

# The Forgotten Words of Rainbow Man

## *John 3:1-21*

CWZepp, BWCOB, March 9, 2008

Its fourth down and three yards to go on the 17 yard line. The Redskins line up for the field goal. The snap is made, the kick is up, and the camera traces the arc of the ball through the goal posts – when what to my wondering eyes should appear but a scantily clad man sporting a rainbow colored wig and a huge sign that says simply, “John 3:16”.

Another day, another ballpark. The Orioles are playing the Yankees on national TV. A long fly ball slices just outside the foul pole, and the TV cameras cannot avoid showing that perky fellow in the loin cloth and wig proudly waving his John 3:16 sign.

If you have watched any significant amount of TV sports in the past 30 years, you have no doubt witnessed the antics of “Rockin’ Rollen Stewart”, better known to the public simply as – “Rainbow Man.” His first 15 seconds of fame came over 30 years ago during a 1977 Portland Trailblazers game, but at the height of his infamous popularity in the mid-1980s, he was traveling over 50,000 miles a year, living in his car and spending every last cent he had with the singular purpose of practicing what he called a “television ministry” by making appearances at over 100 nationally televised sporting events per year. Rainbow man also made other appearances – he appeared in a commercial for Anheuser-Busch, got paid to appear in costume at parties, and his character inspired spoofs on Saturday Night Live, St. Elsewhere, the Tonight Show, and even in the cartoon strip Peanuts. His work inspired a number of copy-cat “Rainbow Men”, and a legacy which continues to live on today.

In his efforts to spread the word of the Lord with his John 3:16 posters, Rollen became quite a pest to the TV networks, which actively worked to develop strategies to limit his exposure, and to stadium authorities, who were forced to eject him from countless stadiums. But the troubles of Rainbow Man didn’t stop there, and he proved that he could be a pest both inside and outside of a stadium. During the 1986 World Series he tried to choke his now-ex-wife after she stood in the wrong spot with her John 3:16 sign. In 1990, he was arrested at the American Music Awards after attempting to toss a stink bomb into the audience – his self-proclaimed aim being to demonstrate that “God thinks this stinks.” The following year, a warrant for his arrest was issued following four more stink bomb attacks in California, as well as a disturbance at the Master’s Golf Tournament. In 1992, he was again arrested, this time for holding a maid hostage in the Hyatt Hotel next to the Los Angeles International Airport. After a 10-hour drama that included Rollen lighting two small fires to draw attention to himself, posting several biblical placards in the windows of the hotel, taking a couple pot-shots with a pistol at jet-liners that flew by, and threatening to harm his hostage, police finally took him into custody by force. When reporters asked him why he had done it, his reply was simple: “To get the word out,” he shouted as he flashed his memorably wacky smile.

Which makes me wonder exactly what word it was that this Rainbow Man was trying to get out. Because I am fairly confident that it was not the same Word that John proclaims at the beginning of his gospel was with God and was God.

So where did Rainbow Man go wrong?

Perhaps – and this is just an educated guess – but perhaps it had something to do with the massive quantities of pot that he smoked throughout his “ministry.” But regardless of whether he was just riding a perpetual high with an intensely evangelical flare, I suspect that his error was even more basic than that. I suspect that Rainbow Man had been led to a fundamental misunderstanding of what the Gospel is all about.

In his lectures and sermons, Fred Craddock has often decried the human tendency to try to shrink the Christian faith to a manageable size, to fit it into the tiny boxes of our impoverished religious imagination. With sharp wit, he tells of people who have boiled the faith down to slogans, of those who have taken the spacious and infinite promises of God and reduced them to bumper stickers, of grinning seminary students who amble mindlessly up to the theology professor after hearing a passionate, sweat-drenched lecture on the mysterious depths of God’s grace just to say, “Hey prof, I guess it boils down to ‘God helps those who help themselves,’ right?”

But Rockin’ Rollen Stewart made a career out of doing just this. His self-styled “television ministry” consisted of an effort to promote one single verse of scripture. Perhaps he imagined that American couch potatoes would see him bouncing around with his John 3:16 sign on TV, put down their remote controls, and begin flipping through their Bibles because of his work. *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son. That whomsoever believes in him, shall not perish but have everlasting life.”* Granted, if you are going to pick only one verse of scripture on which to base your life and ministry, John 3:16 is not a bad choice. Believe in Christ – be saved. It’s that easy. That’s all you have to do. Right?

It certainly makes a nice package for evangelism at least. Such a shrink-wrapped, marketable message seems made for sharing with others. You want to go to heaven...all you gotta do is believe.

But let’s remember the context in which Jesus offered those words. We just heard the whole story read, so we know that Jesus when Jesus said these words, he was answering questions put to him by Nicodemus, a Pharisee that approached him at night with flattering words and some questions about what Jesus had been doing. Nicodemus says to Jesus, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, because no one could do the kinds of things you are doing without God’s presence.” It’s not a bad start for a Pharisee, but before Nicodemus can say anything else, Jesus jumps in and says to him, “I tell you all that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Now here I need to say a few words about the various translations of the scripture which we use today. Some of the most popular versions of verse 3 translate Jesus’ words as indicating that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born “again”. That translation was made popular by the King James Version, and has been perpetuated in many popular modern translations such as the NIV. But I am told that if we look at the Greek word that is used here, we have reason to question this translation. The Greek word translated “again” in the KJV is “another”, a word which can also mean “from

above” or “from a higher place” or “anew”, the meaning picked up in some other translations such as the New Revised Standard Version from which we read the story today.

Now when Jesus uses this word in verse 3, Nicodemus apparently thinks of another in terms of being born again, because he asks Jesus how anyone could be born a second time, whether they could return to the mother’s womb. But Jesus’ response indicates that Nicodemus was, in fact, *misunderstanding* him. So he corrects him, tells him to turn up his hearing aid and listen, saying, “Truly I tell you all, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of both water and spirit.” He goes on to say that what is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit, so he shouldn’t be surprised when he is told that you need to be born from above. Hey, Nick – he didn’t mean “again”. He meant “from above.”

Will Willimon makes the observation that it is interesting when people talk about this passage today, making it the very hallmark of the Christian faith, the one and only necessary path to the kingdom of God, that they continue to speak of it the way Nicodemus misunderstood it rather than the way Jesus depicted it. They say “You must be born again.” Like a second time or something. Some people even celebrate two birthdays. But, Jesus meant, “You must be born *from above*. Flesh is flesh, but spirit is spirit. What God wants with your heart is not a new one, but a renovated one – a heart redone, expanded and made larger. A heart that traces its existence not to its origins in the flesh, but to its foundations in the spirit.

Its quite likely that we eventually see this kind of change worked in Nicodemus later in John’s gospel. But it doesn’t happen overnight. We don’t see the Nicodemus born *another* in this passage. You see, it is significant that this conversation between Nicodemus occurs at night. John doesn’t tell us why Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, but we can probably assume that there is symbolic significance to the night-time visit with Jesus, because John plays on the theme of light and darkness throughout his gospel, with the prologue introducing Jesus as the light of the world who shines in the darkness. So for Nicodemus to come to Jesus at night just two chapters later likely indicates that he was both literally and figuratively “in the dark” about Jesus.

But Nicodemus would show his face twice more in the course of John’s story. In chapter 7, we again see Nicodemus, but this time he is not questioning Jesus, but rather his associates among the chief priests and his fellow Pharisees, apparently in defense of Jesus. Towards the end of the gospel, Nicodemus shows his face once more – this time to help Joseph of Arimathea prepare and bury the dead body of Jesus. Here John makes a point to reintroduce Nicodemus as the one who “had at first come to Jesus by night.” The implication is that this is no longer the case. John seems to imply that Nicodemus is no longer in the dark about Jesus. The light that shines in the darkness had worked a transformation in Nicodemus, and we can probably assume that in the intervening time, he had discovered at least part of what it meant to be born from above.

I am not so sure we can say the same thing about our friend Rainbow Man. While I do not wish to debate the authenticity of his alleged conversion and born again experience, I think it is safe to say that he did not demonstrate the fruit of the spirit that we would

expect to see from one born from above. It seems to me that he forgot a few things, or more likely most things about the gospel. He might have had the words of John 3:16 down pat, but he seemed to have forgotten that Jesus said many other words. He remembered the words about believing and having eternal life, but he forgot the words Jesus said about doing “unto the least of these.” He remembered the words about being born again, but he forgot the words where Jesus said blessed are the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers. He remembered John 3:16, but unlike Nicodemus, he seemed content to let his story with Jesus stop there. And I dare that those words of Jesus that he was content to forget might have come in handy as he was choking his wife on national TV or holding a hotel maid hostage to his religious fanaticism or taking pot shots at airplanes or smoking pot in his car.

Like many of us, I think Rainbow Man fell victim to the belief that you can reduce the Christian faith to a slogan. I don't care what verse you put on a sign...you can't put the essence of the Christian faith into a motto. At its very best, such a saying might be a catalyst, a spring board from which to launch into the depths of faith. And it is in the depths of faith in which the church is called to exist. That is why it is so painful for us when people like Rockin' Rollen Stewart make a mockery of the faith. Because at their worst a slogan like Rainbow Man's John 3:16 becomes a mark of shame on the communities which actually practice the faith he claimed. They end up pointing not to Christ, but to a fanatic in a wig. And just as it is tempting to judge Islam by the fanatics intent on very public displays in God's name, so too the church is often judged on the basis of its vocal fanatics.

But we who have waded into the deep waters of faith know better. We know that salvation comes not in some shrink-wrapped slogan, whether printed on poster board or on the pages of a Bible. We know that salvation is found not in a once and done assent to belief, but rather in a life renewed by the power of the Spirit, a heart renovated from the top down, a life that traces its origins from above.

We are called to live and to share the forgotten words of Rainbow Man – that which makes the Christian faith real and true and worthwhile. To not just believe in Jesus, but to follow in his footsteps and continue his work – peacefully, simply, together. As the Brethren like to say it's more than just believing...it is another way of living.

So maybe we should all go get some poster board, make signs, and tell everyone about this other way of living.

What do you think?