

Book Review

Early New England: A Covenanted Society. By David A. Weir. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. xviii, 460 pp. Paper, \$34.00, ISBN 0-8028-1352-6.)

The history of Puritan New England has continuously attracted many fine scholars. 1 Among them clearly is David A. Weir, whose book is the most detailed and ambitious analysis of the formation of all the surviving covenants in all the New England colonies from 1620 to 1708, or from the Mayflower Compact to the Saybrook Platform, the most important confessional document in New England, which marked a significant step toward Presbyterianism. The author claims that "the content of early New England church and civil covenants reflected a counterpoint of unity and diversity over the seventeenth century" (pp. 3–4). And by exploring thousands of town and church histories, this study is probably—and rightly so—the last word on this important subject. No small achievement for a historical study.

In accordance with the book's central theme, the author analyzes "the covenant 2 texts that emerged from the formation of civil and religious institutions on a local and colonial level in early New England," describes the "series of changes [that] occurred" in these texts "during the period of 1620 to 1708," and these specifically in terms of "the relationship between religion, religious institution, and the civil magistracy" (pp. 1–2). The first chapter explains in a very small space the religious transformation in England that led to the Puritan migration to America. The second one deals with the colonial charters of New England, examining them "as the backdrop to the local civil covenants" (p. 26) and defining them as "formal legal covenants" (p. 74). Chapter 3 examines civil covenants—among them the well-known Mayflower Compact of 1620. Their importance, claims the author, is crucial to the history of New England: "While the sphere of New England religion was shattered by 1700, as evidenced by its ecclesiastical diversity, its civil covenants indicate that a much larger degree of civil and political uniformity had emerged by 1700" (p. 233). The last three chapters deal with church, or ecclesiastical, covenants. These were not contracts, explains the author, but "reflected a relationship of grace with God and not a contractual arrangement whereby human beings could bargain with God" (p. 171).

Such a fine study, however, has its own problems and limitations. The rise of 3 covenant making in late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century Europe signified the decline of traditional religious, social, and political obligations. Hence the urge to create new ones based on a covenant relation with God. Unfortunately, the European background to the formation of the covenants is not discussed in the book, and thus the reader may get the mistaken impression that New England Puritans created them. Church and civil covenants, however, were not invented in New England but rather belonged to the rich tradition of covenant making in Protestant and Puritan England, as described in Patrick Collinson's classic studies, *Godly People* (1983) and *The Religion of Protestants* (1982). Further, despite the book's preoccupation with social and civil covenants, there is no serious discussion of the theocratic government that Puritans in both England and New England attempted to establish on the basis of the utmost converging of the civil and the religious covenant.

Despite these reservations, Weir's impressive scholarship has produced an essential book for students of early New England, especially those who continue to wrestle with the issues of the covenants. 4

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