

More Than a Woman: Anne Hutchinson's Testimony for the Holy Spirit

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The mid-1600s was a wild time in church history, much more than most people realize. With the changes in Europe and the newfound opportunities and challenges in the American colonies, there was a stirring of ecclesial discontent and rediscovery. Some of these new directions were quite unorthodox, while others can be called orthodox but not conventional. Among the latter, we can think of those like Roger Williams (1603–1683), George Fox (1624–1691), or Anne Hutchinson (1591–1643). Fox tells us a lot about himself, and we are privileged to be left with a significant amount of Williams's writing. The same is not true for Anne Hutchinson.¹ Though she did not formally lead a movement, her influences continued in various ways and her insights on the Holy Spirit continued to be driving arguments for why women are so important to the ministry and life of the church. Given this, some may see Hutchinson as a proto-feminist in a time of supposed intense misogyny. Others may see her as an antinomian ranter rising up against an oppressive religious theocracy, an early seventeenth-century warrior who can speak into our times. The reality of her situation is more complex.²

Born Anne Marbury in 1591 into the family of an English cleric in Alford, Lincolnshire, she received a privileged education. After her marriage to William Hutchinson, the couple followed the preacher John Cotton, a leading English Puritan who unconventionally emphasized the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer. When Cotton emigrated to the British colonies in America in 1633, the Hutchinsons followed a year later and took up residence in Boston, part of the developing settlement of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in New England. Besides working as a midwife, Hutchinson began to assert herself in the religious sphere. She began hosting meetings for women in her home, where she would pick up on the sermons Cotton preached at church and expound them further. Soon, men, such as the governor of the colony, Henry Vane, began to attend these meetings. It is for the theological tenor of these activities that she was eventually taken to stand trial.

Puritan on Trial

As mentioned, Hutchinson did not leave did not leave substantive writings or teachings. Her only direct testimony is, in fact, literally a testimony! Her testimony to the court in Boston concerned an array of charges laid against her in the years 1637–1638, few of which were actual legal violations.³ “I am called here to answer before you,” she says, “but I hear no things laid to my charge.”⁴ Her trial was, in many ways, a coming together of a vast number of historical developments that reflected the great religious struggles of her century and beyond. She represented, in her person, the coming wave of resistance—spiritual resistance—of later colonists.

John Winthrop, the magistrate, opened the trial by noting that Hutchinson had been “called here as one of those that have

troubled the peace of the commonwealth and the churches here.”⁵ He continues, “You are known to be a woman. . . .” For some commentators, this is enough to develop the narrative of Hutchinson's crimes, focusing on a feminist narrative of Hutchinson charged primarily with “talking while a woman.”⁶ Yet, while Winthrop mentions her gender, this is descriptive rather than emphatic, and it is what he continues to say in his charge that is most important. “You are known to be a woman,” he says, “that hath had a great share in the promoting and divulging of those opinions that are the causes of this trouble and to be nearly joined not only in affinity and affection with some of those the court has taken notice of and passed censure on.”⁷

The gruelling trial she was forced to endure came about because she not only dared assert a leadership role as a woman but did so claiming that it was the Holy Spirit who inspired this work.

She had participated in the causing of troubles. This seems a vague charge, but not vague in the minds of those who brought her to trial. Hutchinson was being charged with speaking theologically unacceptable doctrine, and in doing this, she had also “spoken divers things as we have been informed very prejudicial to the honor of the churches and ministers thereof. . . .” Specifically, she was accused of telling others that most of the ministers in Boston were not ministers of Christ but of antichrist due to their promotion of what she saw as a theology of works. Though not publicly, she was undermining ministers through conversations in her home and elsewhere. She also participated in quiet forms of resistance such as getting up and leaving, along with other women, when such a minister was going to begin preaching. She attributed such an act to “feminine issues,” and thus made refutation embarrassing.

Winthrop ends his list of charges by addressing Hutchinson's leading meetings in her house. This, finally, is a specific gender issue: “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 fitting for your sex.”⁸ This indicates how discussions about women's roles and opportunities were not fixed. When given the opportunity and space, many women and men sought to express their freedom in ways that the authorities rejected.

These charges were, it seems, an attempt to forestall a rising independence that had both issues of theology and issues of authority at the root. Hutchinson was not simply a wayward woman who needed to be put in her place.⁹ For those in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the issue was—at first, at least—a more narrowly focused theological quibble. It involved how different people answered the

question, “How do I know I am saved?” There were two answers to this question being offered in the early days of Massachusetts.¹⁰

One camp argued that we could examine our lives for signs of sanctification. Those who held this approach were called sanctificationists. A number of ministers in early New England held this view, most notably among them Winthrop and Thomas Shepard. The other camp argued that we can be assured of our salvation only by a direct testimony of God into our hearts—the Holy Spirit would testify to us. This was the free grace movement to which belonged Sir Henry Vane, Hutchinson, and her brother-in-law Thomas Wheelwright.¹¹

Discerning the Work of God

This issue of the Holy Spirit was a key Reformation topic. The free grace movement argued that sanctificationists were teaching a salvation by works. For the most part, this early debate went on behind the scenes, in private conversations or indirect forms of protest. Among the most important disputants was Hutchinson, who did not have a pulpit but rather had, it seems, an engaging way about her, a strong intelligence, and independence of thought. Further, and to her advantage, she was involved in those particular aspects of community which were not open to men. She increasingly, it seems, made note that many ministers were no longer real servants of Christ, but in their teaching of salvation by works—in her estimation—they were antichrists, leading the new community of Boston astray, leading them back toward the despised doctrine of Catholics.

Her opponents were not slow to react. The idea that salvation could only be validated by a direct witness of the Spirit appeared to them a dangerous teaching. It was far too similar to a rash of heresies that had begun by emphasizing a newfound revelation by the Spirit and had led to lawlessness and immorality. Like many heresy hunts, similarity of language sparked accusation of full blown heresy, with the results of these heresies being trumpeted as the reason for “wayward” believers.¹² Among the more “dangerous” heresies being noted were the Familists and the Anabaptists.¹³

Due to the nature of the mission of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, these theological issues easily drifted into divisions of power and identity. Jeffrey Kahl writes that “the Puritan elders of New England primarily proceeded against Hutchinson not for theological reasons but for the very practical purpose of maintaining the implementation of their vision.”¹⁴ Kahl goes on to bring his own experience as a pastor to his analysis of the situation: “I think of the numerous conflicts that I have endured in my job. . . . As the person in the leadership position, I have often found that the integrity of my vision for ministry would have been jeopardized if my opponents were allowed free reign. Thus, I had to accept the hard burden of confronting those individuals, explaining their errors, and in some cases, removing them from their positions.” Such a response raises the question of why one person’s vision should be prioritized over another’s. The ministers of New England, on both sides of this issue, had theological reasons behind their vision, but they had to clarify why their vision was the “right” one.

More than simply being a woman who dared to make her opinion known, Hutchinson was a central leader for one side in the struggle

for power and control. As such, her trial was about community and religious politics, with theology used to drive the accusations.

In her trial, Hutchinson showed herself to be extremely adept at countering the accusations.¹⁵ She had, it seemed, mastered the art of displaying herself as an intelligent leader while staying within the cultural expectations of a woman. Indeed, it can be argued that she exploited these expectations by working behind the scenes to constantly undermine the influence of the sanctificationists. Her opponents turned this tactic against her, making public what she thought was private, and exposing what she had carefully kept out of public view. This put her on the spot to respond openly to specific charges and in doing so, to speak about the theology that underpinned her ministry.

Beyond the Bible

Hutchinson was finally banished from Massachusetts Bay colony—not over the competing theologies of free grace and sanctification, but because of her assertion that the Holy Spirit spoke to her directly. This moved the argument into radical directions. Like most of the church in the West (as opposed to the Eastern Orthodox), Puritan pneumatology tended to subsume discussions about the Holy Spirit within the topics of soteriology and ecclesiology. The issue of how the Holy Spirit worked in salvation was the direct reason for the trial, but surrounding this was a rising disagreement about the Holy Spirit’s wider work within the Christian community.

While it was agreed that the work of the Spirit permeated the whole ministry of the church, it was thought that the Spirit’s work was focused through the Word, namely, the preaching of the Word by ordained ministers.¹⁶ Hutchinson’s claim that the Spirit spoke to her directly was perceived as a significant slight against the established church order. Whether this was a statement of Hutchinson’s personal experience or was part of a wider conversation within her community, we do not know. But, it seems to be the impetus for both her unwillingness to accept correction and her assumption that she would prevail.

Indeed, this seemed a possibility earlier in the trial. She was extremely adept at parrying the various charges related to the primary soteriological issues. Her husband, William, was not an active part of her trial, but his experience as a deputy for the court certainly was a factor in her understanding of courtroom tactics. Hutchinson faced her accusers mostly alone and, despite her lack of formal education, showed herself to be more than the equal of her accusers. She was humble and thoughtful in her response, willing to admit her ignorance or misstatements at times, while also continuing to hold to her overall positions. This, no doubt, drove them even more to rid themselves of this “troublesome” woman.

It was not their charges, however, that led to her defeat, and thereby the defeat of the free grace faction in Boston. Rather, in a move that still flummoxes many historians, Hutchinson herself gave the ammunition for her conviction. When questioned on her claim that many of her opponents were not “able ministers of the new testament”¹⁷ she answered that she reached this conclusion because—while not a minister herself—she was a prophet. She said her authority to judge ministers for their theology came from speaking God’s own judgment “by an immediate revelation.”¹⁸

Worries about heresies related to extra-biblical revelations supposedly mediated by the Spirit go as far back as the early church. Montanism, for example, was an especially strong movement in which new prophecies—including those made by women—were included as an important part of Christian revelation. Such heresies undermined ecclesial authority. The person who heard directly from the Spirit bypassed human church leadership.¹⁹

Hutchinson's appropriation of the office of prophet assumed there could be a direct personal extra-biblical revelation.²⁰ She claimed revelation that transcended ministerial authority.²¹ "Now," she says at the end of her startling declaration, "if you do condemn me for speaking what in my conscience I know to be truth I must commit myself to the Lord."²² With this, the trial took a new turn, becoming embroiled in the question of whether the work of the Holy Spirit included extra-biblical revelations. Hutchinson asserted that she had direct communication with God. She felt she could trust her own impressions about Scripture and thereby judge those ministers who interpreted it in error.

This is how Hutchinson became a clear and present danger to those who sought to establish a community in Massachusetts based on clearly regulated religious ideals—regulated by ministers who shared a basic agreement about doctrine and revelation. Hutchinson challenged the established ecclesial order. With no telling what else these "revelations" might lead to, her opponents decided it was best to put a fence in front of the slope right away.²³

Pioneer and Martyr rather than Movement Leader

Historically, no lasting "Hutchinsonian" freedom faction spilled over the borders of Massachusetts. To be sure, Hutchinson did not have sufficient opportunity to catalyze this, given her tragic death in 1644 in a massacre resulting from the hostilities between the colonists and the native population. Hutchinson had the charisma, but had neither the time nor the leadership opportunities afforded to men.²⁴ Rather than seeing her influence in terms of movements, it is much more useful to assess her contribution in terms of how she opened the door for others.

Hutchinson, it seems, did have followers.²⁵ Among Hutchinson's followers was Mary Dyer, born in 1611. After Hutchinson died, however, Dyer became a Quaker, and in 1660, she was hanged by the government of Boston for her persistent testimony to the active work of the Spirit in the lives of those saved by Christ. With this, and other indications, it seems much more likely that Hutchinson's lasting influence was not in creating a movement, but in preparing the way for the Quakers.²⁶

With Hutchinson, we see a woman seemingly content within the bounds of the ecclesial conventions of her time. The charge that she, a woman, overstepped her prescribed bounds was among the least successful. She successfully countered her accusers with evidence that her actions in hosting women's meetings were to be encouraged.²⁷ She was extremely intelligent, and she displayed strong insight into Scripture. These led to the popularity of her home meetings.²⁸

Hutchinson's radical departure from established theology came with her emerging doctrine of the Holy Spirit. She argued that the

Holy Spirit can be understood outside of Scripture, though always in agreement with Scripture. This led the ministers who supported her to eventually distance themselves from her, seemingly because her expanding understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in those who are faithful to Christ went beyond what they were willing to fight for publicly.²⁹ Instead of offering support, they let her take blame for what were previously shared perspectives.

How did Hutchinson resist the pressure to conform while others in her circle succumbed? Her status as leader and her deep conviction pushed her beyond the boundaries of the conventional theology of her time. She, being a pioneer, lacked the support of robust pneumatology such as developed later in the twentieth century. Her theological instinct alone was insufficient to guide her, and this left her isolated and seemingly discouraged.³⁰ Later, the Quakers continued to provide a prophetic influence in the church. Their early fights against slavery were based on their pneumatology, understanding that the Spirit empowered and transformed all people irrespective of race. We can likewise see this pneumatology inspiring later women preachers like Mary Bosanquet Fletcher (1739–1815) and Jarena Lee (1783–1864) to break through their social and ecclesial barriers.³¹

Conclusion

While Anne Hutchinson's story is not one of victory, her voice can speak into the struggles of the present day. Her goal was not necessarily to further women's rights but to discern and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. In this cause, she assumed she had the support of key male leaders. However, when she was brought to trial in court, she found herself on her own. Today, her example encourages men and women who may not fit within ministry boundaries prescribed by the church. May we follow her example of truth and courage, going wherever it may lead us.

Notes

1. For good, recent biographies of Anne Hutchinson that deal with the lack of details of her life by delving deeply into the context in which she lived see Timothy Hall, *Anne Hutchinson: Puritan Prophet* (Longman, 2010) and Michael P. Winship, *The Times and Trials of Anne Hutchinson: Puritans Divided* (University Press of Kansas, 2005).
2. See Amanda Porterfield, *Female Piety in Puritan New England: The Emergence of Religious Humanism* (Oxford University Press, 1992), a study that acknowledges the complexity and the context while pushing to assess Hutchinson as an example of early modern trends. Her assessment of Thomas Hooker, Thomas Shepard, and John Cotton are especially insightful as to contributing causes for the overall crisis.
3. There were, in fact, two separate trials. The first, discussed here, was an examination by the General Court in Nov 1637. This resulted in her being sentenced to banishment. The second was a trial before the church in Boston in March 1638. This was more theological in focus and resulted in her excommunication.
4. David D. Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636–1638: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (Duke University Press, 1990) 312.
5. Hall, *Antinomian Controversy*, 312.
6. See Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, "Feminism, Anne Hutchinson, and the Antinomian Controversy, 1634–1638," *TJ* 2/1 (1981) 42ff. for a brief discussion of this interpretive approach in regards to Hutchinson.
7. Hall, *Antinomian Controversy*, 312.

'Antimonian' and 'Famelist' were applied rather loosely in the 1630s to varied collections of people who had no necessary connection with Continental Anabaptist movements or with the original Family of Love." He adds later, 637, "Much of the reputation of the pre-Civil War sects originated in . . . tainted evidence, whether given by would-be informers, preachers with troublesome congregations, or hack writers eager to titillate their audience with a little religious scandalmongering. As a consequence, the image of the Antinomians was terribly distorted, and their numbers may not have justified the degree of attention they received." Like Roger Williams, Hutchinson's arguments for spiritual freedom were accompanied by more, rather than less, moral stringency than most of her contemporaries, albeit moral stringency with particularly interpreted emphases, such as including hospitality.

24. Important Hutchinson scholar, David Hall, however, doubts her charisma, writing that "more adequate measure of Hutchinson's charisma is that, with the exception of two of her sons, the entire (male) membership of her congregation voted to excommunicate her, and there is nothing to suggest that her visionary capacities gained her a significant audience in Rhode Island where she went to live." David Hall, "The Passion of Anne Hutchinson. An Extraordinary Woman, the Puritan Patriarchs, and the World They Made and Lost. By Marilyn J. Westerkamp," *JEH* 73/4 (2022) 889–91. I think Hall is too quick to attribute Hutchinson's lack of support to any reflection of her charisma. Her earlier leadership and later support is certainly more due to those in the community wanting to maintain their own status. A person can be charismatic and also become seen as toxic to those who want to be seen on the "approved" side of politics and culture.

25. See Ditmore, "Prophetess in Her Own Country," 137ff.
26. See Winship, *Times and Trials of Anne Hutchinson*, 146ff.
27. See Hall, *Anne Hutchinson: Puritan Prophet*, 55ff.
28. In this we can see a similarity with Susannah Wesley, whose home meetings were quite popular and she had to defend herself against criticisms. Unlike Hutchinson, however, her husband seems to have stood up for her.
29. Ditmore, "Prophetess in Her Own Country," 378, writes, "Whereas before the Holy Spirit had guided her in the interpretation and discrimination of false from authentic ministers, now it began to lead her to further specific promises and assurances toward and about the future, as we have already seen from her reference to the far country of captivity in Jeremiah."
30. However, there are indications that even this understanding of conventional practices was changing after she had been banished from Massachusetts. See Hall, *Anne Hutchinson: Puritan Prophet*, 141ff., and Winship, *Times and Trials of Anne Hutchinson*, 143ff.
31. For the latter see her interesting autobiography: Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia, 1849).



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