

### **Reasonable**

On the contrary, it is seen to be a reasonable and wise thing. It was for that reason that the 16th century Reformer, Martin Bucer, argued that the Communion should be used not just once but at least four times a year. Evidently he saw we need to be prompted to remember sin - any and all sin - is serious.

### **Submission**

Another feature of the Communion in the Prayer Book is that from start to finish it has a supplicatory character. The people of God are taught to bow low before God.

They are reminded of his greatness and holiness, and of their weakness and proneness to wander. They see they are totally dependent upon him. They submit to him recognising only he can preserve them from error; only he can deliver from the eternal misery those under God's curse shall endure.

The Communion, as well as reminding us of the seriousness of sin, also points us to Christ. He alone can rescue us. He we are to trust and he we are to obey.

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# Cursed

How strange. That is what many think. They just cannot see why anyone wants to read words that speak of damnation. They also think a person odd if he thinks he will be damned.

We can turn to the opening section of John Bunyan's famous book, *Pilgrim's Progress*, to illustrate the point. It begins with a man dressed in rags in distress. He cries out, 'What shall I do?' What troubled him? Why was he in anguish? Because he was burdened. Burdened by what? The fear of ruin and torment.

What caused him to be afraid? A book, and especially what he read in

it. He saw he was guilty; guilty, that is, of putting his wants first. It told him his choices were wrong.

The book also told him he could do nothing to make things better. There was no way for him to get rid of his guilt. He knew he deserved damnation and would experience it if he was not forgiven.

All this left his family amazed. They thought he needed a rest. A good sleep, they said, would make him feel better. But the next day they found him worse. His sense of guilt was greater. He was convinced he would be punished and rejected on the day of judgment.

Most people do not think that way. They are more interested in finding ways to be happy. The idea that one should read a book that speaks of curses is far from their minds.

### **Communion**

We do not hear the word communion often. It

comes from a Latin word meaning to threaten. Thus the Communion found toward the end of the Book of Common Prayer is an act of worship in which the threat of punishment is pronounced to those who disobey. The key word is cursed. It is repeated ten times.

At the heart of the Communion one part of the Bible is especially quoted - *Deuteronomy* chapter 27. It is not difficult to see why. There we find recorded the curses announced on Mount Ebal to the people of God in the days of Moses. There are no less than twelve, although only seven are recited in the Communion (*verses 15-19 & 24f*). Other parts of the Bible from which curses are drawn are *Leviticus, Psalms, Proverbs, Jeremiah, Matthew, 1 Corinthians* and *Galatians*.

### **Why?**

The question is asked. Why have an act of worship in which people are faced with the threat of God's curse?

It is a good question. There are two important matters to consider.

### **God's people**

*First, the original curses were spoken to the people of Israel.* Curses were pronounced from Mount Ebal and blessings from Mount Gerizim. These two mounts were opposite each other across the valley of Shechem in an area of Israel to the west of the River Jordan.

The people of God, once in the land of promise, were to be reminded of his wonderful promise of blessing. He delights to do good to his people. However, as well as being reminded of God's goodness and kindness, his people also need to remember what a terrible thing it is to turn away from him. Those who disobey find themselves under his curse. Sin, any sin, is serious.

What is sin? It is lawlessness. It is disobedience. It is defiance of God's revealed

will. His commandments are given for our good. They are to be honoured and obeyed. God's children delight to do that. But it is a fearful thing to defy God. Why? To disobey is to incur his displeasure. It is to come under his curse.

*Secondly, a Communion was used for two reasons.* Both can be found in the introduction.

### **Restore**

*First, those who err need to be restored.* Thus, by means of a timely reminder of what displeases God, the person who strays from God's ways is called to return. He is urged to have a change of mind about the way he lives. He is taught to put right what is wrong.

### **Remain**

*Secondly, those who truly love God need to be encouraged to remain faithful.* To them the sentences of God's curse

are a reminder. They point to an essential feature of a Christian. A mark of being born again, of having new life in Christ, is obedience.

### **Response**

Believers do not obey to earn God's favour. That is impossible. It is always his free gift. They obey because they are thankful. They are deeply grateful that in Christ Jesus God rescues them from the eternal damnation and hell they know they deserve. *Gratitude is a spontaneous response to grace.* Those who are grateful keep God's commands. Obedience is a defining mark of their love, praise and thanksgiving to him (*see John 14.15*).

It may seem strange to some for there to be readings, prayers and praise (*Psalms 51*) that focus upon sin and God's curse. Once one sees why it is done - to call the disobedient to change, and to warn the obedient to remain faithful - then it no longer seems odd.