

1a – A Woman Not Fit For Our Society

Puritans in colonial Massachusetts had left England to escape religious oppression, only to establish their own equally stringent theocracy, in America. In the new colony, as in England, religious dissenters were jailed beaten and sometimes even killed.



Anne Hutchinson considered herself a devout Puritan, not a dissenter. However, she interpreted the church's teachings differently than most of the Puritan ministers in Massachusetts. She began to hold informal weekly meetings where church members could discuss and debate church scripture. At first the meetings were attended only by women, who were not allowed to participate in the theological discussions that followed regular Sunday services. But soon men in the colony came to hear Hutchinson as well. Her intelligence and eloquence often attracted large crowds.

In 1637, civil and church leaders charged Hutchinson with promoting false doctrine. They also accused her of stepping beyond the church's established bounds for women, who were supposed to be seen and not heard. She was brought before Boston's General Court.

During her trial, Hutchinson insisted on her right to practice her faith according to the dictates of her conscience. The court ruled against her. Pregnant with her 16th child, she was imprisoned and later banished from Massachusetts. The following spring, she settled in the newly established colony of Rhode Island, which had been founded on the principle of religious freedom three years earlier by another religious exile from Massachusetts - Roger Williams.

Mr. Winthrop, governor: Mrs. Hutchinson, you are called here as one of those that have troubled the peace of the commonwealth and the churches here .. 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 ...

Mrs. Hutchinson: What have I said or done?

Gov.: Why for your doings, this you did harbour and countenance those that are parties in this faction,* that you have heard of.

Mrs. H: That's [a] matter of conscience, Sir.

Gov.: Your conscience you must keep or it must be kept for you. ... Why do you keep such a meeting at your house as you do every, week upon a set day?

Mrs. H: 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? ...

Deputy Gov.: [I]t appears by this woman's meeting that Mrs. Hutchinson hath so forestalled the minds of many ... that now she hath a potent party in the country. Now if all these things have endangered us as from that foundation and if she in particular hath disparaged all our ministers in the land ... we must take away the foundation and the building will fall. ...

Mrs. H: [I]f you do condemn me for speaking what in my conscience I know to be truth I must commit myself unto the Lord. ... 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 goon in this course you begin you will bring a curse upon you and your posterity, and the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. ... Now having seen him which is invisible I fear not what man can do unto me...



Anne Hutchinson at Trial

Gov: The court hath already declared themselves satisfied concerning things you hear, and concerning the troublesomeness of her spirit and the danger of her course amongst us, which is not to be suffered. ... 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.

** Hutchinson was accused of associating with the much-despised antinomians, who believed that Christians were not bound by church law.*

*This article is reprinted by from the Teaching Tolerance curriculum kit
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