

DEFIANT DAUGHTERS

Christian Women
of Conscience

MARCY HEIDISH



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Introduction

Heroines are commanding: “good girls,” whose heads are often haloed, or “bad girls,” whose heads are often expendable. Spiritual heroines are especially commanding, as they give their all for a world unseen: the flammable field of faith.

Often dismissed or discounted, they take costly stands, make tough choices—and pay the price. Some have names we recognize; many more do not. We crave to know these spiritual trailblazers so that we might, in some way, emulate their courage, their character, and their conscience-driven lives.

What motivates these “defiant daughters,” who face many and varied dilemmas? What causes them to surrender security, reputation, comfort and sometimes survival itself—all to answer the call of God and principle? The answers are highly individual, of course, but the portraits on these pages offer clues, conjectures, and some conclusions.

Here is a selection of lives caught in spiritual dilemma, crisis, or conflict. We have much to learn from these passionate women of principle, heirs to the women of the Gospels.

It has always been more difficult for women to break out of conventional expectations and claim their own place in the larger scheme of things. And yet, many did, against long odds. It is notable that such women, in spiritual contexts, have often been seen as mental cases, misfits, menaces, menopausal harpies, or all of the above. Misunderstood or not, they have persevered. In this book, specific spiritual lives are examined for their “tipping points”: a

question of conscience is faced, weighed, and decided. “Every life includes pivotal moments, roads taken or not,” writes Bill Shore. “...Quiet, often solitary acts of conscience have echoes louder than the original sound.”

Such choices are exemplified by the cross itself, the center of Christian faith for two thousand years. Women were faithful followers of Jesus, all the way to Calvary and beyond. Women discovered the empty tomb of the resurrection. Women, as apostles, deacons, and converts, turned their homes into the earliest Christian churches, even during times of severe persecution by the state.

The Christian tradition, then, is deeply enriched by those “defiant daughters” who lived the Gospel to a radical, risk-taking degree. In the words of Ita Ford, a Maryknoll sister martyred in El Salvador, “We keep plugging along here, because life is threatened by other evils worse than death—hatred, vengeance, and selfishness.” This sentiment is expressed in word and deed by a variety of figures in this book.

Defiant Daughters is divided into three categories, which may overlap in some cases. Here is a mix of mystics and martyrs, reformers and rebels, protectors and preachers. Many live in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed. Some give up lives of comfort for a sense of calling; others bear burdens rather than betray comrades. They are Catholic, Protestant, Quaker, and Orthodox. Whatever their differences, they are all in close communion with God—and they all face some sort of spiritual dilemma.

The “dilemma factor” has been this book’s guiding criterion. It is inevitable that many figures could not be included within this book’s scope. Among them are medieval laywomen called “Beguines,” Scottish Covenanters, notable abbesses such as Hildegard of Bingen, remarkable missionaries such as Gladys Aylward and Amy Carmichael, and certain canonized saints, such as Catherine

of Siena. They are numerous, as well as awe-inspiring, these “defiant daughters” of many countries, many cultures, and all races.

The prologue presents a keynote figure, Laura Lopez of Guazapa, whose cry of “*adelante!*” (“forward”) expresses the passing of a spiritual torch through conscientious choice. The epilogue brings us into the present with Immaculée Ilibagiza of Rwanda, who made a different kind of choice, which she continues to live out. Between these two women are many others.

Their lives range over one thousand eight hundred years and some ten nations. Those classed as “daring” tend to rebel against existing constraints or put themselves in harm’s way. Women categorized as “determined” stand fast, whether that means refusal to inform on friends or give way to adversaries. Heroines in the “dedication” section are strongly motivated by love of God and the oppressed. As noted, there is some fluidity among the classifications. Corrie ten Boom exemplifies this: she is determined, indeed, but extraordinary in her daring to forgive her oppressors. In each case, it is the dominant note that determines the placement.

The stories of these women need not be read in order of appearance. It might be helpful to read the profiles in community with others, for discussion or educational purposes. What would we have done in similar situations? How far would we go for a principle? When does a stand for conscience cost too much? In most cases, there are no easy answers—but there are questions following each chapter to spark conversation and reflection. My source material and ideas for further reading are cited in a list of sources and acknowledgments at the book’s conclusion.

However the book is used, it is hoped that these profiles will draw on inspiration from the past to give us inspiration for today and tomorrow.



Anne Hutchinson of Boston 1591-1643



The trial of Anne Hutchinson

In her own day some called her a saint. Some went so far as to call her a “Satan” and a “New England Jezebel.” Today, however, she is hailed as a pioneer of American religious liberty. In a belated tribute, a statue of her, cast in bronze, stands before the Statehouse of Massachusetts, overlooking historic Boston Common.

Who was the controversial woman depicted in the statue? Why did she have to pay so dearly for her religious convictions? Anne Hutchinson, a Puritan convert, was first and foremost, the devoted matriarch of a huge family. In addition, she became Boston's beloved midwife—and a unique, unofficial lay minister to the town's women. Soon after she began holding meetings for them, men were also drawn to the Hutchinsons' commodious home.

Directly across the street, Governor John Winthrop kept a wary eye on these unsanctioned gatherings—and on their charismatic hostess, whom he grudgingly dubbed “a masterpiece of woman's wit.” At first, he could do little more than observe. After all, Anne's husband was one of the most prosperous and prominent newcomers to Boston in 1634.

I like to think of Anne Hutchinson on those evenings when her home shone with light and brimmed with hospitality. Hanging from the great room's ceiling, the long candle-bar would cast an amber glow across the benches set out for the Hutchinsons' guests. The talk in this house was illuminating as well. Here, ideas about spirituality and Scripture could be freely exchanged.

Anne, the daughter of an English minister, was well-educated and knowledgeable about biblical studies. Somehow, through thirteen pregnancies, she had maintained her life of devotional prayer and study. Certainly, this was a rare set of roles for a woman of Anne's era. Perhaps it irritated Winthrop that she managed them all so well.

At her large house on School Street, all were welcome. Winthrop would have noticed the profusion of lanterns bobbing toward the Hutchinson home. There, Anne encouraged extemporaneous prayer, Bible study, and discussion of Sunday sermons.

Boston's women blessed Mistress Hutchinson for these evenings; many goodwives could not attend Sabbath meetings due to child-bearing and child rearing. Recent emigrants, they sought spiritual

guidance for their life in this raw new town so far from home. Anne Hutchinson, an emigrant herself, addressed their special spiritual needs.

Even the “common people,” unchurched laborers, loved her. She had a way of communicating even the most complex theology. It was perhaps unfortunate that one such worker’s enthusiasm was overheard.

“If you’d go along with me tonight,” he told a comrade, “I’ll bring you to a woman that teaches better Gospel than any of your black-coats at a university, a woman of another spirit entirely....” However, the ministers and magistrates remained suspicious.

They remembered a delay in Anne’s acceptance by Boston Church over a doctrinal disagreement—a small point, soon resolved, but the clergy had not forgotten. They would wait. They would watch. They would listen for any sign of unorthodoxy from this popular Mistress Hutchinson and sent spies into her meetings.

It is impossible to underestimate the power of these men. The Massachusetts Bay Colony was not chartered as a bastion of religious tolerance. Instead, the colony was formed as a new “Promised Land” for the Puritan elect and elite. Boston was to be a “city on a hill” where its sober values were strictly enforced. Any deviation from the norm would, and did, invite harsh punishment.

For speaking publicly against the ministers, one Phillip Ratcliffe was fined, whipped, and banished, after both his ears were cut off. Two other dissenters were censured by the courts and sentenced to stand in public with their tongues held in cleft sticks. Such personal examples made no small impact on Boston’s citizens.

Anne Hutchinson would have heard about these incidents. Even so, she insisted on her right to speak in private, in her own home, and merely raised matters of interpretation. When Anne could not see a text as a minister did, she was not afraid of open discussion or

commentary. Her theology had a more liberal cast than was common in Boston. Anne emphasized God's mercy and grace rather than inexhaustible divine wrath. An excessive fear of damnation plagued many of the women and this, too, grieved Anne.

Perhaps as a clergyman's daughter, raised in an atmosphere of religious debate, she recognized the importance of scriptural understanding. Certainly, Anne Hutchinson believed in liberties we take for granted today. She did not believe that ministers should wield unquestioned power over their listeners. "It was never in my heart to slight any man," she later said in her own defense, "But only that man should be kept in his own place and not set in the room of God."

More radical still, for Anne's time, was her conviction that God's presence could be felt directly by any believer. The clergy were not necessary to mediate the worshiper's experience of divine grace. She was truly the daughter of a defiant religious era.

For about two years, Anne Hutchinson opened her home weekly for prayer and discussion. Her husband continued to prosper; her family continued to grow. In 1636, she gave birth to her fourteenth child, a son christened Zuriel. The large and lively Hutchinson clan must have evoked a good deal of admiration—and, no doubt, a certain amount of envy. It was only a matter of time before Anne would be questioned by the ministers, few of whom commanded Anne's popularity.

First, the ministers stringently criticized Mistress Hutchinson's "unauthorized" meetings. The initial reason for their opposition was "concern for the faithful," who might be "confused" about doctrinal points.

Anne, undeterred, continued to hold her meetings. The pressure on her increased. The clergy reminded Anne of the Pauline text stating that women in Corinth should keep silent in church.

Hutchinson noted that she spoke in her own home and countered with other texts from Galatians and Titus, allowing older women to instruct the younger.

Meanwhile, Anne's own family began to divide over the issue of her meetings. Soon, they knew, further action would be taken. Will Hutchinson remained loyal and supportive of his wife. But Anne's oldest daughter, ironically named Faith, expressed anger over the increasingly tense situation. Other voices were raised at the long dining table in the house on School Street. And so Anne Hutchinson approached a crisis of conscience. The Massachusetts Synod was meeting in Cambridge. If it banned her meetings, would she comply—or defy them?

It is highly unlikely that Anne would have undertaken defiance without careful thought. She was not only the daughter of a minister—she was the daughter of a minister silenced by his own Anglican church for his opinions. Anne would have experienced the effects of defiance on her own household. She admired her father and must have watched him struggle with his decision. Then she lived through that decision's aftermath. Perhaps that was hard on her family; perhaps, however, it was harder still when her father was in a state of anguished indecision.

Anne herself was the devoted parent of many children. Clearly, her family was important to her, and she had given much of her time to nurturing her brood. If she took a stand for conscience, she knew, her family would feel the repercussions. Still, Anne had seen her father's distress when he tried to go against his conscience. Perhaps he had spoken of this with her, his eldest child, whom he had personally educated. Francis Marbury had taught his daughter how to plumb the Scriptures, how to study, and how to think. In the end, he had chosen integrity of belief and faithfulness to conscience, despite the predictable consequences.

Her father must have been on Anne Hutchinson's mind as she wrestled with her own choices. When the Synod banned her meetings, her situation was ironically similar to her father's dilemma. In the historical novel *Witnesses*, I tried to imagine Anne's struggle. I envisioned her thinking aloud with her friend, one hot summer night in her Boston home.

"Where is that line, Nell?" this imagined Anne says, "Where? Where does it become selfishness to stand on principle at all costs? Where is that place, that tiny place, where fidelity to conscience turns into arrogance? How shall I weigh this, having no experience of sainthood, no extraordinary powers to help me....?"

The only "extraordinary power" she could turn to was God. Everything we know about her life places God at its center. Her decision must have been made in the course of prayerful consideration. Her husband would not give her a command or make the decision for her. As a man of his era, Will Hutchinson gave his wife the extraordinary liberty of making her own choice in her own way.

The matter was between her and God—and we know her ultimate decision. Despite the objections of her daughter, Anne Hutchinson continued to hold her meetings, defying the order of the Massachusetts Synod. She well understood the inevitable consequences of her stand for the principles of religious liberty and freedom of speech.

In the autumn of 1637, three and a half years after her arrival in Boston, Anne was arrested and tried on the charge of "sedition." She had disobeyed her elders and, according to them, had spread "abominable" teachings throughout the community, especially among the women. These teachings, in fact, were referred to as a "contagion." Anne Hutchinson's civil trial, held in the meetinghouse, must have been a major event. Everyone would have crowded into the barn-like building or peered in through its windows.

Before her neighbors, friends, and enemies, then, Hutchinson was relentlessly interrogated. I imagine her, a lone female figure, standing before a row of grim-faced magistrates garbed in iron-gray. She was defendant and defender, adroitly using her wit for long debates with her accusers.

The outcome of the proceedings, however, was never really in question. One woman could not be permitted to best a bench of magistrates, no matter how sound her arguments were. In addition, she was accused of endangering the stability of the new colony by voicing and creating differences of opinion—rights so fiercely guarded by the United States Constitution a century and a half later. Finally, Anne Hutchinson turned on the biased court itself.

According to John Winthrop's transcript of the proceedings, the defendant's voice rang out: "You have no power over my body, neither can you do me any harm," she said. "I fear none but the great Jehovah, which hath foretold me of these things, and I do verily believe he will deliver me out of your hands...." Her fiery words must have caused a shocked silence and then a stir among the onlookers, who could not have expected such an outspoken stance, especially from a woman.

The magistrates' response to Anne's speech was brutal. One by one, they attacked, calling her a heretic and a tool of Satan, with "the guile of a Jesuit"—a great slur, indeed, from the Puritans. "You have stepped out of your place," snapped one minister. "You have rather been a husband than a wife, a preacher than a hearer, and a magistrate than a subject." At last, the sentence was pronounced. "You are banished out of our jurisdictions and shall be held in prison until the court shall send you away."

Throughout the winter of 1637–38, Anne Hutchinson was locked in the frigid attic of Thomas Weld, minister of Roxbury.

Will Hutchinson rode out into the wilderness, seeking new land for the family beyond the colony. At forty-six, ill and weakened by her fifteenth pregnancy, Hutchinson was given little in the way of comfort. While imprisoned, Anne did receive some visits from family and friends; she also endured many visits from members of the clergy, trying to force a recantation. Some sources state that, in her weakened state, Anne did sign some form of recantation while she waited to be set free.

In the spring of 1638, Boston Church took one further action to damage Anne Hutchinson's self-esteem and reputation. Immediately after her release from Weld's attic, Hutchinson was subjected to an ecclesiastical trial in the meeting house. This time, the assembled ministers of the colony, from Salem to Ipswich, were the judges and jury.

Among them was John Cotton, once the Hutchinsons' minister in Alford, Lincolnshire, and Anne's mentor. He, too, joined his peers in their stand against his former protégé. Did Anne truly recant and repent? she was asked. What, precisely, did she believe now? "I believe what I have always believed," Anne Hutchinson declared. "My judgment has not altered." Any recantation she may have made was now nullified.

Pastor Wilson made the final pronouncement: "I think we are bound upon this ground to remove her from us by excommunication, seeing she does prevaricate in her words." He then began the solemn pronouncement of excommunication over her: "Forasmuch as you, Mistress Hutchinson, have highly transgressed and offended and troubled the church with your errors and have drawn always many a poor soul..."

Anne stood up before the pulpit as he continued:

"I do cast you out and deliver you up to Satan and account you from this time forth to be a heathen and a publican. I command

you in the name of Jesus Christ to withdraw yourself as a leper from this congregation.”

Anne Hutchinson turned and regarded the whole congregation, its magistrates, and ministers. “The Lord does not judge as man judges,” she spoke out. “It is better to be cast out of the church than to deny Christ.” She walked up the aisle, accompanied only by her friend, Mary Dyer, and together they stepped through the open doors and out into the sunlight.

After a hazardous journey, Anne and her younger children joined Will Hutchinson in Rhode Island. Soon after the family was reunited, Anne suffered a difficult late-term miscarriage. This event was reported from the pulpit of Boston Church; the miscarriage was interpreted as a sign of divine judgment against the banished heretic and a vindication of her excommunication.

In time, Anne Hutchinson recovered from her physical trials. With her husband, she co-founded Portsmouth, Rhode Island, known for its religious tolerance. William Hutchinson was elected governor of the colony until his death in 1642. His widow, fearing the long reach of her enemies in Massachusetts, moved her family into Dutch territory, near what is now Eastchester, New York. There, in August 1643, Indians massacred the Hutchinson family.

In Boston Church, this massacre was interpreted as yet another sign of God’s wrathful judgment. Centuries passed before a statue was placed before the Statehouse honoring Anne Hutchinson’s conscientious stand for religious liberty in the formative years of America.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How would you define Anne Hutchinson's example?
2. What sustained her more than anything?
3. Was she motivated by faith, conscience—or ego?
Could she have been motivated by all three?
4. When does personal courage put others at risk?
5. What do you think of Anne's choice: family or principle?
6. Do you think she was "driven" or "called?"
Could she have been both?
7. What can we learn about the cost of discipleship
from Anne Hutchinson?
8. Do we need Hutchinson's kind of commitment today?
9. Would you stand against your community for a principle?
10. Where is "the moment of truth" for this heroine?



About the Author

Marcy Heidish is an award-winning author of nine other books, including the acclaimed novel *A Woman Called Moses*, which was made into a television movie starring Cicely Tyson. In addition to *Defiant Daughters*, Heidish has published six novels and three nonfiction books, plus many short pieces.

She has also taught creative writing at Georgetown University, the George Washington University, and Fordham University.

In addition, she has been a committed volunteer in homeless shelters, a hospital, a hospice, a prison, on a hot line, and at the Lighthouse for the Blind. She also participates in a program that allows her to mentor recently incarcerated women.

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