

Christian Vazquez, an aerospace engineering graduate student at the University of Central Florida, visits the Kennedy Space Center in Titusville, Florida.

# Translating Facts Into Faith

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**CRU STORYLINES**

*words by* **RACHEL STREICH**

*photos by* **GUY GERRARD**

*published in* **MAY 2019**

Christian Vazquez pauses from his research in a windowless lab. Sandwich in one hand and pen in the other, his eyes focus through half-rim glasses on some recreational reading: a textbook to learn biblical Greek from Spanish. He decided to study biblical Greek on a whim.

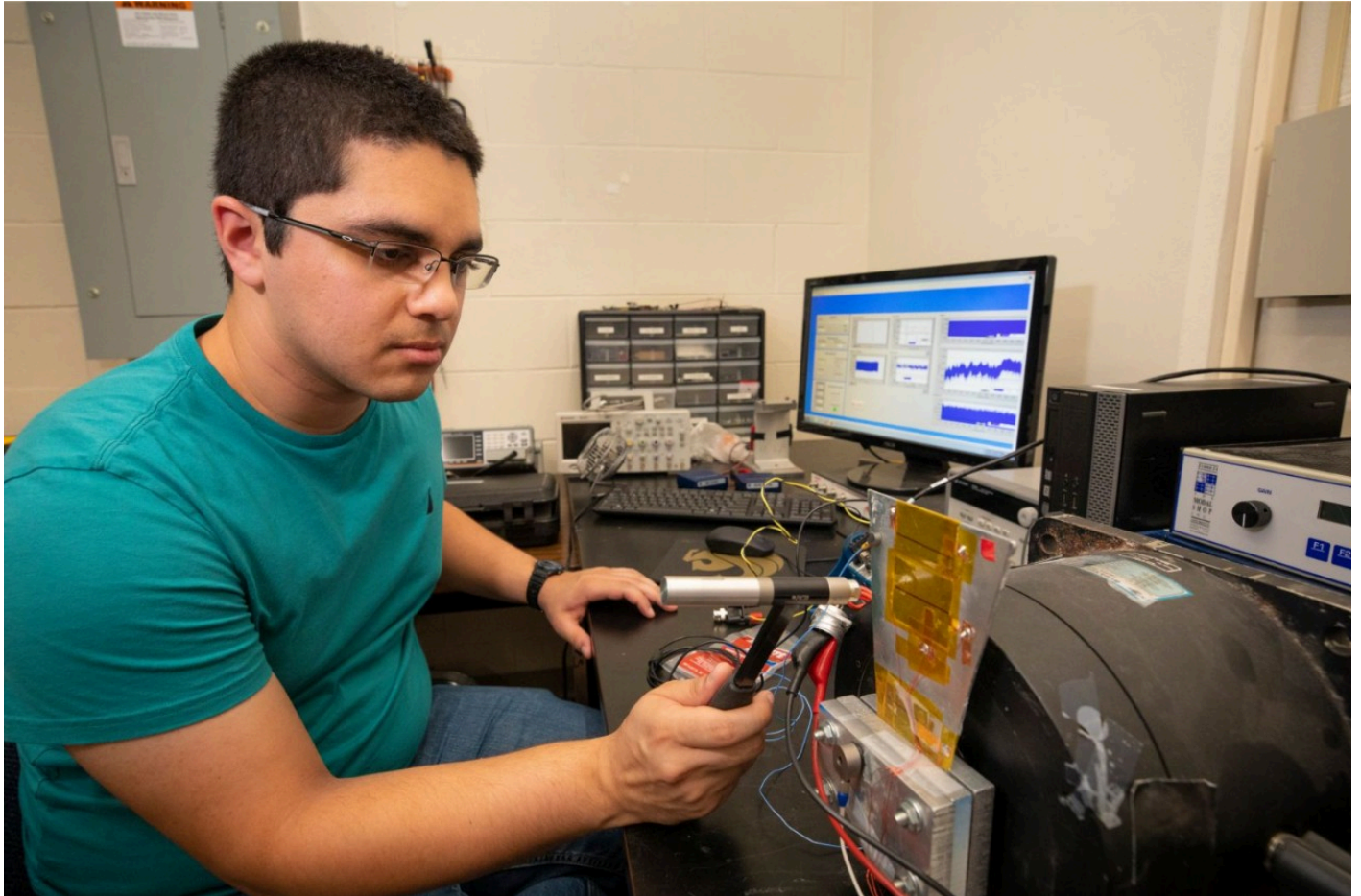
The rest of the day, he and other engineering students at the University of Central Florida in Orlando work intently around computers. Another student, David\*, passes Christian and asks, “What’s that?”

As Christian explains that he’s using the book to learn biblical Greek, David responds, “Oh, I thought the Bible was written in Latin.”

A clarification about Old and New Testament languages turns into a discussion on faith. The two talk about God’s standard of perfection, and Christian mentions the need of a sacrifice to pay for our sins. This concept seems foreign to David, who believes a god exists and everyone should do what makes them happy. After conversing about belief, Christian and David promptly return to work.

Christian studies aerospace engineering at UCF in pursuit of his Ph.D. Space exploration fascinates him, so he decided to embark on the study of building and designing aircraft and spacecraft. As an avid learner, Christian seeks

to transfer knowledge into action, welcoming God into every realm of his life.



In the engineering lab, Christian captures vibration characteristics of a turbine blade by striking it with an impact hammer. Data in the form of waves then appears on his computer, helping him determine the natural frequencies that could ultimately bend the blade and threaten its structural integrity.



Christian walks near the UCF library with Tomas Rodriguez (right), the vice president of Destino®, the Hispanic ministry of Cru®, at UCF. In 2016, they helped Destino become a registered student organization on campus.

## Truth illuminated

Christian learned about devotion to God from his parents. When he was 3, his family moved from Puerto Rico to Orlando and began attending a Spanish-speaking church.

He grew to wonder, despite this foundation, whether knowledge and belief opposed each other. *Is any of this*

*objectively true?* he wondered. People in his life seemed to just “trust God,” which Christian didn’t understand.

But, as a sophomore in high school, Christian made a discovery. He listened to biology teacher Jeremy Absher speak to more than 100 students at a [Cru® High School](#) conference. His message on faith and reason intrigued Christian.

“When we trust God, we’re not taking a blind leap of faith,” Christian remembers Absher saying. “Rather, we’re taking a step into the light.”

Christian felt compelled to ask a question as Absher was leaving. Christian and another student walked down a road with him in the evening.

“What if alien life existed and they were messing with us? What if none of this is real? Would extraterrestrial life disprove this faith?” Christian asked. The teacher took time to answer. He told Christian that if aliens existed, then they had to have been created.

Absher’s talk and their conversation sparked Christian’s desire to learn more. After the conference, he began to study apologetics, philosophy and history.

“I can prove this,” Christian realized in what he calls his “aha” faith moment. “Jesus doesn’t just exist in my mind and heart. He objectively exists. I exist because of Him.”



Students enter and leave the UCF Student Union, which stands at the center of campus.



The Student Union boardwalk cuts through swampy forest land.

## Launching in one sphere

Now, seven years after his conversation with Absher, Christian continues to pursue truth as he tests vibration frequencies of turbine blades, attends classes and takes part in activities with Destino®, the Hispanic ministry of Cru. Christian serves at the president of Destino at UCF.

Christian seeks to keep academics and spirituality melded.

“They’re not separate spheres,” he says. He strives to remember that all of life is a part of faith.

Christian spends nearly 20 hours each week working on his computer in a lab with white walls marred by scuffed gray spots. The dated brown-carpeted room makes space for innovation and intellectual pursuits. Christian's advisor, Professor Jeff Kauffman, oversees the lab and hosts weekly research meetings there with students.

Kauffman's office library includes a plethora of textbooks and other books, such as *The Reason for God* by Tim Keller and *A Praying Life* by Paul Miller. Christian asked him about faith during his office hours and learned that Kauffman is also a follower of Christ. Kauffman meets with other Christian professors at UCF through [Faculty Commons®](#), a ministry of Cru to college professors.

Kauffman cares not only for Christian's academic growth but also for his spiritual growth. He encouraged Christian to attend a ministry for graduate students at UCF. In their field, Christian recognizes that talking to other graduate students about life beyond research often proves difficult. Work and dedication tend to be their main focus. Their research dominates their conversations.





Christian crosses paths with a friend at the entrance of the Student Union, where a mural depicts Pegasus, a symbol in UCF's logo.



Christian has worked for nearly two years with his advisor, Jeff Kauffman, associate professor in UCF's Department of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering.



Students walk around UCF, where the student population hails from all 50 states and 146 countries.



More than 9,000 graduate students study at UCF, and the institution produces more graduates who work in aerospace and defense companies than any other U.S. university.

## Campus dynamics

At one of the largest universities in the U.S., with 68,000 students, different languages mix into the conversational noise on a trek around UCF's palm tree-dotted campus. Students from all over the world study in the engineering department.

Christian sees the value of connections with others who share his love of knowledge. Students use Facebook to

organize gatherings to study together outside the lab.

On Wednesday afternoons, to help build these kinds of connections, Christian leaves the “engineering la-la land,” as he calls it, to attend the weekly Destino Bible study.



Christian starts the Wednesday Destino® meeting by explaining a game.



Students Tatyana Canon, Julie Foroosh and Tomas Rodriguez play an ice-breaker game to begin the Destino® weekly gathering, guessing the person on their sticky notes.

The Destino *familia* gathers in a small classroom where they share food, conversation and spiritual insight. The meeting technically begins at 4 p.m., but 17 students stream in and chat in lively conversation until around 4:20.

Backpacks and a skateboard litter the floor as the students take their seats and pass around cookies and platanitos (plantain chips). After a game, Christian walks to the front of the room to share announcements. He welcomes the

group and lightheartedly gives information about Destino events.

A staff member with Destino, Jared, leads the study on prayer and evangelism while sitting at a desk facing the rows of students and other staff members. They read scripture passages in English, then Spanish, on phones and in Bibles.







Tatyana participates in the fun during Destino®'s opening activity.



Christian gives announcements about Destino® events and activities at the beginning of the meeting.



Jose Orozco listens intently during the Destino® meeting.

When Jared asks where the students learned spiritual practices, a few talk about seeing faith in their families. Throughout the meeting, they chime in about their lives and struggles. One student gives an “Amen” and snaps her fingers in agreement after the words, “We can always be connected [to God].” Another student draws on a tablet while listening, and she responds to the discussion about prayer from the back of the room.

“We’re focused on the now, what we’re doing, but it’s making that connection with God even in the things that

we do every day,” she says.

The gathering ends with goodbye hugs. A handful of students head to the Student Union for dinner, where they discuss topics ranging from the *Dragon Ball Z* television show to navigating dating relationships as Christians.



Christian welcomes a new visitor, Jesus Evangelista (left), to Destino® and gets his contact information.



After the Destino® meeting, some of the students gather for dinner at the Student Union.

Within Destino, Christian has found a meaningful community.

“It’s a place where I can learn more about my Hispanic and my Puerto Rican culture ... I don’t get the judgment of, ‘you’re not Hispanic enough.’ They’re just happy to see me.”

Christian, at times, senses that some Latinos feel he’s too comfortable with Anglo culture. But he finds a welcoming small-group environment in Destino, which reaches out to

the 26 percent of the UCF student population that is Hispanic.



Christian walks to the Student Union with his discipler, Kenny Dyches. Kenny leads the Destino® team at UCF.



Christian and Kenny study the Bible during a discipleship meeting on campus.

Christian meets students with Kenny Dyches, the Destino leader at UCF. They begin gospel conversations while people are studying or hanging out in the Student Union. Fast-paced pop music blasts through speakers, and the bass reverberates as students eat or work on laptops.

When Kenny and Christian first started meeting, Christian wanted to move past his potential apathy and inauthenticity — to not just know the truth about Jesus but to also care more deeply for others. He desires to connect with others and help them feel cared for in conversations,

rather than just hear him give an argument for Christianity. And he keeps in mind the “small world theory,” that each of us are connected to every person in the world by at most six relationships.



A student hones his trombone skills outside the UCF library.



Skateboarders whizz past each other on campus.

When having conversations with people about Jesus, Christian says, “They’re not a statistic. This is someone who has interests, dislikes, fears, insecurities, sins, doubts, but also joy and some hope in them. My fear is that I might regurgitate some argument and not really meet their need.”

Kenny has witnessed Christian’s spiritual development in the last few years of meeting once a week.

“He’s grown a lot in his ability to get to know [people] and give them a place to have spiritual conversations that



are safe,” Kenny says.

Christian can sometimes understand the appeal of keeping worlds separate when he speaks with fellow students. Their academic and spiritual lives don’t intermix. While some are willing to take a break from schoolwork and discuss general spiritual topics, they might not care to reflect on what they personally believe.

In conversations with students, Christian senses that many go about their routines unmindful of God, pushing spiritual matters to the side. With compassion, he strives to introduce new thoughts and spiritual topics.

“In this day and age where things have become postmodern, it is possible that there is knowledge, and we can find Christ through that knowledge,” Christian says. “I want to look for the truth. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, I also want to share with the rest of society this truth.”



Christian relaxes with his dog, Hershey, at home, where he lives with his parents, not far from UCF.



Christian's annual pass to Kennedy Space Center, one of his favorite places, allows him to see such exhibits as the space shuttle Atlantis.

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*\*Name changed for security purposes.*

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