

Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643)

The Failure of the New England Experiment

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Although it might be said that civil and ecclesiastical law were one in the Old Testament Dispensation, the New Testament clearly teaches that both non-Christians and Christians have civil rights and responsibilities and the powers that be, whether Christian or not, have an ordained duty to command obedience from the populace and maintain the right. Where New Testament Churches have usurped civil and secular authority by exercising Jewish case law and the authority of a Sanhedrin, they have failed in their calling as Christian leaders and reverted to un-Christian, and therefore worldly, means.

Nowhere is this abuse of New Testament principles more crassly illustrated as in the so-called New England Experiment in general and the mocked-up trial of Anne Hutchinson in particular. Here we have a marked example of officious but spineless pastors who strove to run a state on Gentleman's Club lines, in which women were second class citizens and were made punishable for 'offences' that clearly resulted from their pastors' preaching. The only difference being that the pulpit culprits in power refused to punish themselves or mend their ways but used a fine-living woman as their scapegoat in true Old Testament 'case law' style. The chief of these culprits was, otherwise first class theologian, John Cotton who sadly had not the strength of his own convictions and left a very close friend in the lurch to save his own crumbling reputation.

This story, which demonstrates the weakness of the New England ecclesiastical system, started in the English town of Alford, in Lincolnshire, where, in 1591, Anne Marbury was born. She was the daughter of Edward Marbury, a Church of England clergyman who became well known through his Old Testament expositions. During Anne's childhood, the Marburys moved to London but Anne returned to Alford in 1612 to marry a local merchant named William Hutchinson. Later those who put Anne on trial were to call Hutchinson a 'man of a very mild temper and weak parts, and wholly guided by his wife', but this was obviously merely part of the trumped up charge to 'prove' that Anne was a lawless rebel. Actually, William Hutchinson showed his wife a love and deep respect that appeared foreign to his wife's persecutors. The way William stood by Anne in spite of having the entire ecclesiastical, legalistic jurisprudence against him was admirable and showed great moral strength.



THE HUTCHINSONS COME UNDER JOHN COTTON'S MINISTRY

About the time of Anne's return to Alford, twenty-seven year old John Cotton had just graduated from Emmanuel College, Cambridge and settled down as a Church of England minister in nearby Boston. Cotton's preaching soon drew crowds and the Hutchinsons regularly visited Boston to hear him. They became good friends and Cotton testified in *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* that Anne Hutchinson was, 'well beloved, and all the faithful embraced her conference, and blessed God for her fruitful discourses.' Cotton's professional pride suffered somewhat on hearing that it was Mrs Hutchinson's vast reading and studies in the Scripture that had given her a sound hope in Christ rather than his preaching. However, Cotton's direct influence on the Hutchinsons cannot be denied. For them, he became the preacher of righteousness and soon they could not imagine a Christian life outside of his ministry and guidance. Thus, when Cotton moved to New England in 1633, the Hutchinsons were like sheep without a shepherd. After studying Isaiah 30:20, the favourite verse of many a New England pilgrim, William and Anne decided to join their pastor in the new Boston that Cotton helped create in Massachusetts. Thus, in May, 1634 William's widowed mother, two other sons and a daughter, and John Wheelwright, the daughter's minister husband, set sail in the Griffin for Boston with the Hutchinsons and their children. Two other ministers, John Lothrop and Zechariah Symmes were also on board but Mrs Hutchinson annoyed them greatly by speaking of justification with great skill. Later at her trial, all the words Mrs Hutchinson had exchanged with these two gentlemen were misapplied and used as evidence against her. For instance, Mrs Hutchinson commented on the teaching of Thomas Hooker that England was done for as a Christian country. These words were later sifted out of context as signs that Mrs Hutchinson thought she was a prophetess. Yet, there was probably not a man at the trial who had not claimed the same, as this was their reason for fleeing to North America. Indeed, when Anne Bradstreet, another brave pioneer woman, contradicted this common belief, she too was viewed by the men as being unorthodox. They were obviously not against opinions but against women having them.

EARLY DIFFICULTIES IN BOSTON

Immediately on their arrival, the Hutchinsons applied for membership of the Boston Church but were surprised to find that they would accept William but not Anne. Symmes had told Deputy Governor Dudley that Mrs Hutchinson was unsuitable for church membership. The irony of the matter is that Symmes left England because of the lack of religious liberty there, though he turned into a Laudian bishop himself as soon as he gained that liberty for himself. Thus it was agreed that John Cotton and a John Wilson, the deputy pastor, should give Mrs Hutchinson a thorough-going spiritual examination. She passed with flying colours and was admitted to membership. Apparently the examination had to do with the relationship between sanctification and justification. Cotton and Wheelwright both claimed that Mrs Hutchinson was orthodox as she agreed that

‘sanctification did help to evidence justification’. After this, Mr Hutchinson was made Deputy to the Massachusetts General Court and Mrs Hutchinson found herself doing a good deal of entertaining and caring for the women of the colony.

It was customary for the more spiritual minded ladies in Boston to gather together in the midweek and discuss their pastor’s teaching. At first, Mrs Hutchinson did not join these meetings, not knowing if they were allowed by the authorities. The other ladies told her not to be a legalist and come and share the fellowship. Soon Mrs Hutchinson was asked to lead these gatherings, now held at her home. Both Cotton and Wheelwright supported Mrs Hutchinson’s ministry to the ladies. The meetings became very popular and soon they were held twice a week, drawing about fifty women. Several pastors became horrified at the idea of a crowd of women discussing their sermons. They could not complain much about Anne Hutchinson’s practical religion, however. Her days were fully taken up with helping at childbirth, visiting and caring for the sick, clothing and feeding the poor and counselling the distressed and down-hearted. Soon Mrs Hutchinson was looked upon as a saint by the populace though a clique of clergy began to call her Jezebel.

THE TIDE OF HYPOCRISY TURNS AGAINST MRS HUTCHINSON

Now two factors began to tell against Mrs Hutchinson though she was not in the least blameworthy in either. The deputy pastor, Wilson, who had been absent in England for some time, was rather lost in Cotton’s shadow which he felt bitterly. A move was made to have Wheelwright take his place as a man of more profile and spiritual energy. John Winthrop, now Deputy Governor, whose man Wilson was, would not hear of this. He, too, had left England, protesting at the patronage of Bishops, but in the New World he, as a very influential layman, claimed very similar rights for himself. He was able to tip the scales against Wheelwright but angered the congregation in so doing. The other factor was that many a man now turned to Mrs Hutchinson for advice. Believing firmly that she should not instruct men, she asked Wheelwright and other sympathetic ministers to take on the task. The men, however, gathered at Mrs Hutchinson’s to receive this help which usually centred on the doctrines of justification, sanctification and the work of the Spirit. Mrs Hutchinson and Wheelwright followed Cotton in believing that the emphasis on one’s own personal sanctification could produce hypocrites. Cotton argued that many New Englanders believed that the Christian was under a covenant of works. Mrs Hutchinson added that this was because certain ministers themselves were preaching works’ righteousness and not saving grace.

WINTHROP’S POLICY FOR MASSACHUSETTS

Deputy Governor Winthrop was appalled at the deviation from his own ‘norm’ for the spiritual state of the colony. He had never given much thought to the supposed Theocracy, which modern American school children learn was the pervading ideal in early New England. Winthrop and

his men wanted to tempt what they called 'people of quality' to the colony. These were respectable, upper-middle and gentry classes that would bring trade, wealth and honour to the merchant community which they wished to form. They had been very disappointed at the kind of persons who had left England. In the desire to enjoy a liberty in the New World denied to them in England, not only decent-minded, God-fearing people like the Dudleys, Bradstreets, Mathers and Wheelwrights had emigrated to America but also, besides unwanted plain, honest, poor people, wild adventurers, gamblers, tricksters, and swindlers had flooded the colony. In the wake of the Reformation, it had become customary for all walks of society to use the pious language of the Bible in every day conversation and to profess to do nothing be it not the will of the Lord. It had thus become extremely difficult to assess the spirituality of a person. To a large extent, hypocrisy had become the religion of the colony.

WAYS OF CONFRONTING HYPOCRISY

To counteract this hypocrisy, Winthrop and his faction placed rigid restrictions on those entering the colony and demanded a strict code of conduct for those remaining. Those of different opinions were to be banished from Massachusetts, including 'Familists, Antinomians, Anabaptists, and other enthusiasts'. Liberty for such 'enthusiasts' was defined by the 'orthodox' as 'the free liberty to keep away from us, and such as will come, to be gone as fast as they can, the sooner the better.' Thus the marks of a Christian were judged by outward appearances and it became easier and easier for skilled rogues to find asylum under the artificial protective canopy that the colony had spanned over itself. Winthrop, in fact, strove to abolish natural hypocrisy by introducing enforced hypocrisy. True Christian liberty was now outlawed.

Cotton, Hutchinson and Wheelwright had a different solution. They read the stories of the English Reformation and saw that the martyrs were men who viewed the inner-working of the Spirit and an absolute dependence on the Word of God as their standards. Not outward conformity but inner regeneration was their foundation for both justification and sanctification. One could not work backwards from good works to prove salvation but salvation worked forwards to good works, though this might not even be outwardly visible to those who were still under the Covenant of Works for salvation. Thus good works, of themselves, were no absolute indicators of sanctification.

THE BASIS OF MRS HUTCHINSON'S FAITH

Here we are at the centre of Mrs Hutchinson's theology. Ministers such as Thomas Shepherd maintained that the aim of Christian sanctification was to regain the natural righteousness which was in pre-fallen Adam. This, they believed, is only gained by performing moral duties whether in a regenerate state or not which thus bring into action the sanctification needed for justification. All graces (i.e. works of grace) were to be performed in faith by the individual in order that sanctification and thus

justification might ensue. The ministers other than Cotton and Wheelwright denied completely that these graces were external to the believer and existed in the believer only in his union with Christ. In God's covenant with man, they argued, man should do his part and then God would do His. Against this, Mrs Hutchinson, following Cotton, maintained that all graces are in Christ and there are no natural graces in man, helping him to attain sanctification. Any grace in man is implanted by Christ and developed by the Spirit. There is no saving righteousness other than the righteousness of Christ imputed. Therefore, the natural righteousness of Adam did not save him and thus can save no one.

Up to this time, Governor Henry Vane had supported Mrs Hutchinson and was as alarmed as she was at the work's righteousness of the colony. Instead of openly supporting her, however, Vane decided to throw in the towel, believing that Massachusetts was going the way of all flesh and God's judgement would come on it. He thus resigned his governorship on 7 December, 1636 and planned to return to England, but his church persuaded him to stay. Vane said that unless the ministers changed for the better, there was no hope for the colony. John Wilson protested strongly at this 'insult' and he and other ministers looked for a scapegoat. Cotton was now feeling most uncomfortable and feared he would be the very scapegoat that Wilson had in mind. Thus, whilst the Covenant of Works debate was going on, cold-footed Cotton spotted Wheelwright in his congregation and asked him to preach in his stead. Wheelwright, thinking he was on friendly territory, preached down works' righteousness and up sovereign grace.

'LEGALISTS' VERSUS 'ANTINOMIANS'

As a result of this sermon, Winthrop accused Wheelwright of having a faulty view of sanctification and of thus being an Antinomian. Now the entire colony seemed to be composed of either 'Legalists' of the Winthrop kind or 'Antinomians' of the Wheelwright kind. The courts were on the side of the 'legalists' and, in the Land of Liberty, imposed a £40 fine on those who anyone claimed taught of the existence of a Covenant of Works. Those who criticised this spiritual downgrading, as John Pratt did, were thrown into prison. It was election time and the theological Legalist-Antinomian debate became the major election issue. Winthrop replaced Vane but the 'Antinomian' Boston honour-guard refused to escort such a 'legalist'. Now the two parties would not serve in any public capacity together nor even sit at the same table to eat. Massachusetts had become two separate religious colonies.

Throughout this time, Anne Hutchinson had carried on her daily work in the Lord as midwife, nurse, advisor and counsellor amongst the women. Winthrop, now Governor again, began to show his power. At first he merely fined his adversaries but then he gained authority from the court to banish all 'Antinomians', i.e. mostly those who would not vote for him. Wheelwright was banished early and Cotton escaped the same fate by answering sixteen accusations drawn up against him in a way that nobody

understood, so he was left in peace. Now one hardly dare whisper the words 'free grace' in Massachusetts. Then Winthrop, supported by a growing number of vigilantes, argued that as the trouble started with Anne Hutchinson, a most unproven hypothesis, she was to blame for the bother. All those who sympathised with her were 'visited' and bullied into handing over their weapons as if they feared Mrs Hutchinson would lead an armed revolution. Mrs Hutchinson was put on trial at the Newtown Court.

A TRIAL OF MOCKERY

The official records of the trial are almost unbelievable. They show a governor who has thrown all objectivity and justice to the four winds and, calling Mrs Hutchinson seditious, believes he can prove that she is seditious because she denies that she is seditious. Anne Hutchinson's calm wit, logic, abilities in debate and deep knowledge of the Scriptures must have made Winthrop feel quite helpless. This made him angry as he felt it was beneath his dignity to be put right by a woman. Mrs Hutchinson calmly told him that if he asked a woman a question and she answered civilly, he could not then tell her that she had no right to answer because of her womanhood. After complaining that Mrs Hutchinson entertained visitors and discussed religion with them, the Puritan lady asked Winthrop if he did the same. The governor confessed he did, whereupon Mrs Hutchinson asked him why he condemned her for behaving as he himself behaved. Winthrop argued that though he could instruct men, she could not. Mrs Hutchinson, however, denied that she had ever taught a man's class, which was the entire truth. On asking Mrs Hutchinson what her authority was for witnessing to the women of the colony, she replied Titus 2:3-5, 'The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; that they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands that the word of God be not blasphemed.' Sadly, Winthrop had Scriptural knowledge but could not apply it scripturally. Immediately he told Mrs Hutchinson that her rule was contradicted by 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, 'Let your women keep silent in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak: but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for woman to speak in the church.' In vain did Mrs Hutchinson strive to tell Winthrop that he was misapplying the text. He refused to be taught by a woman. With this misapplied policy, Winthrop cut off Mrs Hutchinson's entire defence.

Winthrop and his growing number of supporters had found no definite claims against Mrs Hutchinson until they ordered her to attend a private hearing with the ministers to discuss her faith. The ministers, on the whole, took on a most 'we are holier than thou' line and strove to outwit Mrs Hutchinson with metaphysical speculations about the whereabouts of the body at death and the difference between soul and spirit. The accusers believed that the Holy Spirit works externally on the believer, prompting

but not initiating faith. When they heard that Mrs Hutchinson believed that it was the inner working of the Spirit that initiated faith and an interest in Christ, they called their entirely orthodox sister a 'Familists'. i.e. one who claims revelation outside of and apart from the Word of God. Yet, Mrs Hutchinson had backed up her claims by the Scriptures which authorised them! Mrs Hutchinson also maintained that there was no eternal element in man that vouchsafed his immortality but for God's plan for that man and Christ's eternal union with His elect. She also maintained that the believer's body that died corruptible cannot be the same as the resurrection body as that is incorruptible. One must take into consideration the transforming work of Christ in that body. On all these issues, the ministers disagreed with Mrs Hutchinson which led them to conclusions, later outlined before the Boston Church, which had nothing whatsoever to do with their premise. Though the hearing was in private, at the court trial, the ministers gave as evidence the conclusions they had drawn through misunderstanding Mrs Hutchinson and these were accepted by the court as facts which spoke against her. Mrs Hutchinson was given a prison sentence to be followed by banishment. As no formal grounds were given, Mrs Hutchinson said, 'I desire to know wherefore I am banished?' To this, Winthrop answered, 'Say no more, the court knows wherefore and is satisfied.'

THE EXCOMMUNICATION

After the formal sentence, John Cotton's Church met to discuss Anne Hutchinson's excommunication. It was decided that as only a majority vote would be valid, those who backed Mrs Hutchinson should be condemned by Cotton and judged as not fit to speak on behalf of the Church. Cotton thus condemned and excluded in the strongest of language this dissenting element so that 'the whole Church' could be unanimous. Mrs Hutchinson and the tiny circle of friends now left, had been the only ones to live out the doctrines that Cotton had taught. This fact had led to Cotton being criticised by his fellow ministers. Cotton, obviously wanting to save his own skin, now distanced himself fully from Mrs Hutchinson. However, his U-turn had shattered his integrity and his moral stability. Cotton became crude, dirty-minded and guilty of base slander. William Hutchinson had testified to the loving devotion of his wife to him and that he saw her as a jewel in Christ's crown. Cotton admitted that he knew of no immoral action on her part. Nevertheless, he accused Mrs Hutchinson of holding beliefs which were tantamount to promoting 'the common use of all women' by men and 'the filthy Sinne of the Communitie of Woemen and all promiscuus and filthy cominge togeather of men and Woemen without Distinction or Relation of Marriage.' Now these accusations had never been the subject of complaints against Mrs Hutchinson by her Church or any of the opposing ministers and were not even hinted at during the court case. They were merely the fallen fantasy of a leading minister of the gospel who felt that his career would be ruined unless he was rid of the woman who had expected him to practise what he preached. This was John Cotton's declaration of spiritual bankruptcy and in excommunicating Mrs Hutchinson, he was, in reality, excommunicating himself.

Mrs Hutchinson went bravely into banishment, accompanied by her faithful husband and most of her family. They suffered many hardships and persecutions until 1643 when Anne Hutchinson was murdered during an Indian attack. With her died the American dream of true liberty of faith.

Other authorities give Francis as his first name.

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