

Analysis: Prayer for people who don't want it

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To paraphrase the old King James: The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous Anglican apparently availeth much. Consternation, at least.

That's what's been going on in the United Kingdom the past few days: Richard Dawkins, a University of Oxford professor and one of the world's most famous atheists, suffered a stroke. The Church of England issued a prayer via Twitter for Dawkins and his family. All hell broke loose.

The Church's official Twitter account tweeted, "Prayers for Prof Dawkins and his family."

Commenters—apparently sympathetic to Dawkins' atheism—accused the Church of "trolling" Dawkins. Apparently, praying for someone who doesn't believe in God is just plain mean. And tweeting it to the whole world just adds insult to injury.

Tempest in a tweet-spot

"Sarcastic or ignorant?" tweeter Nikki Sinclaire responded.

"Top trolling there by C of E. Romans 12 v. 20," another reader, Murdo Fraser, added. Give Fraser props for knowing enough about the Bible to stump many Sunday school regulars. We could debate whether (a) the Church actually intended to "heap burning coals on (Dawkins') head" and (b) heaping coals is intended to bless or to curse.

The Guardian reported on the ["Twitterstorm" here](#). Religion reporter Peter

Ormerod [defended the Church here](#).

Of course, we shouldn't be surprised when offering prayer for an unbeliever creates a controversy. In our contentious world, Christians and non-Christians alike see slights where none are intended and infer insults where none are implied.

“Nothing controversial” in prayer?

Arun Arora, communications director for the Church's Archbishop Council, attempted to set the record straight. “The tweet was a prayer,” he [wrote on Tumblr](#). “Nothing controversial in that. ...

“Prayer is for everyone. Some of the Twitter reaction assumed that Christians only pray for other Christians. In fact, Christians pray for all kinds of people. They pray for their friends and families. They pray for their community.

“They pray for the government (of whatever persuasion). They pray for terrorists, kidnappers, hostage takers. They pray for criminals as well as giving thanks for saints. Poets write poetry, musicians play music, Christians pray. And they love.”

Amen to Arora. Those are strong, biblical words. Jesus commanded: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44).

Pray for “enemies”

Perhaps if more Christians followed the Church of England's lead and

prayed for our enemies—and those who act like enemies—the gospel would go forth with greater power and strength. Who knows how lives might be changed and eternity recalibrated?

This episode reminds me to wonder if Christians possess enough obedience, to say nothing of faith, to follow Jesus' command and pray for our enemies. While I cannot speak for you, I'll confess I rarely think about praying for my enemies, much less get on my knees to seek God's favor for them.

Judging by what I read and hear, however, I'd guess I'm not far outside the norm. Many Christians sound and act as if their hearts' desire is to see their enemies vanquished. If those Christians also believe in hell, isn't that attitude contrary to the gospel?

What if, as Arora claimed, Christians made a concerted effort to pray for terrorists, kidnappers, hostage takers, criminals and even the government? What if we prayed for atheists and Muslims and Hindus and even people from the "other" political party? What might happen if we asked God to secure not only their ultimate salvation, but also their present well-being? What if we asked God to make them strong and healthy and happy?

If we truly believe in prayer and in miracles, we can concur that God has the power to do all of that, in an instant.

And if God wants to take God's own time, then maybe the answer to our prayers begins in our own changed hearts. In our reformed attitudes. In our new relationships with people we previously called our enemy.