Williams in Rhode Island and later moved to the Dutch colony of New Netherland (New York).

In 1643, Hutchinson and several of her children were killed in an attack by local Indians who presented themselves in a friendly manner, then suddenly turned on their unsuspecting victims (the attack was part of a series of incidents known as Kieft’s War). The Puritans interpreted the incident as punishment from God levied upon Hutchinson. The following excerpt is from her trial at Newton in 1637.



Gov. John Winthrop: Mrs. Hutchinson, you are called here as one of those that have troubled the peace of the commonwealth and the churches here; you are known to be a woman that hath had a great share in the promoting and divulging of those opinions that are causes of this trouble, and...you have spoken divers things, as we have been informed, very prejudicial to the honour of the churches and ministers thereof, and you have maintained a meeting and an assembly in your house that hath been condemned by the general assembly as a thing not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God nor fitting for your sex, and notwithstanding that was cried down you have continued the same, therefore we have thought good to send for you to understand how things are, that if you be in an erroneous way we may reduce you that so you may become a profitable member here among us, otherwise if you be obstinate in your course that then the court may take such course that you may trouble us no further, therefore I would intreat you to express whether you do not hold and assent in practice to those opinions and factions that have been handled in court already, that is to say, whether you do not justify Mr. Wheelwright’s sermon and the petition.

Mrs. Anne Hutchinson: I am called here to answer before you but I hear no things laid to my charge.

Gov. John Winthrop: I have told you some already and more I can tell you....Why do you keep such a meeting at your house as you do every week upon a set day?

Mrs. Anne Hutchinson: It is lawful for me so to do, as it is all your practices and can you find a warrant for yourself and condemn me for the same thing? The ground of my taking it up was, when I first came to this land because I did not go to such meetings as those were, it was presently reported that I did not allow of such meetings but held them unlawful and therefore in that regard they said I was proud and did despise all ordinances, upon that a friend came unto me and told me of it and I to prevent such aspersions took it up, but it was in practice before I came. Therefore I was not the first.

Gov. John Winthrop: ...I will say that there was no meeting of women alone, but your meeting is of another sort for there are sometimes men among you.

Mrs. Anne Hutchinson: There was never any man with us.

Gov. John Winthrop: Well, admit there was no man at your meeting and that you was sorry for it, there is no warrant for your doings, and by what warrant do you continue such a course?

Mrs. Anne Hutchinson: I conceive there lies a clear rule in Titus that the elder women should instruct the younger [Titus 2:3-5] and then I must have a time wherein I must do it....

If you please to give me leave I shall give you the ground of what I know to be true. Being much troubled to see the falseness of the constitution of the Church of England, I had like to have turned separatist. Whereupon I kept a day of solemn humiliation and pondering of the thing; this scripture was brought unto me—he that denies Jesus Christ to be come in the flesh is antichrist. This I considered of and in considering found that the papists did not deny him to be come in the flesh nor we did not deny him—who then was antichrist?...The Lord knows that I could not open scripture; he must by his prophetic office open it unto me....I bless the Lord, he hath let me see which was the clear ministry and which the wrong.

Since that time I confess I have been more choice and he hath let me to distinguish between the voice of my beloved and the voice of Moses, the voice of John Baptist and the voice of antichrist, for all those voices are spoken of in scripture. Now if you do condemn me for speaking what in my conscience I know to be truth I must commit myself unto the Lord.

Mr. Nowell (assistant to the Court): How do you know that that was the spirit?

Mrs. Anne Hutchinson: How did Abraham know that it was God that bid him offer his son, being a breach of the sixth commandment?

Dep. Gov. Thomas Dudley: By an immediate voice.

Mrs. Anne Hutchinson: So to me by an immediate revelation.

Dep. Gov. Thomas Dudley: How! an immediate revelation.

Mrs. Anne Hutchinson: By the voice of his own spirit to my soul. I will give you another scripture, Jeremiah 46: 27-28—out of which the Lord showed me what he would do for me and the rest of his servants. But after he was pleased to reveal himself to me....

Therefore I desire you to look to it, for you see this scripture fulfilled this day and therefore I desire you that as you tender the Lord and the church and commonwealth to consider and look what you do.

You have power over my body but the Lord Jesus hath power over my body and soul, and assure yourselves thus much, you do as much as in you lies to put the Lord Jesus Christ from you, and if you go on in this course you begin you will I bring a curse upon you and your posterity, and the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it....

Gov. John Winthrop: I am persuaded that the revelation she brings forth is delusion....

The court hath already declared themselves satisfied concerning the things you hear, and concerning the troublesomeness of her spirit and the danger of her course amongst us, which is not to be suffered. Therefore if it be the mind of the court that Mrs. Hutchinson for these things that appear before us is unfit for our society, and if it be the mind of the court that she shall be banished out of our liberties and imprisoned till she be sent away, let them hold up their hands....

Mrs. Hutchinson, the sentence of the court you hear is that you are banished from out of our jurisdiction as being a woman not fit for our society, and are to be imprisoned till the court shall send you away.

Mrs. Anne Hutchinson: I desire to know wherefore I am banished?

Gov. John Winthrop: Say no more, the court knows wherefore and is satisfied.

- What place did the Puritans hold within the Anglican Church? How were they different from Separatist groups such as the Pilgrims?

- What factor made Anne Hutchinson's trial—as a religious dissenter—so ironic within the Puritan community?

- What portions of this transcript reveal Anne Hutchinson's religious zeal? Why did Governor John Winthrop and other members of the Court consider her passion so dangerous?

- At the close of her trial, Anne Hutchinson asks why she is being banished. What does her question suggest about her attitude toward the Court?

- Anne Hutchinson was charged with blasphemy and heresy against the Puritan order. Explain the difference between the two accusations.