

Article

“She Is the Seminary”: The Life and Ministry of Dr. Olive L. Clark (1894–1989), Canadian Fundamentalist Educator

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Abstract: This article explores the life and contributions of Dr. Olive L. Clark (1894–1989), a long-time faculty member at the fundamentalist Toronto Baptist Seminary (TBS). In the 1920s, Clark sided with the fundamentalists and became a vocal critic of the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec. As the first person to receive a PhD in Classics from the University of Toronto, she was a gifted scholar. In 1928, she became one of the first faculty members at the newly-minted Toronto Baptist Seminary—operated by the prominent fundamentalist leader T. T. Shields—and remained there until her retirement thirty-eight years later. Through those years and even into retirement, she took an active role in the fundamentalist community by training pastors, publishing lesson plans and articles, speaking in various churches, and serving as co-editor of *The Gospel Witness* newspaper. In the process, she helped guide and shape the movement, both behind the scenes and in visible ways.

Keywords: fundamentalism; Baptist; women; education

1. Introduction

As historians continue to fill the gaps caused by what Ruth Compton Brouwer has called the “unacknowledged quarantine” between religious studies and women’s history in Canada, there remain a number of notable omissions (Brouwer 1992). Among them, the study of women in Baptist fundamentalist groups in Canada is underdeveloped. Put another way: “the casual reader might be forgiven for thinking that several prominent Baptist fundamentalists never even met a woman aside from his own wife!” (Murray and Wilson 2022, p. 298). In general, women had fewer opportunities than men within the fundamentalist world. In Canada, women were usually restricted from pulpits and most forms of professional ministry; yet, at the same time, they remained involved at various levels of the fundamentalist movement and, in some cases, even wielded significant amounts of influence and authority.¹

One route for women within the fundamentalist world was education. This article explores the life and contributions of one such educator, Dr. Olive L. Clark (1894–1989). As the first person to receive a PhD in Classics from the University of Toronto, she was a gifted scholar. In 1928, she became one of the first faculty members at the newly-minted Toronto Baptist Seminary (TBS)—operated by the prominent Canadian fundamentalist leader T. T. Shields—and remained there until her retirement thirty-eight years later. By comparison, it was not until 1948 that the first woman became a full professor at the purportedly modernist seminary at McMaster University (Dekar and Fleming 2016, p. 162). Clark predated that appointment by two decades. As a professor at the TBS, Clark took an active role in the fundamentalist community by training pastors, publishing lesson plans and articles, and serving as an editor of *The Gospel Witness* newspaper. In fact, her involvement in the movement was so significant that, after Shields, Clark was perhaps one of the most influential people in the entire Baptist fundamentalist community in Canada. One former student called her “a prophetess of note” who “made her mark for God in an hour which gave little encouragement to women in ministry, and excelled in any work she



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undertook.” (Corbett 1990, p. 12). Similarly, on at least one occasion, Shields is said to have remarked: “She is the Seminary”.²

Despite her significant place in the movement, the existing literature on Baptist fundamentalism in Canada has tended to gloss over her life, career, and contributions.³ In an effort to fill this gap, this study approaches the material chronologically, beginning with Clark’s early years and defection from the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec before looking at her teaching career and contributions to the wider Baptist fundamentalist world in Canada. While the fundamentalists in her immediate orbit held strict positions that mandated a subordinate role for women, Clark did not fit the mould of the “traditional” woman. She was not a homemaker—nor did she ever marry—and, shortly after the fundamentalist–modernist controversy, became one of the most visible and respected figures in the Toronto-based fundamentalist movement. Her intelligence, dedication to the fundamentals of the faith, and loyalty to Shields elevated her status in this fundamentalist circle and eventually solidified her place as a leader in a movement otherwise dominated by men. Indeed, it is somewhat paradoxical that an individual who should have had relatively little authority due to her gender actually became one of Canadian fundamentalism’s most influential figures.

While it would be wrong to suggest that Clark’s experiences were normative for fundamentalist women, her example suggests that fundamentalists were, on occasion, willing to suspend or soften some of their theological convictions in order to strengthen the movement. In the end, she had a significant influence on Baptist fundamentalism in Canada as an educator, author, and editor—and she helped guide and shape the movement, both behind the scenes and in visible ways.

2. Early Life

Olive Lucille Clark was born to George and Rosamond (née Clayton) Clark in Hamilton, Ontario, on 11 March 1894. Located on the western edge of Lake Ontario, Hamilton was driven by its steel industry and had a reputation as a rough and industrial city. Clark’s family reflected this blue-collar context. She came from a large family that included one sister, Florence, and three brothers, Ivan, Gordon, and Ivor. Her father worked as a clerk at a dry goods house, and according to one newspaper report from the era, her family was “not overwell to do” (Bright Hamilton Girls 1919). Yet, these financial limitations were not debilitating for the young Clark. In the same report noted above, Clark’s father added that he “had the ambition to give his daughters the benefits of the best education attainable in [the] public system” (Bright Hamilton Girls 1919).

Very early on, Clark demonstrated her academic prowess. When she graduated from the Hamilton Collegiate Institute in 1914, she received gold medals for highest general proficiency and highest proficiency in Classics. For her standing in the matriculation examination, she was awarded fourteen scholarships, including one totalling \$2450.00.⁴ Even though Clark displayed obvious gifts, she also encountered the sexist attitudes of the time, as one local newspaper acknowledged her “phenomenal success” before also adding: “That sum. . . won by a brilliant young Hamilton girl student, could come in handy to start housekeeping. Learning the art of frying beefsteak could then follow.” (Splendid Showing 1914).

Not content with simply “Learning the art of frying beefsteak”, Clark instead decided to continue her educational journey beyond high school. The prospect of a woman with an advanced level of education was still relatively new in early twentieth-century Canada. While universities across the country gradually became co-educational, they often retained sexist attitudes that discouraged and sometimes limited how far a woman could go. In other instances, women were academically segregated, either to women’s colleges or degree programs that were perceived as more feminine in nature.⁵ During the First World War, however, as male students and professors travelled “to the front”, campuses became more populated with women. Clark enrolled in the Classics Department at McMaster University in Toronto, where she received a Bachelor of Arts (honours) in 1917 and a Master of Arts in

1921. Between her two McMaster degrees, she also earned a teaching specialist certificate in Classics from Queen's University in Kingston in 1919.

Clark felt "at home" at McMaster. In 1887, the Toronto Baptist College reconstituted to become McMaster University, named in recognition of the support and financial backing of the senator and wealthy Baptist businessman William McMaster.⁶ Many Baptists viewed the university as a way to establish themselves as a respectable denomination in a society where they were significantly outnumbered by other religious bodies, including Methodists, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, and Anglicans.⁷ When Baptists in the region came together to form the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec (BCOQ) the following year, the university took an important part in the life of the denomination as its official training ground. Clark had been raised in a Baptist home. Her family attended James Street Baptist Church (then-pastored by the nephew of the university's namesake) in Hamilton's downtown core. Consequently, Clark would have heard about the university for much of her life and, at some point early on, reportedly developed a strong affinity for it.⁸ Adding to her immediate context, one must also consider that the early twentieth century was a time when Baptist women across the country were taking an increased role in the life of the denomination as missionaries, administrators, and educators.⁹ It was a time when gifted young women, such as Clark, could seek training at a familiar place and even possibly expect to become involved in denominational life.

As an undergraduate and then postgraduate student, Clark continued to add to her already impressive list of accolades. On one occasion, *The McMaster University Monthly* described her by writing, "like a powerful magnet, she draws scholarships and medals toward her" (Olive Lucille Clark 1917, p. 358). This assessment was only a mild exaggeration. Indeed, not only did she accrue numerous scholarships and awards in each program she entered, but she was also a two-time recipient of the Governor-General's Medal for the highest academic standing, once at McMaster (1915) and once at Queen's (1919) (*Made Sweep of Scholarships 1915*; *Miss O. L. Clark gets Medal 1919*). "This", wrote one local newspaper, "is a record any girl can feel proud of" (*Bright Hamilton Girls 1919*).

Clark was not finished with higher education, however, and she soon looked to the University of Toronto (UofT). The university had awarded graduate degrees in the past, but with the formation of a new School of Graduate Studies in 1922, enrollments swelled (*Friedland 2002*, p. 293). When UofT's Classics Department began accepting doctoral students in the middle of the decade, Clark was counted among the first to enrol. Under the supervision of Norman W. DeWitt, a long-time Professor of Classics and sometime Dean of Arts at UofT's affiliate, Victoria College, Clark completed her PhD in Classics in 1930. Significantly, she was the first person to receive this degree (Olive Lucille Clark, *PhD 1930*, p. 10). While Clark was a postgraduate student, she held sequential teaching positions at Ingersoll Collegiate Institution and Brockville Collegiate Institution, where she remained for a combined five years before accepting a position as an assistant in the Latin Department at McMaster with purported assurances of an eventual promotion to professor.¹⁰

3. Controversy at McMaster University

Clark joined the faculty of McMaster during a turbulent period in the university's history. During the 1920s, McMaster was the subject of significant criticism within the BCOQ over perceived heterodoxy among its theology professors. According to the critics, McMaster had adopted a modernist curriculum that challenged traditional elements of the faith, including the virgin birth, the authority of scripture, the historicity of the biblical stories, and the deity of Christ. Leading the charge against the university was T. T. Shields, the fundamentalist pastor of Jarvis Street Baptist Church in Toronto. For Shields, the university crossed the Rubicon when it appointed L. H. Marshall, a purported modernist, to the Chair of Practical Theology in 1925. Utilizing the press (including his influential newspaper, *The Gospel Witness*) and his pulpit, Shields redoubled his campaign against the university.¹¹

Initially, Clark remained loyal to the BCOQ and her alma mater. According to a statement written in the late 1920s, she had self-identified as a “fundamentalist” for a number of years. She “believed in the inspiration of the Scriptures, and had no sympathy with the views of those who were advocating Modernist doctrines”, but she rejected the militancy of Shields and his ilk. She summed her feelings at the time by writing that she was “most bitter in my opposition to those who were carrying the Fundamentalist banner”. Having dedicated a significant amount of her life to McMaster, first as a student and later as a faculty member, her immediate response is not surprising. As she admitted, her negative reaction to the fundamentalists stemmed from a feeling of defensiveness for McMaster.¹²

Clark’s feelings toward the situation changed in October 1927 when the BCOQ took decisive action against Shields and his fundamentalist allies by expelling him and his church from the convention (*The Baptist Convention 1927*, p. 4). At the time, Clark referred to that day as “the day of my awakening” (Clark 1929, p. 6). Using language that resembled a story of one’s personal conversion, she continued:

when I heard the utterance of Professor Marshall, in which he emphatically denied the doctrine of the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible, and when I saw those with whom I had been associating loudly applauding such infidelity, I realized that I was in the wrong company. The conviction was brought home to me that unless I resigned from McMaster University, I would lose my testimony entirely. After a severe inward struggle, the Lord gained the victory and enabled me to surrender all to His will. (Clark 1929, p. 6)

Ultimately, shortly after the convention gathering, Clark made the difficult decision to resign from her position at McMaster.¹³ While she affirmed that she believed many people within the BCOQ were still theologically orthodox, she also added that by not standing with the fundamentalists against modernism at McMaster, “they have refused to obey, and have sold out” (Clark 1929, p. 6). Once the dust had settled, a total of 90 churches had either been expelled from the BCOQ or withdrew of their own accord.¹⁴ The majority of these fundamentalist churches came together to form the Union of the Regular Baptists of Ontario and Quebec with Shields at the helm.

Now within the fundamentalist camp, Clark looked for other teaching opportunities, which came in the form of the Toronto Baptist Seminary (TBS). As a fundamentalist response to McMaster’s modernism, Shields opened the TBS in 1927.¹⁵ It was to be a place where young people could “receive preparation for the Baptist ministry without being exposed. . . to the poison disseminated through the teaching of McMaster” (Shields 1926, p. 22). Based out of Jarvis Street, Shields also served as the president. Tasked with finding qualified and theologically sound faculty members, he soon came into contact with Clark. Generally speaking, Shields believed and taught that women were physiologically and psychologically different from—and inferior to—men, and each had their own separate responsibilities to home and church.¹⁶ At the same time, he also recognized the importance of this historical moment: theological modernism had become pervasive among Baptists, and it was necessary to fight back on all fronts, which included the women. This was perhaps most visible in Shields’ vocal support for the independent and women-led fundamentalist organization, the Women’s Missionary Society of the Regular Baptists of Canada in the mid-to-late 1920s.¹⁷ Faced with the prospect of recruiting such an obviously talented young woman to his fundamentalist cause, Shields made the obvious choice, and in October 1928, *The Gospel Witness* quietly announced that Clark “had accepted a position on the Faculty” (*Seminary Notes 1928*, p. 14). If there was any opposition to her appointment, it did not manifest in the public forum.

It is unclear how Clark had entered Shields’ orbit. Shields later recorded that he “had heard of her, but knew little about her”.¹⁸ What is clear is that she was an answer to prayer for the Jarvis Street pastor. Shields, who had no higher education of his own, soon came to view Clark as a crucial piece of the fundamentalists’ intellectual puzzle. This is visible in the wide array of teaching responsibilities Clark soon inherited. In her first year on the faculty of the TBS, she was listed as the Professor of Latin, Greek, and Church

History ([First Annual Convention 1928](#), p. 6). Through her time at the seminary, she also taught numerous other courses as needed, including Christian Psychology ([Toronto Baptist Seminary 1931](#), p. 6), Biblical Introduction, Life of Christ, Non-Christian Religions, and Sunday School Work ([Description of Subjects 1950](#), pp. 7–9), among others.

4. Professor at The Toronto Baptist Seminary

One of the reasons Clark fit so well with the TBS was her unflinching conviction of the fundamentalist interpretations of the faith. As already noted, she affirmed the inspiration and authority of the Bible and had identified as a fundamentalist even before separating from the BCOQ. In Shields' orbit, she became even more outspoken in her belief that it was necessary to defend what she understood as scriptural truths from modernism. In short, she viewed modernists as "enemies of the cross" and consequently warned against those "who cast reproach upon the Gospel of Salvation" ([Clark 1944](#), p. 15). Alongside Shields, she believed that the TBS would serve as the front line in the battle against those whom she would later describe as the ones "chiefly responsible for the apostasy of the age", namely those "unfaithful and negligent preachers, the professors, the administrators and leaders in the pulpits, colleges and seminaries" ([Clark 1971](#), p. 12).

In line with TBS's mission to train pastors and missionaries in a fundamentalist mould, Clark was characteristically fundamentalist in her theology. She routinely affirmed 'fundamental' doctrines in the press, including the inspiration of Scripture and the historicity of the biblical narrative.¹⁹ She denounced the ecumenical movement and Roman Catholicism as proponents of modernism and enemies of the Bible, respectively.²⁰ She rejected most modern translations of the Bible, such as the New English Bible, which she believed "in effect degrades the Word of God to the level of a human book" ([Clark 1961](#), p. 2). Moreover, she believed it was necessary to take such hard stances on each of these matters because, as she noted later in life, "Separation from unscriptural doctrines and practices, not conformity, is the way of blessing" ([Clark 1970b](#), p. 4).

Clark balanced her strong commitment to fundamentalist perspectives with a keen belief in the necessity of proper academic instruction. She rejected the stereotypical fundamentalist aversion to education, in particular "that a preacher of the gospel, if he have a trained heart, need not have a trained mind". Indeed, Clark likened the mind to a tool and education to the refining process. One's intellect needed to be "tempered, sharpened, and prepared" so that it would be "of greater use than one which is bent and blunt".²¹ This was reflected in her often rigorous academic standards. As one early report noted, "when she sets the pace for her students we are not sure that they know in what month they are living, or what time of day it is!" ([Seminary News 1930](#), p. 9).

Clark believed that high academic standards alone were not sufficient for a credible education but that it was necessary also to incorporate a significant spiritual element into the curriculum. This kind of emphasis, she noted, "is upon the cultivation of the soul and the ministry of the Holy Spirit to illuminate the mind, quicken the spirit, enlarge the vision and mould the life of the individual as he prepares to the ministry which he believes the Lord is preparing for him" ([Clark 1972b](#), p. 4). Clark's perspective was not necessarily unique for the era and, in fact, reflected the attitudes of many smaller Baptist institutions in the twentieth century.²² At the same time, her conviction on this point was so strong that she even cautioned against "an over-emphasis upon the training of the mind",²³ which perhaps reflected the contemporary fundamentalist attitudes on the dangers of certain aspects of higher education, namely the modernist elements that would call key theological principles into question.

Clark was immediately beloved at the TBS. One early report noted that "by her cheery disposition, [she] brings June weather in December" ([Seminary News 1930](#), p. 9). By all accounts, Clark was a gifted teacher who prioritized her students. This is summarized well in the words of one of her earliest students: "She perfectly combined true scholarship and genuine spirituality with a most efficient way of communication" ([Buhler 1990](#), p. 12). As this assessment captures, not only did she see herself as an academic guide but as a mentor

as well. “She was vitally interested in and concerned for every student that came into her classes”, recalled another early student (Hindry 1990, p. 12). It was this blend of academic discipline and genuine care that endeared her to her students.

The seminary administration understood what a valuable asset Clark was to the TBS. This is visible in a report published in *The Gospel Witness* in 1934, which began its update on the faculty with a glowing paragraph-long assessment of Clark’s contributions to the life of the seminary. It noted: “as a full-time member of the Seminary Faculty, [Clark] has more than fulfilled all our highest expectations entertained when she joined us”. The summary noted that “her influence over and counsel to” female students was especially valuable. Yet, her impact did not end with the female students, as the report also noted that she was “A fine scholar, a splendid teacher, and a woman of excellent poise and judgment, . . . [whose] ministry to the *whole Seminary* is invaluable”.²⁴

The report’s evaluation of Clark was especially important in light of recent events within the Union of the Regular Baptists of Canada. From 1931 to 1933, the Union experienced infighting on several different matters, including the extent to which women should be allowed to independently operate ministries within the fundamentalist community. Not only did this controversy result in a significant schism, but it also led Shields to become even more restrictive in his own stance on women than he was before.²⁵ Where Clark differed from the women who stood at the heart of this controversy was in her loyalty to Shields. Rather than join the women who advocated for the right to operate independent fundamentalist ministries, she quietly continued her work at the TBS. As a result, at a time when Shields was exclaiming his distrust for assertive women in his ranks, he was also expressing his gratitude for the contributions Clark had made to the seminary.

As one of the key faculty members at the TBS, Clark often served as the public face of the seminary. This role took her throughout Ontario and Quebec, as she visited churches to generate support for the seminary and recruit students.²⁶ It also opened doors for her to speak at various churches and conferences. While these were usually not gospel messages on Sunday mornings, they nevertheless provided opportunities for her to address and instruct both women and men. In 1929, for example, she was the speaker at the annual picnic of the “Pastors’ and People’s Conference of Hamilton, Brantford and District”. One report noted that she taught on 1 Peter “For an hour and a half” and that “All [listeners] felt that they learned much”.²⁷ Her place at the TBS also meant that she often represented the seminary in print. Beginning early in her tenure at the TBS and continuing even into her retirement, she routinely took to the pages of *The Gospel Witness* to justify the institution’s decisions or seek additional financial support.²⁸ She also often clarified TBS’s purpose. Following the vision laid out by Shields, she remarked that the TBS existed “to clarify in their [students’] minds and hearts the message which they must deliver, the doctrines taught in the inspired, infallible Word of God” (Clark 1959a, p. 6).

Shields recognized that Clark’s talent and abilities were indispensable for the TBS. For the majority of Clark’s thirty-eight-year career at the TBS, she was the only faculty member with an earned doctorate. On one level, this suggests that the barrier to entry was much higher for women in the fundamentalist world. Clark’s educational background and accomplishments were far more impressive than each of the men on the faculty. At the same time, her abilities did not go unnoticed. With her academic bona fides, Shields recognized that she brought a certain level of legitimacy to the seminary. In a letter to Clark, he summarized this feeling by noting “you brought to the FACULTY the prestige which was inseparable from your fine scholastic record. . . Your distinguished academic career, and your marvellous teaching record we feel adds great prestige to THE SEMINARY FACULTY TO-DAY”.²⁹ Aside from Clark, very few women ever served on the faculty at the TBS—and she appears to have been the only one who taught biblical content.³⁰

Moreover, Clark’s loyalty to the TBS was especially valuable to Shields, and very likely helped permanently solidify her place in his fundamentalist movement. Clark had demonstrated her dependability by siding with Shields during the controversy over women’s ministries in the early 1930s, but she was tested even further during the following

decade when disagreement emerged within the TBS itself. In the late 1940s, W. Gordon Brown (the Dean of the seminary) and Shields came to blows over operational policies at the TBS. In response, Clark sided firmly with the Jarvis Street pastor, even after it resulted in a major schism that saw the majority of Shields' allies distance themselves from him.³¹ In return, Shields came to rely on Clark as a pillar of support and stability. On one occasion, he noted: "you have been my greatest comfort, because I knew that I could always absolutely depend upon your utmost cooperation and conspicuously able service".³² The feeling was mutual. When Shields died in 1955, Clark eulogized him as "one of those precious gifts of God to His Church" (Clark 1955, p. 14). Shields was a notoriously volatile ally who had a record of lashing out at those whom he believed challenged his authority. Clark's unwavering support (paired with her apparently unmatched intellect) undoubtedly played a part in cementing her place in the fundamentalist world at a time when women were not universally accepted in such roles.

5. Commitments to the Fundamentalist World

Having established herself as a stabilizing force and a respected member at the TBS, she became more involved in the public forum and soon became something of an intellectual heartbeat for the Baptist fundamentalists in Ontario and Quebec. With her academic background and a strong aversion to modernism in all its forms, she became a trustworthy champion of fundamentalist theology for the public. She provided updates on the wider academic world in *The Gospel Witness*, which often took the form of articles and book reviews, and usually included appraises or warnings about a person's or publication's heterodoxy. Conversely, she was quick to endorse those authors who believed in "the integrity and authority of the Bible".³³

In the late 1930s, Clark accepted another responsibility when she began writing a weekly "Bible School Lesson Outline", which circulated in *The Gospel Witness*. In April 1937, a severe illness restricted Shields—the newspaper's editor—to bed rest, which required several individuals from within the Toronto fundamentalist's immediate orbit to assume some of his responsibilities. Among them, Clark was tasked with writing the lesson outline with the promise that the interim editors "shall no doubt press her into further service" (*A Word about the Editor's Illness 1937*, p. 6). Each lesson focused on a particular passage from the Bible and one "golden text", which was a particular verse that encapsulated the lesson. She explored each passage with an expository lens that also identified noteworthy details from historical and biblical contexts. On the rare occasion that she divided the lessons into junior and adult classes, she made sure to tailor them appropriately. The junior lessons were comprised of brief and memorable instructions with accompanying Bible verses, while the adult lessons provided comparable and complimentary passages from scripture and significant detail from the surrounding history.³⁴ While initially instituted as a stopgap to fill a void left by the sickly Shields, she continued to contribute lessons in this capacity for nearly fifty years.

Not only did Clark's lessons display her keen understanding of the biblical text and her attentive pedagogy, but they also provided a snapshot of her theological perspectives. Indeed, she used the pages allotted to her to formulate lessons that affirmed the same basic theological tenets that fundamentalists believed were under fire, such as the essential deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the historicity of the Bible (including miracles), the atonement, the resurrection, and the second coming.³⁵ Through them, she also upheld the Bible as literal, inspired, and without error. For example, when writing on the biblical creation narrative, she noted: "The Hebrew word translated 'created' signifies that He caused them to come into being without the aid of pre-existing material. Scripture positively contradicts the evolutionary hypothesis... There is no reason to understand the word 'day' as an indefinite period of time, rather than as a literal day of twenty-four hours" (Clark 1938a, p. 7).

While Clark regularly wrote for *The Gospel Witness*, she only rarely commented on the differences between men and women and their attendant gender roles. In general, she affirmed traditional places for women and men in the church and home. For example, she noted that from Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden, women had been condemned to experience

“subjection” (Clark 1938b, p. 8). At the same time, she did not fit this stereotypical and traditionalist mould. Shields had long taught that women were intellectually inferior to men and that their greatest influence was in the home.³⁶ Clark, on the other hand, had established herself as one of the leading intellectual figures of this Toronto-based fundamentalist movement. Moreover, she remained single for her entire life and made no comment to suggest she sought otherwise. While the reason for this latter decision is unknown, it further underscores Clark’s uniqueness as a strong and assertive woman whose example defies easy classification.

In some of Clark’s articles, she went as far as to push the boundaries of these gender roles, especially when it came to preaching the gospel. She believed that spreading the gospel message was a task for all Christians, not a select few. This included “sharing the burdens and joys of the Lord’s service at home and abroad” (Dr. Clark in Quebec 1933, p. 5). In her view, women were not necessarily barred from speaking to mixed audiences. When writing about the Samaritan woman at the well in John’s Gospel, for example, Clark noted that “Christ revealed Himself as the Messiah” to her, “thus qualifying her to speak of Him and for Him”.³⁷ This perspective was also visible in the numerous articles she wrote that read more like evangelistic messages rather than essays. Indeed, in these instances, she often confronted her reader with the reality of their sins and then issued an “altar call” in print.³⁸ Later, she expressed her feelings more clearly that “the proclamation of the Gospel” was not “the responsibility of the ministers alone”, before closing: “Few realize the tremendous good which might be accomplished if more of God’s saints in the pews would put themselves in God’s hands to be channels of His grace” (Clark 1953, p. 13).

In addition to regular contributions to the pages of *The Gospel Witness*, Clark also served as an editor. In 1943, *The Gospel Witness* officially added her name to the masthead as an “Associate Editor”. She had been unofficially serving in this role since 1937, but now, for the first time in the newspaper’s history, Shields formally shared editorial responsibilities. In particular, she was responsible for “S. S. Lesson and Exchanges”.³⁹ After Shields’ death in 1955, she—alongside the next four successive pastors of Jarvis Street—served as “Editor”. In this role, Clark became one of the chief representatives of the newspaper to the public and was usually tasked with writing and presenting the annual report.⁴⁰

Through the pages of *The Gospel Witness* and her lesson plans, Clark carved out a significant place within these Baptist fundamentalist circles. In the words of one writer, “She manages to get into numerous Sunday Schools and Bible Classes every week by means of her very helpful outlines” (W. 1939, p. 14). Shields likewise held a great deal of admiration for Clark’s lessons. “It is quite evident to anyone who reads Dr. Clark’s expositions that she writes only after the most thorough research”, he wrote on one occasion, before continuing, “[she] gives her readers practically the last word on the subject”.⁴¹ He closed this same report by writing:

This Editor remarked to our Jarvis St. teachers last evening that any preacher who could not find suggestions for a dozen sermons in Dr. Clark’s exposition of last week ought not to try to be a preacher. These expositions are of value, not only to Sunday School teachers, but to everyone who would know his or her Bible better.⁴²

In another, later assessment, Shields went even further. He remarked that he had “received numerous expressions of appreciation from ministers. . . who have said that her exposition is among the very best things they find in the paper”, before adding: “Dr. Clark is, as a great many ministers are not, a real theologian” (Shields 1953, p. 12). Through the pages of *The Gospel Witness*, Clark could provide counsel and instruction to pastors and parishioners alike.

6. Retirement and Final Years

In May 1966, owing to apparent “health reasons”, Clark retired from the TBS at the age of 72 (Slade 1966, p. 3). As a sign of her influence over the years, when news of her retirement emerged, “letters showered in from around the world from those who

had been inspired by this godly Professor" (Adams 1966, p. 22). It was this legacy that prompted the seminary to honour her as Professor Emeritus.⁴³ She remained a part of the TBS community—still regularly attending events and convocations—but she officially stepped back from teaching. Clark's role in the life and history of the TBS remained so important that the faculty dedicated the history of the seminary (published in 1987) to her (Toronto Baptist Seminary 1987). She returned to Hamilton after her retirement, where she lived with her sister.

Even though Clark concluded her full-time service to the TBS, she agreed to only a "partial" retirement from *The Gospel Witness* (Slade 1966, p. 3). Her name remained on the masthead, and she continued to contribute regular articles and Bible lessons. Among her many contributions, she often reflected on Shields' life and the conflict at McMaster, as if to ensure that the story remained before an entirely new generation of fundamentalists.⁴⁴ At a time when Baptists across the continent were debating and dividing over the issue of women in the church, Clark remained one of the most influential figures in this Toronto-based fundamentalist movement.⁴⁵ Through the summer months, as the weather permitted, she would regularly travel to Toronto by bus in order to complete her editorial responsibilities (Wiebe 1990, p. 22). As her age caught up with her, these trips became more infrequent.

When Clark died at the age of 95 on 7 December 1989, tributes again flooded into *The Gospel Witness*. The pastor of Jarvis Street, Norman H. Street, eulogized her as "a most winsome and outstanding handmaid of the Lord". In an article, he recognized Clark's uniqueness in the fundamentalist world:

In her time, especially in her youth, the prevailing notion had it that the Lord's work was to be done by men. Women who desired to devote their lives to Christian work were something of a problem. It was reluctantly admitted that in some cases women might be used on the mission field, but a woman on the faculty of a seminary? A woman teaching men? The very fact that Olive Clark won such a place of respect in what was considered a 'male preserve' testifies not only to her superior abilities but to a very gracious spirit. (Street 1990, p. 7)

Street was not the only one to understand that Clark was a woman of singular note among the fundamentalists. One former student remarked: "She made her mark for God in an hour which gave little encouragement to women in ministry, and excelled in any work she undertook. She was a prophetess of note and an encouragement and a challenge to all whom she taught" (Corbett 1990, p. 12).

7. Conclusions

Historians have noted that fundamentalism was a movement comprised of dominant and often competing personalities.⁴⁶ Yet, with few exceptions, historians have also tended to overlook the fact that it was not just men who fit this stereotype. Indeed, for all of the limitations placed on them, women sometimes emerged as strong and influential voices in their respective fundamentalist circles. Such was the case with Clark, who led an impressive life and career among Baptist fundamentalists in Canada.

With very little apparent desire to simply become a housewife, she instead became one of the leading intellectual figures in this Toronto-based fundamentalist movement. She was the first person to receive a PhD in Classics from the University of Toronto and was the recipient of numerous other academic accolades. She had a lengthy career at the Toronto Baptist Seminary, where she trained several generations of pastors and missionaries within the Baptist fundamentalist fold. She served as an intellectual resource in the pages of *The Gospel Witness* and published a regular Bible lesson used by pastors for over fifty years. She was characteristically fundamentalist in her theology and was fiercely loyal to her friend and comrade in arms, T. T. Shields, who once referred to her as his "greatest comfort". Her example suggests that, in select circumstances, fundamentalists were willing to soften some of their theological convictions if it meant strengthening the movement.

In the final analysis, it should be reiterated that Clark’s experience within the Baptist fundamentalist world in Ontario and Quebec was not representative of other women within those same churches. She was, by all accounts, what historians would label an “exceptional woman”. Therefore, the purpose of this paper has not been to suggest that her experiences were somehow normative or representative of how women were treated within this community. Rather, it has focused specifically on Clark and her important influence among Baptist fundamentalists in Canada. While she would not have been able to regularly preach from many of the pulpits within the Baptist fundamentalist community, she trained and led the pastors who did. Indeed, it may be said that she was one of the most important individuals in the movement. As an educator, editor, and author, she had a hand in guiding numerous fundamentalist churches, directly and indirectly—and in Canada and beyond. These impressive contributions made her not only a “prophetess of note” but also, by Shields’ own assessment, the Toronto Baptist Seminary personified.

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Notes

- ¹ I have explored this theme in greater detail in [Murray \(2023a, 2023b\)](#), pp. 248–57). For a study that looks at the theme of women in the fundamentalist world more broadly, see [Bendroth \(1993\)](#).
- ² *The Gospel Witness*, 13 August 1970, 14.
- ³ E.g., [Toronto Baptist Seminary \(1987\)](#), pp. 24–25). For a detailed list of available sources on Baptist fundamentalism in Canada, see [Murray and Wilson \(2024\)](#).
- ⁴ Because she opted to go to McMaster University rather than the University of Toronto, she was eligible for only one of the scholarships. See [Olive Lucille Clark \(1917\)](#), p. 358). She also received the “third highest rank in Ontario” on her matriculation examination. See [Bright Hamilton Girls \(1919\)](#).
- ⁵ E.g., home economics and health care. For a good study on women and higher education in Canada during this period, especially on the topics noted here, see [MacDonald \(2021\)](#).
- ⁶ For an important early history of McMaster University, see [Johnston \(1976\)](#).
- ⁷ On the desire toward denominational respectability, see [Goodwin \(1997\)](#), pp. 200–1). Baptists in Ontario held a minority stake in the religious landscape, occupying only 5.3% of the population. They numbered behind the following: Methodists (30.5%), Presbyterians (21.9%), Roman Catholics (17.9%), and Anglicans (16.9%). The data listed here are taken from the [Canadian Census Office \(1902\)](#), pp. 2–5).
- ⁸ As Shields would later note, she “had long entertained an ambition to be a professor of Classics” at McMaster. See [Shields \(1953\)](#), p. 11). Enrolling at the university would be the first step in accomplishing her dream. That Clark was so strongly convicted in her decision to attend the Baptist institution is evidenced by the fact that she declined thirteen of her awarded scholarships in order to attend McMaster instead of the University of Toronto.
- ⁹ For example, see [Jones \(2016\)](#), pp. 135–54); and [Whiteley \(2016\)](#), pp. 113–31). On the roots of this change among Baptists in Ontario, see [Colwell \(1985\)](#).
- ¹⁰ [Olive Lucille Clark, PhD \(1930\)](#), p. 10). Clark joined her alma mater at a time when women outnumbered men in the department. ([McKay 2000](#), p. 22).
- ¹¹ Historians have given this controversy a significant amount of attention. For a recent example, see [Adams \(2022\)](#), pp. 119–56).
- ¹² The above quotations in this paragraph are from [Clark \(1929\)](#), p. 5).
- ¹³ Shields suggests that the resignation came “three or four days” later; however, I have been unable to verify this timeframe. See [Shields \(1953\)](#), p. 12).
- ¹⁴ In addition to the Jarvis Street Baptist Church, the BCOQ expelled 12 other churches. See [MacLeod \(1928\)](#), p. 61). The remainder of the churches withdrew from the BCOQ.
- ¹⁵ For a recent analysis of the formation of the TBS, see [Haykin \(2023\)](#), pp. 105–16).
- ¹⁶ For a few examples, see [Shields \(1924\)](#), p. 11; [1930](#), p. 11).
- ¹⁷ On Shields’ support, see ([Murray 2023a](#)), “‘A Call to [Fundamentalist] Baptist Women’”, pp. 79–80.
- ¹⁸ [Shields \(1953\)](#), p. 11). In the same article, Shields notes that he knew her father. Given the fact that Shields had once held a pastorate in Hamilton before going to Jarvis Street, it is possible that he knew the Clark family from that period. In a separate

article, the only detail Clark gives on the matter is that “The next morning two professors from the Seminary came from Dr. Shields and said that if I was interested there was an opening to teach in the Seminary”. See [Clark \(1990, p. 11\)](#).

Clark’s affirmation of the fundamental doctrines through the press is discussed in greater detail below.

E.g., [Clark \(1959b, p. 5; 1970a, p. 7\)](#).

The above quotations in this paragraph are from ([Clark 1934a, p. 5](#)).

E.g., [R. Wilson \(2000, p. 140\)](#). On Baptists and higher education more broadly, see [Brackney \(2008\)](#).

[Clark \(1972a, p. 8\)](#). Clark had a strict approach to education, which she believed was both character-building and spiritually enriching. She emphasized that an education rooted in Christian principles was necessarily “characterized by dignity and decorum”, which required all students to possess a high degree of self-discipline. As such, she expected obedience from all of her students because “A quiet humble submission to authority is an indispensable quality of Christian character”. She reasoned that this kind of “submission” would, in turn, refine students into mature Christian leaders who understood that they were accountable to Christ. See [Clark \(1963, p. 15\)](#).

Quotations in this paragraph are from [Last Sunday and the Seminary \(1934, p. 7\)](#). Emphasis added.

([Murray 2023a](#)), “A Call to [Fundamentalist] Baptist Women”, pp. 138–227. As a representative example, on one occasion after the controversy, he remarked: “God Almighty made man superior to woman, and superior he must always be. . . I rule this church—and no woman shall ever dictate to me”. Clarence Griffin to C. K. Duff, 8 December 1940, CBA, as quoted in [Russell \(1981, p. 18\)](#).

E.g., [W. \(1944, p. 10\)](#); [Among Ourselves \(1945, p. 16\)](#); [Bible Fellowship Conference \(1950, p. 15\)](#); and [Graduation Banquet \(1957, p. 5\)](#).

[Conference Picnic \(1929, p. 12\)](#). For other examples, see [Essex \(1931, p. 11\)](#), and [Ambassador, Windsor \(1931, p. 16\)](#).

For a few representative examples, see [Clark \(1934b, pp. 5–6; 1954, p. 8; 1957, p. 1; 1959c, p. 1; 1975, p. 16\)](#).

T. T. Shields et al. to Olive L. Clark, 6 May 1954, Jarvis Street Baptist Church Archives (hereafter JSBCA), Clark Collection. Irregular capitalization in original.

Other women appointed to the faculty taught non-biblical classes, such as “Church Music”. e.g., [Introducing Recent New Faculty Members \(1988, p. 19\)](#).

For details about this controversy, see [P. Wilson \(2017–2018, pp. 34–80\)](#).

T. T. Shields et al. to Olive L. Clark, 6 May 1954, JSBCA, Clark Collection.

[Book Reviews \(1933, p. 5\)](#). For another representative example, see [Book Review \(1953, pp. 12–13\)](#).

For a representative example, see [Clark \(1937b, p. 8\)](#).

E.g., [Clark \(1937f, p. 8; 1937d, p. 8; 1937a, pp. 11–12; 1937e, p. 8; 1937b, p. 8; 1938c, p. 11\)](#).

For representative examples, see [Shields \(1924, p. 11; 1930, p. 10\)](#).

[Clark \(1937c, p. 7\)](#). Emphasis in original.

E.g., [Clark \(1930, pp. 6–7\)](#).

This change occurred in the 4 March 1943 edition of *The Gospel Witness*. The other new Associate Editor was W. S. Whitcombe, who covered “French Language Translations and Public Questions”. The following year, the newspaper also added W. Gordon Brown as “Contributing Editor”.

For a representative example, see [Clark \(1965, pp. 5–6\)](#).

“Dr. O. L. Clark and the SS Lesson”, *The Gospel Witness*, 18 February 1943, p. 10.

See note 41 above.

It is unclear when the TBS gave her that title, though she is listed with it in the 1967 prospectus. See [Seminary Faculty \(1967, p. 7\)](#).

E.g., [Clark \(1975, p. 16; 1976, p. 16\)](#).

On the larger Baptist world, see [Flowers \(2012\)](#).

E.g., [Brackney \(2019, pp. 34–35\)](#).

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