

How Not to Do Evangelism

There are effective ways to share the gospel ... and then there's Rollen Stewart's way. Don't recognize the name? You'll recognize the face:



For years, Stewart donned a rainbow wig and positioned himself at sporting events strategically behind the goalposts so television viewers would see his John 3:16 sign. Call me a short-sighted curmudgeon, but I have a few issues with Rollen's methods:

1. He looked foolish Yes, his rainbow wig got him noticed. It gained him notoriety. But it did nothing to give credibility to his message.

Rollen Stewart had originally moved to Los Angeles to be an actor. His career wasn't taking off, so to get noticed in 1977, he donned a rainbow wig and fur pants to dance on live TV at sporting events. It worked. He got noticed ... but not by any Hollywood talent brokers. But during the 1979 (or 1980) Super Bowl, Stewart was in a hotel room when he saw a Bible prophecy program on TV. Stewart found Jesus. OK, so far, so good. Stewart decided to spread the good news of Jesus. He traded in the fur for a T-shirt that read "Jesus Saves." And out came the "John 3:16" placard.

2. His message was unclear. *What's not clear about John 3:16??* Christians know the message in John 3:16, but Stewart wasn't acting goofy for Christians. Think of this from the perspective of non-Christians. They don't know what John 3:16 refers to. How many even know to look in a Bible?

The only way it might make a difference is when, say, a couple of guys are munching pizzas and watching a game. One guy asks, "John 3:16? What's up with that?" And his other friend, who is a Christian, quotes the passage for him, and hopefully, goes on to share the gospel. I hope that happened a lot more than I think.

Rollen Stewart's method assumes the viewer understands. He reminds me of a missionary I heard speak. He had served in Sri Lanka where there was another missionary who came from Germany. The German would stand on a street corner and loudly proclaim the gospel—in German. If you're unfamiliar with Sri Lanka, they speak Sinhala, not German.

If a person has no clue what you're talking about, are you really witnessing for Christ?

3. His life did not match his message. This is my biggest beef. I'd like to think he was sincere in his motives, but Rollen Stewart was a troubled man saddled with a lot of questionable theology.

One of his four wives left him because he tried to choke her. Why? She wasn't holding her John 3:16 sign correctly.

By 1991, Stewart was convinced Jesus was coming back ANY MINUTE NOW. He wanted to get the word out so he barricaded himself in a hotel room and plastered the windows with John 3:16 signs. The police showed up and had an old-fashioned stand-off because—oh, did I forget to mention? —the hotel maid being held hostage in the bathroom?

Periodically, Stewart would toss a stink bomb outside just to make sure the police were paying attention. What Stewart really wanted was for the SWAT team to come with a news crew, and with the cameras rolling, Stewart could proclaim to the world that Jesus was coming ANY MINUTE NOW.

I took several evangelism classes during my time at seminary, and I don't remember stink bombs or hostages being mentioned. Maybe I was sick that day.

If you're wondering why you haven't seen the Rainbow Man evangelizing lately at sporting events, it's because he is serving three life sentences at California's Mule Creek State Prison. We can hope the prison chaplain set him straight on a few things like sharing your faith with love and integrity and not silly or paranoid antics.

If you think I'm being harsh, you're correct. But sharing the good news of Jesus Christ does not require buffoonery. In fact, such antics can quickly distract from the life-saving message. Let's ensure our methods are not turning people away from such an important message. And let's make sure our lifestyle matches our message!

What is called for is authenticity, integrity, and a conversation.

"How, then, can they call on him they have not believed in? And how can they believe without hearing about him?" (Rom. 10:14).

A good conversation about how Christ has changed your life does not require a rainbow wig. Not even fur pants.