

TRIAL AND INTERROGATION OF ANNE HUTCHINSON (1637)

Questions:

1. How do Hutchinson's accusers treat her? How does Hutchinson respond?
2. Why was Hutchinson's sex so significant in these proceedings?
3. What were the charges levied against Hutchinson? Why was she found guilty?

The founders of the Massachusetts Bay hoped to build a community based on religious ideals. In his 1630 sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity," Governor John Winthrop announced that the colony would be "a city upon a hill" that would inspire other nations. Adhering to a covenant that bound them to God and to each other, the Puritans were disciplined and motivated. They quickly established a network of well-organized towns, each centering on a congregation. Before one could attain full church membership, the Puritans required a public account of conversion.

Not all Puritans agreed with their leaders' religious and political views. In 1635, Puritan authorities banished Roger Williams for arguing that church and state should be completely separate. Anne Hutchinson, another dissident, organized weekly theological discussions for the women of Boston. Arguing that individuals possessed the ability to interpret and preach the Scriptures, Hutchinson questioned clerical authority and began drawing both male and female followers. In 1637, Hutchinson's critics charged her with sedition and heresy. After she was convicted and banished, Hutchinson settled on Long Island Sound. In 1643, she and most of her children were killed by Indians, an event some Puritans viewed as divine retribution.

In this selection, Hutchinson testifies before her accusers at the Massachusetts Bay legislature (the General Court). (Some spelling has been modernized.)



The Examination of Mrs. Ann Hutchinson at the Court at Newtown.

Mr. John 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 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 diverse 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....

Hutchinson: What have I said or done?

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

Hutchinson: That's matter of conscience, Sir.

Winthrop: Your conscience you must keep or it must be kept for you.

Hutchinson: Must not I then entertain the saints because I must keep my conscience?

Winthrop: Say that one brother should commit felony or treason and come to his other brother's house, if he knows him guilty and conceals him he is guilty of the same. It is his conscience to entertain him, but if his conscience

comes into act in giving countenance and entertainment to him that hath broken the law he is guilty too. So if you do countenance those that are transgressors of the law you are in the same fact. . .

Hutchinson: What law have I broken?

Winthrop: Why the fifth commandment...

Hutchinson: But put the case Sir that I do fear the Lord and my parents, may not I entertain them that fear the Lord because my parents will not give me leave?

Winthrop: If they be the fathers of the commonwealth, and they of another religion, if you entertain them then you dishonor your parents and are justly punishable.. .

Hutchinson: I may put honor upon them as the children of God and as they do honor the Lord.

Winthrop: We do not mean to discourse with those of your sex but only this; you do adhere unto them and do endeavor to set forward this faction and so you do dishonor us,

Hutchinson: I do acknowledge no such thing neither do I think that I ever put any dishonor upon you,

Winthrop: Why do you keep such a meeting at your house as you do every week upon a set day?

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. . .

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?

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.. .

Winthrop: [S]uppose that a man should come and say Mrs. Hutchinson I hear that you are a woman that God hath given his grace unto and you have knowledge in the word of God I pray instruct me a little, ought you not to instruct this man?

Hutchinson: I think I may. -Do you think it not lawful for me to teach women and why do you call me to teach the court?

Winthrop: We do not call you to teach the court but to lay open yourself....Your course is not to be suffered for, besides that we find such a course as this to be greatly prejudicial to the state, besides the occasion that it is to seduce many honest persons that are called to those meetings and your opinions being known to be different from the word of God may seduce many simple souls that resort unto you, besides that the occasion which hath come of late hath come from none but such as have frequented your meetings, so that now they are flown off from magistrates and ministers and this since they have come to you, and besides that it will not well stand with the commonwealth that families should be neglected for so many neighbors and dames and so much time spent, we see no rule of God for this, we see not that any should have authority to set up any other exercises besides what authority hath already set up and so what hurt comes of this you will be guilty of and we for suffering you.

Hutchinson: Sir I do not believe that to be so...

Winthrop: We are your judges, and not you ours and we must compel you to it.

Hutchinson: If it please you by authority to put it down I will freely let you for I am subject to your authority....

Winthrop: Let us state the case and then we may know what to do. That which is laid to Mrs. Hutchinson's charge is this, that she hath traduced the magistrates and ministers of this jurisdiction, that she hath said the ministers preached a covenant of works and Mr. Cotton a covenant of grace, and that they were not able ministers of the gospel, and she excuses it that she made it a private conference and with a promise of secrecy....

Hutchinson: 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 become 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: How do you know that that was the spirit?

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

Mr. Dudley, Deputy Governor: By an immediate voice.

Hutchinson: So to me by an immediate revelation....Ever since that time I have been confident of what he hath revealed unto me... 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 bring a curse upon you and your posterity, and the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it....

Winthrop: 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....

Winthrop: 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...