

From a Dream to Reality: O. P. Kretzmann's Vision for Valparaiso University

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Abstract

In his 1940 inaugural address, Valparaiso University President O.P. Kretzmann spoke of his vision for a Christian university. During his 28-year tenure at Valpo, he further defined his vision in speeches and articles. Kretzmann argued a Christian university (a) seeks truth for all, (b) is in the van of progress, (c) is the meeting of Jerusalem and Athens, (d) places Christ at its center, and (e) is focused on students. This article examines these five themes and compares Kretzmann's vision to actual events and initiatives during his tenure.

Keywords

Christian university, Valparaiso University, Lutheran, University president

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As O. P. Kretzmann delivered his inaugural address as Valparaiso University (Valpo) president in October 1940, the university and the nation faced grim outlooks. The university had survived the Great Depression but was financially weak and had an enrollment of less than 400 students. The country faced likely war. In his speech, Kretzmann (1940/1999) acknowledged the threats from Europe saying, “We have come now to the winter of the modern world, and there are few signs of spring” (p. 109). Kretzmann saw two battles— “one fought with bombs and guns” and another concerning the hearts and souls of people (p. 113). Kretzmann said it was the university’s duty to throw itself into the second battle by seeking and transmitting truth. “Let the University set an ideal, a vision, a dream, if you please, for itself—and I am confident that there are still enough men and women in visible Christendom who will see the glory of the dream and, with their prayers and support, help to make it a reality” (Kretzmann, 1940/1999, p. 114).

Kretzmann would go on to serve as president for 28 years. He repeatedly spoke of his vision for a Christian university and worked to turn his vision into reality. Five themes emerge from his inaugural address and later speeches and articles. Kretzmann argued a Christian university (a) seeks truth for all, (b) is in the van of progress, (c) is the meeting of Jerusalem and Athens, (d) places Christ at its center, and (e) is focused on students. This article, after providing background on Valpo and Kretzmann, examines these five themes and compares Kretzmann’s vision to actual events and initiatives during his tenure.

Background

This section provides historical context about Valparaiso University before Kretzmann became president. The section also discusses Kretzmann’s background as a well-regarded Lutheran preacher. These oratory skills were on display during his speeches outlining his vision for Valpo.

Valparaiso University

Valparaiso Male and Female College was founded in 1859 by a group of Methodists. Over the next several decades, the institution changed ownership, leadership, and names multiple times (Baepler, 2001). By the 1920s, Valparaiso University was on the verge of bankruptcy and put up for sale. After a deal between the university’s owners and the Ku Klux Klan failed to materialize, a group of Lutheran laity and clergy purchased the nearly shuttered university in June 1925 (Baepler, 2001).

Over the first fifteen years of the “Lutheran Valpo,” two men served as president. Although there were achievements like accreditation and faculty recruitment, the university struggled financially during the Great Depression (Baepler, 2001). Enrollment did not reach 500 students. In 1940, the board of directors searched for a new president. After their first choice turned down the offer (Directors hear decision, 1940), the board selected Kretzmann (Elected president by board, 1940).

O. P. Kretzmann

Kretzmann was an ordained Lutheran minister and the executive secretary of the Walther League, a youth organization. Among Lutheran churches, Kretzmann was known as an excellent preacher. He showed off his oratory skills early in his tenure as president as he delivered his inaugural address titled “The Destiny of a Christian University in the Modern World.” Many in attendance recalled that the atmosphere of the small campus changed overnight (Baepler, 2017). However, as Baepler (2017) points out,

There was little in the new president’s background that prepared him for the kind of collegiate administration that could realize the vision he had set forth. He was a brilliant opportunist who could take advantage of the situations as they developed. (p. 88)

The student newspaper, *The Torch*, hinted at the uncertainty about Kretzmann. While acknowledging his youth and vigor, the student newspaper wrote before his inaugural, “And the whole campus wonders how the dynamic young president will affect Lutheran Valpo’s second fifteen years” (Inauguration of new president, 1940).

Kretzmann did not stop stating his vision for Christian higher education after his inaugural address. Most notably, at the urging of colleagues, he wrote an article titled “The Idea of the University” that summarized his understanding of Christian higher education. Prepared for Valpo’s centennial in 1959, the article was published in *The Christian Scholar* in 1960. In the article he reflected on his twenty-year-old inaugural address. Although “it was an occasion for freeswinging [sic] idealism,” Kretzmann stood by his ideas (p. 312). With the article, he wished to further emphasize the unique characteristics of a Christian university. He recalled how the major concern at the time of his inaugural was the war in Europe and how he saw two battles—one fought with bombs and one concerning the minds and souls of men. He said he underestimated that second battle, which is really an ongoing war. “Our modern wasteland is more thorny and unready for the conquest than I had imagined” (p. 313). As Kretzmann worked to turn his vision into a reality at Valpo, he would find the conquest challenging and thorny.

Truth-Seeking for All

The first theme from Kretzmann’s inaugural address is truth-seeking for all. Kretzmann wanted Valpo to search for and transmit truth to all people. However, this vision faced challenges as the nation and campus struggled through the Civil Rights Era.

Vision

In the inaugural address, Kretzmann (1940/1999) defined a university as “a voluntary association of free men and women in a community which is dedicated to a two-fold task: the search for Truth and the transmission of Truth, free and unbroken, to those who are born later in time” (p. 110). He went on to say it is the “first and supreme requirement” that those in the university know truth, love truth, and search for it (p. 110). The search for truth should be made “with radical sincerity, intellectual honesty, and a deep reverence for even its smallest and faintest gleam” (p. 111). He also wished for a devotion to truth to be passed on to future generations.

The truth being sought is a universal truth. Kretzmann emphasized the university must “cling to the reality of universal Truth” (Kretzmann, 1940/1999, p. 111). Kretzmann dismissed the notion of relativism, calling it a modern heresy. Instead of relativism, the university should affirm “an order of absolute Truth, of ethical goodness, and of absolute social justice” (p. 111). Baepler (2017) argues the use of “social justice” was bold. It signaled an uncommon vision for higher education and showed a desire for dealing with controversial social reforms.

Related to social justice, Kretzmann said that truth “must be one and the same for all races and all nations” (Kretzmann, 1940/1999, p. 111). He argued truth should not be confined to a certain race or nation. At the same time, Kretzmann linked truth to the individual. He said the university should recognize the dignity and worth of each individual. Truth, and thus the university, ought to value the individual.

Reality: Civil Rights

The reality is that Valpo did not always extend its truth seeking to individuals of all races. Valpo contributed positively to the civil rights movement at the national level, but the university had its own shortcomings. In 1950, Kretzmann hosted a group of Lutheran pastors on campus for the inaugural Institute on Human Relations. The following year, the institute received national press. Within a few years, attendees formed the Lutheran Human Relations Association of America (LHRAA), which was

located on campus but had more than fifty chapters across the country. “While the LHRAA was founded as a broad civil rights group with a particular mission to the Lutheran community, it also had a direct impact” on Valpo (Baepler, 2001, p. 218). First, LHRAA provided support and encouragement for more Black students to enroll. Additionally, “the organization’s presence at Valparaiso helped define the University and kept the nation’s central social and moral problem on the agenda when much of the church and the public wanted to forget it” (Baepler, 2001, p. 218). LHRAA was involved early and actively in the civil rights struggle, and it held credible contacts across the movement. Those connections were evident in 1962, when with Kretzmann’s permission, Andrew Schulze, a professor and the executive secretary of LHRAA, joined Martin Luther King Jr. in Albany, Georgia for demonstrations supporting Black voting and school registration. Schulze and 75 other demonstrators were arrested and jailed. In response, Kretzmann sent bail money and sent a telegram of public protest to President John Kennedy (Baepler, 2017).

Despite positive efforts on civil rights issues on the national stage, Kretzmann and the university faced challenges on campus. Kretzmann “learned that civil rights issues, in which he had been a genuine leader in relation to American society at large, took on a very different shape when applied to the university community itself” (Baepler, 2001, p. 279). In 1966, a small group of Black Lutheran youth visited campus and heard racial insults from unknown persons. After learning of this incident, Kretzmann held a special convocation in the chapel, where he denounced racial insults, ordered an investigation, and repeated the university’s commitment to civil rights. But a speech was not enough for some students, including Black students. They wanted more action and created a list of racist features of campus, including the fraternities (Baepler, 2001). Kretzmann and his administration issued responses, but there is little evidence of immediate actions taken in the remaining months of Kretzmann’s presidency.

In the Van of Progress

As a Christian university seeks and transmits truth, Kretzmann (1940/1999) argued it also “must be in the van of the progress of knowledge, not behind it” (p. 112). Being in the “van of the progress of knowledge” meant not separating from society and ignoring scientific discovery. As some Lutheran church leaders rejected the theory of evolution, Valpo professors tried to encourage harmony between science and the church.

Vision

Kretzmann argued that church-related colleges had been in the van of progress earlier in the history of the United States. Kretzmann believed colonial colleges had contributed to the development of American society and that over the twentieth century church-related institutions had lost their way and forgotten their mission. He indicted Christian institutions that appealed to their supporters, families, and students in negative terms. He claimed other institutions thought they deserved support “because we do not do certain things, because we are not as other men are” (Kretzmann, 1962, p. 111). Kretzmann said other institutions were falsely claiming they could protect students from the evils of the world. In a chapel sermon in 1962, Kretzmann preached that the devil is hard at work on Christian college campuses. “You must realize that a campus like ours is a favorite stomping ground for the Evil One. You see, here he has some real enemies. Here he has real work to do” (p. 2).

Instead of an escape, a Christian university offers wisdom, understanding, and nobility.

Kretzmann argued in his inaugural address that Christian universities are unique in their offerings:

We have something to offer you which you can find nowhere else. Others may try to make men scientific; we must do that—and make them wise. Others may give men knowledge; we must give them that—and understanding. Other may try to make men useful; we must do that—and we must make them noble. (p. 112)

By being in the van of the progress of knowledge, a Christian university is in a position to offer more than other institutions. Graduates from it can be scientific, knowledgeable, and useful like their counterparts from public institutions, but they will also be wise, understanding, and noble. Concerning science, Kretzmann (1940/1999) said, “A Christian University cannot fulfill its destiny by belittling or even ignoring the impact of science upon the life and thought of man” (p. 112). He went on to say that institutions and individuals cannot simply say “no” to reality.

Reality: Evolution

The prime example of Valpo being in the “van of the progress of knowledge” is on the issue of evolution. As enrollment increased following World War II, the university worked to recruit faculty members. Many were Lutheran—often seminary graduates, returning veterans, and Valpo alumni (Baeppler, 2001). One of them was Carl Krekler, a biology professor. In 2005, Krekler recalled an incident from the 1950s:

[Kretzmann] sent me a letter he had received from a pastor complaining that I was teaching evolution and stating that his congregation would therefore no longer support the university. O.P. asked me how he should reply. Before answering I made some inquiries as to how much that congregation had contributed in the past, then suggested that O.P. tell him that he would deduct the average amount of the previous years’ contributions—zero—from my salary (para. 9).

Krekler was not alone in his thinking that evolution and faith could be in harmony. Most of the theologians and scientists on campus agreed there was no conflict between faith in God as the Creator and the theory of evolution.

As the hundredth anniversary of Charles Darwin’s book *On the Origin of Species* approached in 1959, Kretzmann felt the need to address the “nagging” issue of evolution (Baeppler, 2017). He turned to the editor of *The Cresset*, a public affairs journal founded in 1930s by Kretzmann and then moved to Valpo. The editor attempted to conclude the debate within the church by praising a recent publication by a young pastor from a well-regarded Lutheran family. The debate did not end and continues inside the Lutheran church and universities to this day.

The Meeting of Jerusalem and Athens

The third theme is that the university was the meeting of Jerusalem and Athens. Kretzmann worked to ensure this interaction occurred on Valpo’s campus through institutes that brought church leaders and professors together and through an honors college.

Vision

In his 1960 *Christian Scholar* article, Kretzmann said the university is to be the meeting of Jerusalem and Athens, or the church and world. Kretzmann claimed this relationship existed from the medieval period through the Reformation and into the eighteenth century. “The university was the free daughter of both the Church and the State, responsible to both, but even more responsible to the disciplined and essentially theological commitment involved in the search for truth” (Kretzmann, 1960, p. 314). However, this fellowship had eroded. Instead, Athens and Jerusalem were being put at odds with each other. “For several centuries there has been a determined and misguided effort to drive a wedge between the Church and university. We have been told that they are really opposed to each other, that they are always at war and that the life of one endangers the life of the other” (Kretzmann, 1960, p. 317). Kretzmann disagreed that they were inevitably at odds and believed they could complement each other. At the university, both are needed. “A valid faith cannot live at the expense of truth; and the truth will never compel the abandonment of an examined faith.” (p. 318). Kretzmann acknowledged there will be tensions. “Athens draws [teachers] toward detachment; Jerusalem demands involvement” (p. 317).

However, Kretzmann urged Jerusalem and Athens to stop “petty quarreling” and resolve conflicts with a respect for the “totality of truth” (p. 318).

While Kretzmann’s commentary on Jerusalem and Athens came later in his tenure, he did allude to these concepts and challenges in his inaugural address. “In the fulfillment of our destiny as a Christian University we shall run head-on into some of the most perplexing problems in modern thought. How can we train a generation which will be both open-minded and deeply committed? Is it possible to be highly intelligent and deeply religious?” (Kretzmann, 1960, p. 113). Although not using the language of Jerusalem and Athens, these are questions a university at the crossroads of the world and church must answer.

Reality: Institutes and Honors College

As part of being at the crossroads of Jerusalem and Athens, Kretzmann felt Valpo was called to serve the church and society by sponsoring workshops and seminars and generating and disseminating knowledge in different fields. In the 1950s, many attempts were made in fields like politics, radio, public relations, law, and drama. The university sponsored or cosponsored up to ten gatherings a year (Baeppler, 2001). Some became annual events and permanent fixtures on campus. Namely, the Institute on Human Relations organized into the LHRAA. Additionally, institutes around music and liturgy in worship developed into annual gatherings. The Institute of Liturgical Studies became “instrumental in reenergizing liturgical life through attention to theological foundations” throughout the Lutheran church (Baeppler, 2017, p. 137).

Kretzmann also conceived of the idea of an honors college. In 1966, he hired a dean for the college before it was formally established. Kretzmann said the honors college was needed to fulfill Valpo’s purpose as a university. The honors college was to be the meeting of Jerusalem and Athens, where faith and reason could work in harmony and grapple with modern issues. Kretzmann “spoke of the need to cope with the flood of new and fragmented knowledge, to promote the centrality of theology and the chapel, and to highlight the importance of social relevance” (Baeppler, 2017, p. 228).

Christ-Centered

Kretzmann believed that a university should be Christ-centered, meaning it should constantly direct students’ attention to Christ. In 1958, the Chapel of the Resurrection literally became the center of campus.

Vision

In his 1960 article, Kretzmann said the first great task of a university is to “clarify our thoughts and maintain our loyalties to the historic Christian answer to the question ‘what is Man?’” (p. 314). Everything depends on the answer to this question. The question is “at the heart of the education process” (Kretzmann, 1960, p. 314). Kretzmann goes on to explain that “Man is made by God and for God—and any answer to the problem of his origin, nature, and destiny which says less than that is irrelevant. The Biblical concept of man—created, redeemed, sanctified by the Triune God is the first essential element in the idea of a University” (p. 314). In other words, God created man to serve God. Man owes everything to God, including life and redemption.

Answering the “what is Man” question allows a Christian university to evaluate current issues. Earlier in the article he says a distinguishing characteristic of a Christian university is its “unique evaluation of the present crisis in the Western world” (Kretzmann, 1960, p. 313). This is not a surface-level or superficial evaluation of current problems. It is an understanding that the root issue is the sinfulness of men. Addressing this issue, Kretzmann argued, requires Christ. Therefore, as a Christian university responds to contemporary issues, it must be focused on Christ.

Nothing has been more disastrous for university communities than the false and artificial divorce of the life of the laboratory and the library from the life of the chapel. When all is said and done the college chapel, as the symbol of the reigning Christ, is the great center of the university's wholeness of purpose and its unique and monumental commitment to the values beyond the boundaries of our humanness (p. 316).

In other words, the center of campus should be the chapel, which symbolizes Christ as the center of all activities on the campus. This was not a new thought of Kretzmann in 1960. Before even being president, he delivered a sermon circa 1939 in which he praised the reading and hearing of the Bible at Valpo. "There the World of the God is set before the student daily in chapel exercises, and the secular studies are presented in a such a way that respect and loyalty to the World of God is upheld" (Kretzmann, n.d., p. 3).

Reality: Chapel of the Resurrection

Those chapel services Kretzmann was talking about circa 1939 were happening in a small auditorium. The building paled in comparison to the Chapel of the Resurrection, which was completed in 1958. The construction of the chapel was a major milestone in Kretzmann's tenure and the fulfilment of his vision for a Christ-centered campus. Planning for the chapel began in the early 1950s. Projecting larger enrollment and wanting a space for all students, the chapel was designed to hold 3,000 people. The final cost was \$1.6 million. The size and cost drew detractors, who claimed it was a monument to Kretzmann's ego. But for him, "the chapel symbolized the centrality of the living Christ in the University and the life of learning" (Baeppler, 2017, p. 178).

The Chapel of the Resurrection drew attention from inside and outside the campus. It became a notable and recognized place of worship in the United States, won architectural awards, and drew distinguished guests (Baeppler, 2017). More important to Kretzmann, it did become the center of campus. It became the place for weddings, funerals, convocations, and festive services.

Student-Focused

Kretzmann placed an emphasis on the experiences of students. He promised in his inaugural address that he and his administration would "always be sympathetically concerned" with students' problems and that students are "centrally important" to Valpo (p.155). However, in the later years of his tenure, some students felt these promises were not kept.

Vision

Near the end of his inaugural address, Kretzmann (1940/1999) turned his attention to the students present. He called them "the heart of the University" and commended them for their "spirit of loyalty and fellowship," saying it was one of the most remarkable things about the institution (p. 115). He said he did not value authority that is based on vertical relationships but rather in the discipline of liberty. He joined them in "impatience with all blind traditionalism; in your opposition to all sham and pretense; and in your fight against all the forces and factors which may prevent your full growth and development" (p. 116). He outlined first steps for his administration, which included the development of a social and spiritual life and personal relations between students and faculty. He said the students will be the final measure of the success or failure of the university. This success was to be based on the quality of graduates, not simply the quantity.

Reality: Interaction with Students

It is clear Kretzmann prioritized meeting and interacting with students during his tenure. This began early on and extended until his retirement. In the weeks following his inaugural, *The Torch*

announced an all-student reception with designated times for each class to ensure all students had the opportunity to meet the new president (Students Meet, 1940). This face-to-face interaction continued through his tenure. In November 1967, he “adeptly” fielded questions for an hour from students after an address to the All Student Congress. Students asked about Black power, the war in Vietnam, loco parentis, and continued campus expansion. The reporter remarked “After Dr. O.P. Kretzmann answered the last question... one thing was clear. The magic that is O.P. is still there” (Spannaus, 1967).

As stated in his inaugural address, an early priority of Kretzmann was to enhance the quality of student life. In January 1941, Kretzmann recruited Sophia “So” Heidbrink to be social director (Campus to Welcome So, 1941). Kretzmann knew her through the Walther League and hired her to create social events. She quickly became a beloved figure on campus and would later become the dean of women and then the secretary and advisor to Kretzmann (Baepler, 2017).

O. P. Kretzmann was a visible part of two aspects of student life—athletics and homecoming. He had a regular spot in the balcony for basketball games and participated in homecoming rituals (Baepler, 2001). Additionally, “Valpo Christmas” in the 1950s was marked by decorated houses and residence halls, parties, caroling, and concerts. The Christmas season was highlighted by a vespers service, held the night before the last day of classes and students went home (Baepler, 2001). Although modified, the vespers service is a tradition that remains today.

Another element Kretzmann desired was positive relationships between students and their professors. In his last year, these relationships became strained. At a 1967 event called a “bitch-in,” students complained about gaps in understanding and communication between students and faculty. According to *The Torch*, one student described a meeting with an instructor saying, “I was a student machine and he was an instructor machine” (Willie, 1967). This complaint and other complaints gave the perception that faculty-student interactions were less than positive.

Despite generally being a well-liked figure on campus, there were instances that Kretzmann and students did not see eye-to-eye. The most prominent examples are from his last years. There were growing tensions on campus, with a rise of student activism. Kretzmann in 1967 contended the university had yet to become distinctive because it was being drawn into national movements with no Christian basis. According to the article in *The Torch* (Spannaus, 1967), Kretzmann said, “We have become a ‘me too’ school.” He stated most activism at large universities was “nonsense.” He questioned the Vietnam War, but he said it was not the role of Valpo students to join the national protest movements and they should not go to Washington D.C. Instead, students ought to conduct “a quiet study of the relationship of Christian faith to Vietnam.” There were mixed reactions among students to these remarks, even if Kretzmann still had some “magic.”

Conclusion

This paper has compared Kretzmann’s vision to reality. In many cases, Kretzmann succeeded. In supporting the pursuit of Truth for all, the university and the Lutheran Human Relations Association of America made positive contributions on civil rights issues on the national stage. The Chapel of the Resurrection still serves as the center of campus and a reminder for the institution to be Christ-centered. In other aspects, reality fell short of Kretzmann’s vision; there remained racial tensions, disagreements with the student body, and unresolved disputes on evolution.

Despite these shortcomings, Kretzmann is regarded as the visionary for the university. After his death in 1975, the editors of *The Torch* wrote, “The dreamer is gone, but the dream remains – reality. His dream and faith, the faith of many others, and the will of our Lord have built the ‘impractical’ on the Valparaiso moraine [sic]” (With faith in the Lord, 1975). The tribute spoke of him as both the visionary and builder of the university. Additionally, Richard Baepler adeptly titled his biography of Kretzmann “Keeper of the Dream.”

Kretzmann’s 28 years as president overlapped the tenures of some well-known university leaders, including Clark Kerr of the University of California, Herman B Wells of Indiana University, and John

Hannah of Michigan State University. These three men have been called the visionaries and builders during the golden age of higher education (Gardner & Laskin, 2011). All oversaw the growth of their institutions in enrollment and reputation, but they also fell short. O. P. Kretzmann should be considered a peer of them. Although reality sometimes fell short of Kretzmann's vision, his dream largely became a reality.

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