

Final Story

Sam Carlson said his inspiration comes from wanting to share the truth in love so people can know God in an interview on Thursday.

“I want other people to know the love of Christ, to experience knowing God and finding eternal life in salvation from their sins and the consequences of their sins,” Carlson said.

Carlson is originally from Minnesota, where he grew up attending a non-denominational church. He viewed himself as a Christian and believed in the Bible but was not “born again.”

“I remember accepting Jesus into my heart as a young child but not understanding really what that meant or not having been convicted of being a sinner,” Carlson said.

Throughout high school, he was constantly chasing popularity, sports, good grades and things that did not satisfy his heart. He questioned where these things got him because they left him feeling empty.

“I ended up achieving all those things, but they didn’t give me what I needed,” Carlson said.

“They aren’t bad in and of themselves but there’s more to life than success, sports, school and even friendships.”

Carlson is currently a senior at Iowa State University studying industrial engineering. He decided to come to Iowa State after his older brother attended.

The transition to college was a huge turning point in Carlson’s faith journey. Coming into college, he was struggling with different personal things.

This was the first time Carlson seriously thought about what he was going to do with his life and was filled with anxiety.

At one point, his anxiety got so bad that he debated dropping out. Ultimately, he decided to not drop out and began attending a Bible study, where he realized he did not know as much about Jesus as he originally thought.

After opening up to a friend about what he was going through, he “lovingly pushed [Carlson] to press into God.”

This friend challenged Carlson to read the book of Acts in the Bible.

After reading Acts, he had a thought he believes to have been from God that challenged him to live like a Christian to be freed from the anxiety in his life. This led to him reading and praying more.

Carlson had an intimate experience with God after praying for Him to take away his anxiety. Carlson said it only took a day for his prayer to be answered and to experience the love and joy of God.

“The realities of Heaven and Hell came alive of like ‘wow, people really need Jesus,’” Carlson said.

Since this experience his freshman year, Carlson has engaged in conversation with other students.

Originally, Carlson joined a ministry based in the Memorial Union called the Navigators. They are a Christian group that speak to people in the Memorial Union food court about their religious beliefs and share the truth of Jesus. Carlson is not associated with this group anymore.

Carlson noted an impactful and challenging interaction he had shortly after “being saved” where he was talking to a group of Muslims about what they believed.

“[I was] challenged and remember being like ‘wow, these people are so sincere, yet I think they’re lost, and they don’t have the truth,’” Carlson said. “[I remember] that being hard to wrestle with.”

He believes that God has led others to him or him to others to have religious discussions. Carlson noted times when he walked away from someone and then went back after feeling a tug at his heart to go back.

Carlson said that he learns from each discussion and hopes the people he talks with also learn.

“It’s the mission of all Christians, not just missionaries, to evangelize and spread the news of Jesus,” Caroline Meis, a senior in biochemistry and future campus missionary with FOCUS, said.

Meis attended a Bible study led by Carlson her freshman year at Iowa State University.

Carlson attended a Thursday Night Liturgy mass at St. Thomas Aquinas parish, after which he debated parishioners about their beliefs.

The feedback was mixed. People appreciate what he is doing but believe a different approach would foster more meaningful discourse.

“I do greatly admire his boldness and his strength in being able to so openly talk about it and ask people about it,” Carolyn, a junior in architecture, said. “As much as he defends his own beliefs, I think he shows a lot of genuine curiosity in why other people believe what they believe.”

“I think if you approach it with the right attitude, it can definitely be a good way to open up conversations,” Zach Gignac, the director of worship at St. Thomas Aquinas parish, said.

Gignac addressed the issues associated with intentionality behind religious debates and potential issues that could be the result.

“Often, not regarding this individual necessarily...it can be done in a way that’s more ‘I want to tell you about this thing, even though I start by asking you what you believe, I don’t really care because I want to tell you what I believe is right’ and that approach often closes the door to deeper discussion, openness, real conversation or, to some level, meaningful friendship,” Gignac said.

Many people feel that Carlson has ulterior motives when he enters conversations, but Carlson said he hopes to have a “pure heart” when approaching religious discussions.

“Both sides [can] see it, on some level, as more of a project than getting to know a person and sharing the love of God with them first,” Gignac said.

In the St. Thomas Aquinas college community, Carlson is known as “The Pentecostal.” This came as a result of him talking about Pentecost as part of the core of his religious beliefs.

Carlson rejected being Pentecostal but does not mind the nickname.

“I think people might have a warped perception,” Carlson said. “What they think of as Pentecostal might not really be what it would mean for me.”

Gignac was surprised to find out that the nickname that students at St. Thomas Aquinas parish named Carlson was not coined by Carlson nor is it his actual denomination.

“I think we first need to recognize the full humanity of the person rather than the category that they fall into, especially if they don’t refer to themselves in that way,” Gignac said.

He discussed the pitfalls that could come as a result of having nicknames for people that they have engaged in debate with because it can detract from their true identity.

“[Nicknaming someone] plays into some of those other dynamics like labeling someone as a novelty or attraction rather than here’s an individual, child of God who I happen to know from this scenario and he’s got some curious things to offer for consideration,” Gignac said.

Instead of being Pentecostal, he said he calls himself a “Bible believing, born again Christian.”

He says that he became “born again” after being born of the spirit the first semester he was at college.

“If we are spiritually dead, we need God to give us spiritual life [because] we can’t produce it ourselves,” Carlson said.

Carlson is not currently directly tied to a ministry but did say he used to be part of the Navigators and attended Deeper Life Bible Church, among other churches. He also participates in the “Bible Talk” discussions that happen at the Free Speech Zone in front of Parks Library.