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### They Only Asked Us to Remember the Poor': The Poor in the Theology of Rev. Dr. Don Davis

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**“They Only Asked Us to Remember the Poor”:  
The Poor in the Theology of Rev. Dr. Don Davis**  
Evangelical Theological Society, November 2021  
Rev. Dr. Hank Voss

*All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor,  
the very thing I had been eager to do all along.*

*Galatians 2:10*

*The plight of the urban poor today represents the greatest missionary challenge  
the church has ever faced.*

*Rev. Dr. Don Davis*

## **Introduction**

In the letter to the Galatians, we learn about a foundational event in Christian history. Paul meets with the Apostles James, Peter, and John, and is given “the right hand of fellowship.” Paul writes, “all they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along” (Gal 2:10, NIV here and throughout). Commenting on this verse, Bruce Longenecker notes, “falling within the *essentials* of the good news, *care for the poor* was thought by Paul to be a *necessary hallmark* of the corporate life of Jesus-followers who lived in conformity with the good news of the early Jesus-movement.”<sup>1</sup> Longenecker is correct; the plight of the poor is a central concern of the global Christian movement.

For over four decades, Rev. Dr. Don Davis has provided intellectual leadership and an example of best practice for evangelicals concerned with a biblically faithful response to the missional challenge of global poverty. This article briefly overviews global and North American poverty in order to better understand its challenge for equipping the next generation of church leaders. The article then provides a brief biography of Rev. Dr. Don Davis and explores two texts representative of his concern for the poor. The first text identifies five barriers North American evangelical theological educators must address if they hope to serve the poor. The second text identifies five foundational theological principles upon which theological educators can build when seeking to remember the poor. Finally, the paper concludes with three practical action steps evangelical theological educators can take to remember the poor in our diverse cultural and institutional settings.

## **I. Poverty in Its Global and North American Context**

Davis has often claimed that “the cries of the urban poor today represent the greatest missionary challenge the church has ever faced.” We begin exploring this claim by examining the state of economic poverty in its global context, then more specifically within its U.S. context.

### **A. Believers and the Missionary Challenge of Global Poverty**

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 1, emphasis added.



On October 18, 2021, the cover story of the Wall Street Journal's print edition was entitled, "As Afghan Poverty Worsens, Children Are Used to Pay Debts." The paper included a picture of Saleha, a forty-year-old mother of six who makes seventy cents a day as a housecleaner in Afghanistan. Saleha has had to borrow money to pay for food for her family, and she now has been asked to sell her three-year-old daughter, Najiba, to pay off a family

debt of \$550.<sup>2</sup>

Saleha and Najiba serve as concrete faces to represent the one billion people on earth who live on less than two dollars a day. Saleha's current reality invites us to ask several questions as theological educators: "What does the good news about Jesus mean for Saleha and her family? How should Saleha's pastor respond to this *Sitz im Leben*? Who is equipping Saleha's pastor to respond well in light of the challenging life situations faced by his congregation?"

More than seventy years ago, Howard Thurman, the spiritual mentor and pastor to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, stated the issue faced by those like Saleha in this way:

I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times that I have heard a sermon on the meaning of religion, of Christianity, to the man who stands with his back against the wall. It is urgent that my meaning be crystal clear. The masses of men live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed. What does our religion say to them? The issue is not what it counsels them to do for others whose need may be greater, but what religion offers to meet their own needs. The search for an answer to this question is perhaps the most important religious quest of modern life.<sup>3</sup>

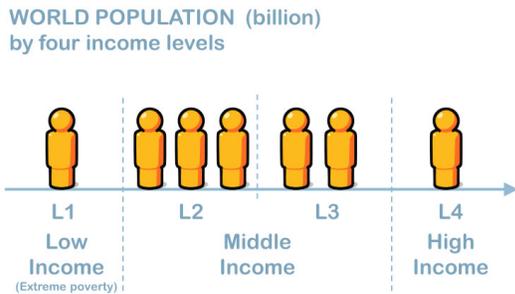
What does Christianity have to say to Saleha or the masses living with their backs against the wall? More specifically, as theological educators we must understand the relevance of Thurman's question to us. Thurman is not asking how we are training our students to care for the poor—even though this is an important and vital question. Rather he is asking, what does our theological education have to say to those like Saleha who are living with their back against the wall? Does our work as theological educators demonstrate any awareness or concern for the billion people living lives like the one Saleha faces? Before turning to Davis for answers to this question, we need to be clear on who the economically poor are in our world today.

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<sup>2</sup> Saeed Shah, "As Afghanistan Sinks Into Destitution, Some Sell Children to Survive," *Wall Street Journal*, October 16, 2021, sec. World, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-afghanistan-sinks-into-destitution-some-sell-children-to-survive-11634387501>.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Draper, ed., *Christian Mission and Poverty: Wisdom from 2,000 Years of Church Leaders*, Sacred Roots Spiritual Classics 4 (Wichita, KS: TUMI Press, 2021), 171.

## A. Understanding Global and U.S. Poverty at Four Levels

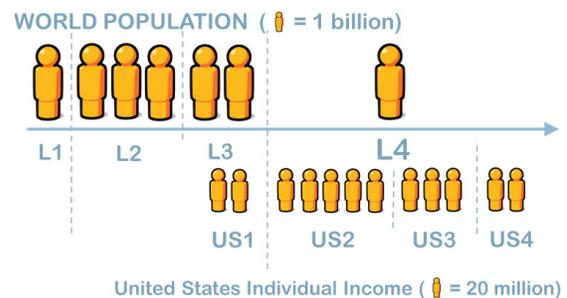


Ball State University economist Nathan Snow, in a whitepaper written for the Sacred Roots Project, has provided two snapshots helpful for understanding poverty: one snapshot relating to global poverty and then one more narrowly focused on the United States.<sup>4</sup> Snow's global snapshot describes four income levels in the world today. Level One includes roughly one billion people who live on two dollars or less a day.

Saleha and her family would fall into this Low Income category (extreme poverty).

There are an additional three billion who live at Level 2, on between four and eight dollars a day. Moving to Level 3, two billion people live on between eight and thirty-two dollars a day. Together, Levels 2 and 3 constitute the global Middle Income category. Finally, Level 4, the global High Income category, includes around one billion people living on more than thirty-two dollars a day. Nearly everyone in the United States lives within this High Income category.<sup>5</sup>

Snow's second snapshot focuses specifically on the United States. Within the U.S., roughly forty million adults over the age of 15 earn less than \$10,000 a year. This places them at U.S. Level 1, termed Low Income in comparison to other U.S. income levels. About one hundred million adults earn between \$10,000 and \$40,000 annually, and fall into U.S. Level 2, which is part of the Middle Income category. Some sixty million adults earn between \$40,000 and \$80,000, placing them at U.S. Level 3, also within the Middle Income category. Finally, some 40 million adults earn more than \$80,000 a year and are placed in the High Income category compared to other U.S. incomes.<sup>6</sup> When speaking about the "poor" in this article, we are especially referring to the forty million Americans whose annual income is less than \$10,000, U.S. Level 1, and to the global population of some four billion living on less than eight dollars a day, or less than \$3,000 annually.



## B. Christian Leaders and Theological Education among the Poor

The cries of those with their backs against the wall are loud. The good news is that the percentage of the globe's population living in extreme poverty has fallen drastically over the last two hundred years. However, the challenge remains that, numerically, the number of people living in extreme poverty is higher today than it has ever been in the history of the world. In 2016, more than two billion people were living in urban poverty, more than one billion of those

<sup>4</sup> Nathanael Snow, "Poverty in a North American Context," Sacred Roots Whitepaper (Upland, IN: Taylor University, July 1, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Snow, "Poverty in a North American Context," 3.

<sup>6</sup> Snow, "Poverty in a North American Context," 4.

in urban slums. By the year 2050, these numbers are projected to increase to six billion and over three-and-a-half billion, respectively.<sup>7</sup> Theological educators need models and mentors for thinking through how to respond to this great challenge. Davis and The Urban Ministry Institute provide one such model.

## II. Who Are Rev. Dr. Don Davis and The Urban Ministry Institute (TUMI)?

For over four decades, Rev. Dr. Don Davis has provided intellectual leadership and an example of best practice for evangelicals concerned with a biblically faithful response to this missional challenge. This section provides a brief biography of Davis and an overview of The Urban Ministry Institute, or TUMI. Davis joined World Impact, an evangelical church-planting mission, in 1975.<sup>8</sup> Davis had grown up in inner city Wichita, Kansas and had not attended college prior to beginning full time ministry with World Impact. In 1986, Davis, his wife, and three children moved to Wheaton, IL where in three years he completed a BA and an MA at Wheaton College *summa cum laude*. During this time, Davis served as an assistant pastor at an African American church, taught adjunct classes at Wheaton, and worked a number of part-time jobs to provide for his family. As a non-traditional student, and the only African American in Wheaton's graduate school, Davis built strong friendships with members of Wheaton faculty including Mark Noll, Robert Webber, and Andrew Hill.

In 1989, Davis began his PhD at the University of Iowa, and after completing coursework, he and his family returned to World Impact to found TUMI in 1995. Davis turned down a number of invitations to teach at high profile posts in academia, including an invitation to join Cornel West at Princeton.<sup>9</sup> Davis' focus on the plight of Christian leaders serving among the global poor led him to reject participating in an academy which he believed largely ignored the needs of the poor.<sup>10</sup> While Davis values the work done at academic institutions, he wanted to invest his life in providing excellent theological education to church leaders serving in communities of deep poverty.

Well over twenty thousand congregational leaders serving among the poor have participated in formal theological education through TUMI since its founding in 1995.<sup>11</sup> Davis designed a church-based seminary approach to Theological Education by Extension that has launched over 325 satellite campuses in sixteen countries since 2001.<sup>12</sup> Today over four thousand leaders a year are participating in TUMI's formalized program for leadership development called the Capstone Curriculum. Students typically take four years to complete the program while

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<sup>7</sup> Hank Voss, "Poor, Theology of The," in *Encyclopedia of Christianity in the Global South*, eds. Mark A. Lamport and George Thomas Kurian (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); Uche Anizor, Rob Price, and Hank Voss, *Evangelical Theology*, Doing Theology Series (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 47.

<sup>8</sup> This brief biography is adapted from Hank Voss, "The Priesthood of All Believers and the Public(s) Theologian: Wisdom from Rev. Dr. Don Davis, Dr. Paige Cunningham, and Rev. Dr. Robert Romero," *Christian Scholars Review* 49 (2020): 387–98.

<sup>9</sup> A conversation between Davis and West is available at, Don L. Davis, "An Interview with Cornel West," *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 12 (1993): 8–17.

<sup>10</sup> See further Terry Cornett, "Rev. Dr. Don L. Davis: A Theological Appreciation," in *Black and Human: Rediscovering King as a Resource for Black Theology and Ethics* (Wichita, KS: TUMI Press, 2015), 289.

<sup>11</sup> Over three thousand students were taking classes at TUMI satellites in July 2019. See "TUMI Stats as of July 2019," *The TUMI Network* (blog), n.d., <https://tumetwork.com/stats> (retrieved August 30, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Bob Stevenson, "New Satellites and Coordinators," *The Urban Ministry Institute Satellite Gazette*, September 2021; "TUMI Satellite Update June 2021," *TUMI Satellite Bulletin*, June 2021.

working under mentors from local churches or ministries.<sup>13</sup> With this brief introduction to Davis and TUMI, we now turn to an overview of Davis' treatment of theological education and the poor.

### III. Theological Themes in Davis' Writings on the Poor and Theological Education

Davis has addressed the importance of prioritizing the poor as a theological educator in over thirty public lectures and assorted publications. Examples of public lectures include his 2010 lecture at the University of Iowa School of Religion entitled, "A Meaningful Education: The Study of the Humanities and the Empowerment of the Poor"<sup>14</sup> and his 2004 lecture at Barclay College entitled, "Taking King Seriously: Risking Cosmic Companionship With God."<sup>15</sup> Davis' public lectures at universities between 2000 and 2010 often built on his dissertation's research into Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's theology. King provides a resource for creatively engaging challenges faced by those attempting formal theological education among the poor. Davis' lectures also reflect the influence of Howard Thurman's concern that Christian thinkers consider the *Sitz im Leben* of those living with their "backs against the wall."

Davis' emphasis on the importance of prioritizing ministry to the poor is a theme that runs across nearly all of his more than five hundred published resources.<sup>16</sup> Here we focus on two representative works in particular. First, a Sacred Roots whitepaper Davis authored in December 2018 entitled, "Barriers and Solutions for Indigenous Leadership Development: An Outline for Equipping a New Generation for Dynamic Mission Among the Poor," in which he describes "the benign leadership educational neglect of the Church toward the forgotten."<sup>17</sup> Davis then identifies five critical barriers to indigenous leadership development among the poor that evangelical theological educators will need to address if we wish to join the Apostle Paul in "remembering the poor" (Gal 2:10). Second, we look at Davis' important text, *Multiplying Laborers for the Urban Harvest: Shifting the Paradigm for Servant Leadership Education*. Davis has identified *Multiplying Laborers* as perhaps the single most important volume he has written.<sup>18</sup> It has already passed through fifteen editions, and it provides the theological and administrative vision within which the more than three hundred satellite campuses of The Urban Ministry Institute currently operate.

#### A. Five Critical Barriers Facing Evangelical Theological Educators Seeking to Remember the Poor

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<sup>13</sup> Don Davis, *For the Next Generation: The Urban Ministry Institute Mentor Manual*, 2nd ed. (Wichita, KS: TUMI Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Don Davis, "A Meaningful Education: The Study of the Humanities and the Empowerment of the Poor" (University of Iowa School of Religion Public Lecture, Iowa City, IA, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Don L. Davis, "Taking King Seriously: Risking Cosmic Companionship With God" (Martin Luther King Celebration, Barclay College, KS, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Hank Voss, "A Select Bibliography of Works by Rev. Dr. Don L. Davis," in *Black and Human: Rediscovering King as a Resource for Black Theology and Ethics*, ed. Don L. Davis (Wichita, KS: TUMI Press, 2015), 295–310.

<sup>17</sup> Don Davis, "Barriers and Solutions for Indigenous Leadership Development: An Outline for Equipping a New Generation for Dynamic Mission Among the Poor," Sacred Roots Whitepaper (Wichita, KS: Taylor University, December 8, 2018), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Don Davis, *Multiplying Laborers for the Urban Harvest: Shifting the Paradigm for Servant Leadership Education*, 15th ed. (Wichita, KS: The Urban Ministry Institute, 2013).

Davis has written and spoken on the barriers facing theological educators working among the poor in numerous settings. For example, he was a plenary speaker at the 2018 Bangkok Global Proclamation Congress which brought together several thousand theological educators working in the majority world. Rather than attempt to comprehensively synthesize Davis' lectures and writings, this essay restricts itself to Davis' "Barriers and Solutions for Indigenous Leadership Development."<sup>19</sup> In this essay, Davis primarily speaks to North American evangelical educators as he identifies five critical barriers that need to be addressed: economic class, middle-class cultural hegemony, a neglect of the local church, programing irrelevance, and training programs that fail to address missional outcomes. We briefly overview each of these barriers below.

*Class.* The first barrier identified by Davis is "Wealth-as-Requisite for Leadership Training." Much formal leadership training in North America assumes that one is wealthy or knows someone who is wealthy. The assumption of wealth means that the poor in the land—those in U.S. Levels 1 and 2 or Global Levels 1, 2, and 3—are often left without a means for formal leadership development as church leaders. In contrast to this benign neglect, every educational program at TUMI is rooted in a deep conviction that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and heirs of God's present and coming kingdom (Jas 2:5).

*Culture.* The second barrier identified by Davis is the "Invisible Middle-Class Cultural Hegemony" of most North American evangelical theological education. Middle class expectations of church leaders are taken to be the norm for all church leaders. Davis notes, "We must admit that we have willingly yet unfruitfully relied upon cultural forms and content of education which are bloated, overly abstract, expensive, and filled with culturally-distant C3 models which are too cumbersome to raise up a dynamic class of urban missionaries and ministers from among city folk."

*Church-amnesia.* Davis' third barrier is entitled "Church-in-Absentia." Here he is referring to the fact that much theological education in North America pays little attention to the local church. The local church is rarely seen as the foundation and locus for leadership training. Instead, leadership development is "given over to professionals and their institutions (whether they are Bible Colleges, Bible Institutes, seminaries, Christian Liberal Arts Colleges, missions agencies, or para-church organizations)."<sup>20</sup> In contrast, TUMI's church-based seminary model places the local church at the center of all ecclesial leadership development.

*Content.* Davis' fourth barrier is "Programming Irrelevance and Impotence." He identifies this barrier as "any unthinking devotion to abstract, professionally oriented, and hard-for-laymen-to-reproduce programs."<sup>21</sup> In contrast, he would prefer ecclesial leadership development to focus on "a more basic Biblical and historically orthodox core that can be passionately preached and reproduced."<sup>22</sup> At TUMI, the core leadership development curriculum entitled the Capstone Curriculum requires students to memorize some 160 verses, study some ten

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<sup>19</sup> For a more thorough explanation of each of these barriers, readers can review the whitepaper itself at SacredRootsMinistry.org.

<sup>20</sup> Davis, "Barriers and Solutions for Indigenous Leadership Development," 4.

<sup>21</sup> Davis, "Barriers and Solutions for Indigenous Leadership Development," 6.

<sup>22</sup> Davis, "Barriers and Solutions for Indigenous Leadership Development," 6.

thousand scriptural cross references, and be able to defend Nicene orthodoxy, the heart of what Davis calls the “Great Tradition.”<sup>23</sup>

*Commission.* Davis’ final barrier is “Non-Entrepreneurial Investment.” We could call this barrier a failure to focus on the missional nature of the church. Davis believes that all leadership development should be directed toward the commissioning of all church members as participants in the mission and ministry of the Holy Spirit in the world. Davis calls theological educators to “shift our leadership development programs and ministerial studies from an emphasis on covering intellectual ground to equipping people for ministry, whether it is how to evangelize, how to disciple, or how to plant churches among the unreached.”<sup>24</sup>

In sum, Davis’ five barriers are concerned with issues related to class, culture, church-amnesia, content, and commission. For evangelical theological educators who share these five concerns, Davis also provides five principles which to inform our response as we seek to “remember the poor.”

### **A. Five Foundational Theological Responses to the Plight of the Poor**

How then should evangelical theological educators approach the poor? Davis’ text *Multiplying Laborers* provides five foundational principles. Within *Multiplying Laborers*, there is an essay entitled “Our Distinctive: Advancing the Kingdom Among the Urban Poor.” He begins by providing a theological definition of the “poor” as “those whose need makes them desperate enough to rely on God alone,”<sup>25</sup> and then suggests four foundational responses Davis believes are necessary for evangelical theological educators concerned with the plight of the poor.<sup>26</sup> The fifth response—good stewardship of kingdom resources with a view to empowering the poor—is a repeated theme throughout *Multiplying Laborers* and concludes this section.<sup>27</sup>

Davis’ five principles for pursuing theological education among the poor are as follows. First, the poor should be treated with absolute respect. God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith (Jas 2:5), and Jesus unreservedly identified Himself with them. We should respect the poor, because God respects them.

Second, the poor should receive God’s love, compassion, and justice through God’s people. Scripture is replete with commands for God’s people to take seriously their responsibility to work for justice for the poor (e.g. Isa 58). Failure to care for the poor can be interpreted as failure to care for Christ Himself (Matt 25).

Third, the poor should hear the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus modeled a ministry of preaching the good news to the poor. Nothing is more empowering to the poor than

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<sup>23</sup> Don Davis, *Sacred Roots: A Primer on Retrieving the Great Tradition* (Wichita, KS: The Urban Ministry Institute, 2010), 14, 23, 27, 43–44.

<sup>24</sup> Davis, “Barriers and Solutions for Indigenous Leadership Development,” 7.

<sup>25</sup> Don Davis, “Our Distinctive: Advancing the Kingdom among the Urban Poor,” in *Multiplying Laborers for the Urban Harvest: Shifting the Paradigm for Servant Leadership Education*, 15th ed. (Wichita, KS: The Urban Ministry Institute, 2013), 24.

<sup>26</sup> This section adapted from Voss, “Poor, Theology of The.”

<sup>27</sup> Davis, *Multiplying Laborers for the Urban Harvest*, 18, 58, 87, 92, 162.

discovering that they can become adopted children of God. The explosion of Pentecostal churches among the poor bears witness to the transformative power the Holy Spirit can bring to under-resourced communities.<sup>28</sup>

Fourth, the poor should be expected to do great things. Jesus said that those who followed Him would do greater things than He (John 14:12–14). The poor empowered by the Holy Spirit have the resources to not only transform their own communities, but also bring the joy and shalom of the kingdom to their wealthier siblings.

A fifth and final response suggested by Davis represents a call to simplicity and stewardship. The theme of stewardship for the sake of the poor comes up repeatedly in Davis' *Multiplying Laborers*. His concern is also well summarized in his article on "stewardship" in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* where he writes:

The apostles reaffirmed kingdom stewardship. Avoiding entanglements with worldly cares or goods, we must do good to others (1 Tim. 6:17–19), especially servants of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:11; Gal. 6:6). . . . As members of the early church displayed God's care for one another (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32; cf. 1 Cor. 8–9), so we are to be generous (Rom. 12:13), show hospitality (1 Pet. 4:9), give cheerfully (2 Cor. 9:6–7), sacrifice on behalf of the needy (Phil. 4:15–19), flee covetousness (Col. 3:5), and be hospitable to strangers, orphans, and widows (Heb. 13:2; James 1:27). Ultimately, as Christ's stewards we must manage his resources well—our possessions, his creation, and our very lives—knowing that we will receive our due in proportion to our investment, whether faithful or wasteful, of the master's goods (Matt. 25:17–28; Luke 16:13).<sup>29</sup>

To sum up, Davis has provided five theological principles with which to build a personal or institutional response to the cries of the poor. Davis' forty years of ministry as an evangelical theological educator also provide a practical model of how to put these principles into practice.

#### **IV. Conclusion: So What?**

How do we respond to the greatest missionary challenge the church has ever faced? In light of the more than one billion people facing situations like Saleha and Saleha in Afghanistan, what might we say by way of conclusion? How do we respond to Davis' themes and proposals? I suggest we can begin with three practical action steps: supplication, study, and stewardship. By *supplication*, I mean we can daily choose to obey Jesus' command in Matthew 9:38 where he commands his disciples to ask the Lord of the harvest to raise up workers for the harvest fields. If we commit to praying daily for workers and ask the Holy Spirit to use us as workers, our hearts, heads, and hands will begin to move in the right direction.

Second, we would do well to *study* the resources developed by Rev. Dr. Don Davis over the last twenty years at The Urban Ministry Institute and made available through TUMI Press.

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<sup>28</sup> See for example stories collected in Bryant Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, Rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> Don L. Davis, "Stewardship," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 843.

With the possible exception of John Stott and the Langham Partnership, I am not aware of anyone in recent decades with a greater impact on leadership development for churches among the poor than Davis. There are countless lessons that can be gleaned from carefully exploring the resources available at The Urban Ministry Institute.

Finally, the example of Boaz provides a model of *stewardship* important for those theological educators working in institutions where the vast majority of resources are not directed toward remembering the poor. In the book of Ruth, we find that Boaz reserved a portion of his wealth and resources for the poor in the land. In Ruth chapter 2, a variation of the word “gleaning” appears twelve times. We could call Boaz’s example of faithfully providing for gleaning, and thereby reserving a portion of one’s resources for the poor, the “Boaz principle.” If North American evangelical theological educators consistently applied the “Boaz principle” to our own research, teaching, and institutional programing, we will discover ways to empower the poor in world changing ways. Consider that the fruit of Boaz’ gleaning resulted in the birth of King David some four generations later.

In sum, if we want to remember the poor like the Apostle Paul and Rev. Dr. Don Davis, then supplication, study, and stewardship present three solid points of departure.