

## “PREPARATION FOR SALVATION” IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY NEW ENGLAND

**I**N THE second half of the seventeenth century the clerical and political leaders of the Puritan colonies in New England became convinced that their societies were steadily degenerating. In 1679 the ministers met at Boston in a formal Synod, drew up a systematic survey of the evils, and launched a vigorous campaign to incite the people to recovery.<sup>1</sup>

Whether the colonies had in fact so woefully fallen off need not concern us. The point is that the ministers, and in all probability most of the people, believed that the case was desperate, and the staggering tabulation of sins, crimes, and offenses published by the Synod in 1679 furnished sufficient documentation. What does concern us is that the leaders of these Calvinist communities, believing that they were faced with destruction, called upon their people to reform, although not a man among them yet entertained any serious doubts about the doctrine of divine determinism. They maintained the absolute sovereignty of God and the utter depravity of man; they held that whatever came to pass in this world was ordained by providence, and they attributed the success of the founders not to human abilities or to physical opportunities, but solely to God, who had furnished the abilities and brought about the opportunities by His providential care. Therefore the question was bound to present itself to divines and statesmen of the second generation, could any merely human effort arrest the moral decline? Was not it a fact in the irresistible plan of God, just as the triumph of the first generation had been decreed in heaven? If God was withholding His grace, could the people be expected to become saints, and if He was depriving them even of “restraining grace,” could they possibly avoid yielding to every temptation? And if God, even while rendering them powerless to resist, was at the same time augmenting the temptations, what point could there be in summoning the society to repent?

Any other nation, having such absolute control over all the agencies for molding public opinion, might have gone directly to work. But a Puritan state, anxious though it was to excite the populace, could not merely preach repentance and expect the mass of men to obey. Before it could call upon them to reform, it had first to prove that there were legitimate provisions in the accepted theory of the community for assuming that they could if they would. Was there any authorization in the Word

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (New York, 1893), pp. 427 ff.