

Anne Hutchinson: Religious Rebel

Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643) brought her family from England to live in the Massachusetts Bay Colony just four years after its founding in 1630. She had been a devoted follower for Reverend John Cotton, who had established a colony of Calvinists after being forced to leave England. Far from seeking religious freedom, the Puritans came to the "New World" to establish a place where they could practice and enforce their strict Calvinist teachings. Hutchinson came to play a major role in a serious religious debate in the early colony.

The Massachusetts Bay Colony was a religious community where there was no separation of church and state. The leaders of the church were in complete control of everything: religion, law, and politics. Their interpretation of the Bible was the only one allowed.

Anne Hutchinson was a practiced healer and midwife, mother of twelve children, self-educated and well respected in the community. Her religious beliefs were strong and fervent. Like many other women in the community, she began inviting friends to her home during the week to discuss the sermon they had heard in church the previous Sunday. Anne went one step further when she dared to interpret biblical teachings herself and to criticize the narrow perspectives and beliefs of the church officials. That was when the trouble began.

Theological questions were taken very seriously in the colony at that time. The common belief was that good works, such as following the Bible and the Ten Commandments, were the only way to salvation. This belief, called the "Covenant of Works," required people to follow official church teachings and laws to the letter. It also required everyone to be absolutely loyal to the church officials themselves. Anne, on the other hand, believed in the "Covenant of Grace," which held that a person could be saved only by feeling God's grace within and by obeying God rather than the Church. This was a far more personal connection to God.

On March 15, 1638, Hutchinson was brought to trial on charges of heresy against the church. Even John Cotton, the teacher she had so admired and followed, turned against her. He told other women in the community not to listen to her, "...for you see she is but a woman and many unsound and dangerous principals are held by her." The trial ended with Hutchinson being forced to leave the church and the colony. She and her family were joined by many of her followers in Rhode Island where they began the colony of Portsmouth.

The persecution and trial of Anne Hutchinson was an important historical event because it was one of the first attempts by anyone in the colonies to stand up to the strict doctrines of the church. She struck a blow for true religious freedom and, ultimately, for the separation of church and state. While some argue that she held her beliefs as firmly as the Puritan fathers held theirs and was not truly in favor of religious freedom, the right to dissent was advanced by her actions. Freedom of religion and the separation of religious matters from the laws of government have since become basic principles of American life.

1. What does the idea of separation of church and state mean?
2. What was different about the meetings Anne held in her home compared to meetings held by other women?
3. Why did church officials bring Anne to trial, and what happened as a result of the trial?
4. Do you think Anne Hutchinson was expelled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony because she was a woman? Would a man have been expelled for doing what she did? Why or why not?
5. Why is the trial of Anne Hutchinson considered important by historians?