

## When the Message of John 3:16 is Not Clear

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:



"Oh. That guy."

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 like an idiot.** I'm not referring to the face his parents blessed him with, but his .. I don't know, maybe his OBNOXIOUS RAINBOW WIG. Sure, it got him noticed. It gained him notoriety. But it did nothing to give credibility to his message.

To be fair, Stewart didn't start out to be a ... well, I hesitate to use the word evangelist. Rollen Stewart had moved to Los Angeles to be an actor. His career wasn't taking off, so in an effort 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. Apparently, no one thought, "Hey, you know that clown who dances at NBA games in fur pants? I think he'd make a great romantic lead opposite Debra Winger."

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.

He lost the fur loincloth and kept the rainbow wig—because nothing communicates the love and grace of Christ like a colorful fake hairpiece. It's understandable to be considered a "fool for Christ" because we believe in the death and resurrection of Christ (1 Cor. 4:14), but that's a far cry from simply looking like a fool.

**2. His message was unclear.** *What's not clear about John 3:16??* Sure, Christians know the incredible 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 sets down his beer and says, "Huh? 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.

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 they don't know what you're talking about, are you really witnessing for Christ?

**3. His life did not match his message.** 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.

During the 1990 Masters Tournament, Stewart set off a remote-controlled air horn—right as Jack Nicklaus was about to swing. (I'm not sure which Bible verse Stewart had in mind with this side-splitting stunt.)

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. After hammering nails into the hotel room's door, the police showed up and we had ourselves an old-fashioned stand-off.

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 is 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 or making fun of his methods, 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. What is called for is authenticity, integrity, and a conversation. Seriously, how can someone know the message without having a conversation with a loving, authentic follower of Christ?

"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.