

Establishing a Gendered Authority through Pentecostal Publications: The Writings of Zelma Argue, 1920-1969

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In 1920 when Zelma Argue launched out from Winnipeg on her first adventures as a travelling Pentecostal evangelist accompanying her father on crusades throughout North America, her family and friends presented her with gifts. Among the items she received were a writing set and a portable typewriter. From the time she received these gifts at the age of twenty, to the end of her public ministry more than fifty years later, she put them both to good use, authoring five books and almost two hundred and fifty articles in Canadian and American Pentecostal publications.

This paper analyzes the writings of this Canadian author a female Pentecostal evangelist, musician, pastor and writer who was a prolific contributor to several denominational magazines published in Canada and the United States between 1920 and 1969. To date, I have collected 235 of her articles which appeared in *The Pentecostal Testimony*, *The Pentecostal Evangel* and *The Latter Rain Evangel*.¹ Rather than analyze the theology behind Argue's writing,² I am interested to trace the ways in which she used her writing to establish herself as an authority figure in the Pentecostal movement, both because of her long-time service and her far-flung travels, and in spite of the fact that she was a woman.

Zelma Argue was one of North America's most widely-travelled Pentecostal speakers, particularly during the early years of the movement. At the age of twenty-eight only eight years after she began her itinerant evangelism career, Argue expressed the wealth of experience she and her

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family had accumulated, saying “It would be impossible to recall, or to mention here all the campaigns in which God has graciously allowed us to proclaim in His Name.”³ Not only was she widely travelled, she was widely published. Because of her itinerant circumstances, Argue did most of her writing while in transit, as she told her readers:

Some of these pages have been written in the tropical heat of Florida and Alabama. Some have been written among the mountains of Colorado. East and West, and in the snows of Canada, often speeding on the transcontinental trains, or perhaps waking at midnight hours thousands of miles from home these pages have been written recording these present-day acts of the Holy Ghost.⁴

The sheer volume of her travels and her firsthand involvement with these “acts of the Holy Ghost” meant that over time Zelma Argue’s reputation as an experienced evangelist for the movement grew, and with that reputation, her authority was reinforced among readers of Pentecostal periodicals.

My paper has two purposes. First, I will demonstrate that Argue’s work is an example of what Brian Hogan asserts about religious newspapers, magazines and journals namely that “they provide the factual and interpretive glue that binds and guides the committed into communities.”⁵ In the five decades considered here, Argue’s writing changed over time to reflect both her own experiences and the evolution of North American Pentecostalism. Second, I pay attention to the ways in which Argue represented herself in her writing to analyze how she created and maintained authority for herself even though the place of Pentecostal women in ministry began to wane as the twentieth century unfolded.

Denominational Glue: Binding and Guiding the Movement into Place

When Pentecostal publications were founded in North America, beginning in the first two decades of the twentieth century, they evolved from a system of financing based on free will offerings to subscription based support. By the 1930s, there was a full-fledged advertising campaign underway to attract subscribers to the Canadian magazine, *The Pentecostal Testimony*. In the October 1937 issue, a full-page advertisement appeared, and analyzing the rhetoric of that ad reveals some significant things about Pentecostal publishing in general, and the role of Zelma Argue in particular. To get a sense of that, the ad bears quoting at

length:

Our circle of subscribers is every-growing [sic]. The mail man now delivers personally each month hundreds of individual TESTIMONIES into the homes across the Dominion. This month we again invite YOU to join this family. And in doing so we should like to make it as pleasant a bit of business as possible. So we offer for your one dollar (1) the following: (1) THE TESTIMONY – to be delivered to your door each month for the next seventeen months, anywhere in the world. (2) Your choice of any one of the four premium books shown above. You may have one book for each new subscription or renewal which is forwarded to our office as is indicated at the bottom of the page. Use the coupon below.⁶

Three significant things arise from this ad. First, a business model is clearly in operation here, complete with a persuasive ad campaign, a mail-in coupon, and a book incentive. This is reminiscent of the kind of marketing techniques which Kevin Kee identified in his book *Revivalists: Marketing the Gospel in English Canada, 1884-1957*.⁷

Second, the campaign invoked the rhetoric of joining a “family” of readers, a clear indication that the publishers were consciously trying to create a sense of community. Using Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined community,” Robyn Sneath has analyzed the Mennonite publication *Mennonitische Post* arguing that for believers who were widely scattered over vast geographic distances, that paper “brought them together in an imagined community”⁸ as readers were “drawn together by common language and shared ways of speaking and writing.”⁹ Sneath argues that through this publication, Mennonites created a shared “cultural script,” and created “dense networks” among subscribers, for whom “maintenance of that community is contingent upon communication.”¹⁰ As we shall see, Zelma Argue’s writing served a similar purpose for Pentecostals by providing the communication that would draw readers together with a sense of shared community.

Third, and perhaps most significant for this study, is the fact that all four of the books on offer as incentives to subscribe were written by Zelma Argue.¹¹ Clearly, Argue was making significant contributions to the spread of Pentecostalism; not only was she a regular contributor, but her writings were proving so popular that the editors were convinced that the promise of one of her books would encourage more paid subscriptions. The ad proclaimed,

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Miss Argue's books sell themselves. They are a devotional series with readings for everyday in the month. In this way their value never wears out . . . May we again remind you that it is a good time to subscribe now and thus take advantage of receiving one of Miss Argue's books ABSOLUTELY FREE.¹²

Argue's influence was not limited to Canadian publications; in 1920 the first issue of the Canadian magazine, *The Pentecostal Testimony*, there was a brief notice about its American counterpart, *The Pentecostal Evangel*, published by the General Council of the Assemblies of God, in Springfield Missouri. Zelma Argue was a regular contributor to the *The Pentecostal Evangel* as well, indeed with approximately 175 pieces of her writing appearing there between 1920 and 1969,¹³ this American publication with Canadian readership was where 70 per cent of her published articles appeared.

Zelma Argue: Authority in Print

Zelma Argue regularly published over a forty-nine-year period, representing three distinct periods in her life. Born in 1900, she was twenty years old when her first work appeared in print, and by the fall of 1939, she had published eighty four articles. During the war years, sixty more articles appeared; and from 1946 to 1969 the remaining ninety one articles were published.¹⁴

It was not uncommon for women's work to be published in religious periodicals; indeed, in her reflections on the history of women and publishing in Canada, Carole Gerson asserts that "publications emanating from women's religious organizations" were one of the most common forms of women's publications during the twentieth century.¹⁵ Where Argue's writing seems to differ from the usual pattern, however, was in the kinds of writing that she produced because she wrote for the general Pentecostal audience, not only for women or children as was the case for most female authors. Instead, she garnered an audience as a travelling evangelist, and because of her experiences, she came to be regarded as one who had her finger on the very pulse of the Pentecostal movement's development.

Argue was convinced that there was a great role for these Pentecostal publications to play in the expanding movement and creating common bonds. She described the reach of her writing, saying

. . . these publications have been blessed to many. Word has reached us of folks being saved in their homes, when they would not come to the revivals, through reading the gospel literature carried home. Then these too, would come to the services and cause all to rejoice, by telling what great things God had done.¹⁶

Reading led to conversion, conversion led to participation, and participation led to group encouragement or the creation of community.

Establishing Community: Expansion and Extending Influence, 1920-1939

Perhaps the most overt example of Argue using her writing to create a sense of shared community was her work for *The Latter Rain Evangel*, published in Chicago, where she authored a regular column entitled “The Get Acquainted Page” from 1938-39.¹⁷ This column regularly featured people, properties, and events that would interest like-minded Pentecostals by keeping them up to date with news of travelling evangelists, church congregations, and camp meetings.¹⁸ In each case, Argue pointed out her personal connection with the leaders of the ministries in question, thus establishing the central role that she was playing in creating and maintaining the networks and webs of relationships that existed among Pentecostal leaders.

When she featured a church camp in southern Ontario, she was encouraging Americans to attend the family camp there, describing in detail the amenities, accommodations, and driving directions.¹⁹ This promotional role was one that Argue often played, encouraging her readers to visit each other’s sites whenever the opportunity arose, and thus participate in Pentecostal experiences together, reinforcing the ties between them.

News about upcoming events was only one form of Argue’s writing. More common was her writing about testimonies of conversions and baptism in the spirit, and she often tucked such stories into the texts of her reprinted sermons. Here again, one sees how this print publication served to create a sense of community. For those who had attended her meetings, the publication was a reminder and reinforcement of the message they had heard, and the spiritual manifestations they had witnessed. Just as important, and maybe more so in terms of imagined community, for those who were unable to attend the campaigns in person, the publication made them feel part of the event by putting a print copy of the sermons into their

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hands. Examples of these sermons abound.

Argue was convinced that her writings could have an impact even if she was not personally present to preach or give witness or instruction, highlighting the importance she attached to publishing. Speaking about the power of the written word in Pentecostal publications, she explained:

Whole revivals have had their inception through these little messengers finding their way into some lonely place when hearts were hungry. Learning of the great things God is doing in different places, hearts have been inspired to seek the Lord until they too would receive the showers of latter rain, and a revival be born in their community.²⁰

To reinforce the truth of this claim about the power of writing, consider the 1937 article, “From the Depths of Despair to Heights of Glory,” based on an exchange of correspondence between Argue and a prostitute who came into the faith because of Argue’s publications.²¹ Although they had never met in person, the power of the printed word, and of Argue’s personal correspondence with the woman, were very dramatic. By retelling the story and reprinting some of the letters themselves, Argue hoped that the impact of her writing would continue to ripple out as other people read the story of this woman’s dramatic conversion and baptism in the Spirit.

In this first period, then, even before the age of forty, Zelma Argue spoke and wrote with profound authority in spite of her relative youth and her gender because she had been so fully immersed in the movement and in ministry from such a young age.

War Years: Sacrificing and Self-Denial, 1939-1945

In July 1944, Argue reiterated how important the Pentecostal publications were particularly during the war years.

Reading is becoming more and more a national pastime, especially with gas rationing making former pleasures often unavailable. The *Gospel Publishing House*, in using actually tons of paper, is putting out great quantities of choice literature, behind which there is careful thought, and many prayers.²²

The renewed emphasis on the importance of publications during times of gas rationing is significant because travel restrictions and wartime commitments meant that, while fewer people were free to attend large campaign meetings, the literature could still do its work. She cited, for

example, “one of our women, working in a defense plant, [who] has a friend there another woman, whose home, she discovered, was on the verge of being broken up.”²³ Publications could speak to the needs of Pentecostal war workers and their unsaved friends.

Keeping up morale was a common theme during wartime, and Argue made many references to the hardships that people were enduring. She was not immune to discouragement herself, and many of her examples seem to be autobiographical ones as she reminded herself that the sacrifices she was making were worthwhile. In 1943 she wrote:

Maybe you don't like sitting up all night in a crowded coach? It helps to recall that Christ slept many a cold night on the hillsides of Judea. You don't like to sleep in different beds, and grief of constantly packing clothes, only to have Bibles and heavy books get them all out of press? You don't like on the closing night to have to collect your things when exhausted, and to prepare to move on? Remember there are millions doing just this much for their country, leaving all that heart holds dear. Remember that this is the secret of the amazing growth of our movement. God Himself raised up a band of flaming souls a generation ago, who were willing to go anywhere, endure any hardship, and *do the work of an evangelist* in tents, on street corners, in brush arbors or cottage meetings. The rest has followed as outgrowth.²⁴

Belying her own fatigue, Argue reasoned “Even Jesus was wearied, and sat by the well at noontide. Yet He did more. He spoke to one person there, a sinful woman. And my conscience is never quite clear, unless I see if I can find a *Reveille*, or some bit of gospel literature, and hand it over with a friendly gesture, and some appropriate word, to the young person in uniform, who is generally sitting across from me.”²⁵

In part, these references to the hardships she endured could be interpreted as wartime rhetoric about the sacrifices that everyone was making for the cause.²⁶ But Argue's tone reflected the additional stress she was under after the death of her mother in 1939.²⁷ In addition, the fact is that Zelma was now a middle-aged woman and the demands of travel were taking their toll on her emotional state. Throughout the war years she warned her readers (and perhaps by inference, herself?) not to make compromises for the sake of their own comforts. “The moment our movement reaches the place where we must all have settled and secure appointments, we must become like other denominations that have begun

to wane and dwindle.”²⁸ And yet, very soon after the war’s end, she gave up the itinerant lifestyle and took up a pastorate in Los Angeles, California – a position she shared with another woman for more than a decade.

Years of Maturity: Rooting, Reminiscing, Renewal, 1946-1969

Beginning in the war years, but continuing on afterward, Argue expressed fear about the danger of Pentecostals lapsing into complacency. Her writing in the postwar years turned even more heavily toward the theme of the need for a return to Pentecostal roots, as in the glory days. This was a reflection of the fact that more time had passed, that the imminent return of Christ had not materialized, and that Argue could now speak from the position of an elder stateswoman – who had devoted her youth and middle years to travelling for the cause.

Examples abound of Argue urging Pentecostal readers to return to their roots, review their personal practices, and regain the enthusiasm and passion that had characterized the early years of the movement. In the titles of her articles, she asked her readers direct questions about Pentecostal practice, including: “Where are you on Sunday nights?”; “Are We Going Forth or Settling Down?”; and “Will you be an Oil Pourer?”²⁹ In addition, she wrote instructions on “How to Enter the House of God,” “Their Secret – unbroken Communion,” “Sitting Before the Lord,” “When you Can’t Sleep,” “Lingering Before the Lord,” and “The Waiting Meeting,”³⁰ in which she taught about the practices of fasting, tarrying, speaking in tongues, and cultivating intimacy with God.

With the passage of time, not only did Zelma Argue’s experience profile grow as she added more successful evangelistic campaigns to her resume, but her authority grew as she could use that experience to exhort readers to recapture the essence of the movement and to renew their spiritual fervency. Yet as she aged, Argue did not adopt a completely negative view and it would be an oversimplification to assume that hers was simply the case of the older generation holding contemporary youth in contempt. Instead, she continued her role of encourager and spokesperson for the “early days” of the Pentecostal movement into her later years, speaking from a position of maturity and wisdom, as one who had the status of an “elder” in the movement. In 1956, she wrote an article entitled “Memories of Fifty Years Ago,” on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Azusa Street revival even though she was only a child, six years of age, when the original outpouring occurred. By virtue of her connections

and personal relationships with the founders of the movement, now elderly or deceased, Argue wrote with authority about the early days.³¹ She was not only nostalgic, but exhortative as she explained that responsibility for the waning of the movement rested with believers who had failed to continue in the practices that were typical of the early days of the movement. On one occasion, she invoked the metaphor of molten lava, to communicate the idea that God's power erupts every so often, and that if the Pentecostals grew cold in their enthusiasm for spiritual things, then God would find other groups and other means to manifest His power in a new eruption.³² That lava metaphor would prove to be prophetic.

By the 1960s, toward the end of Argue's ministry career, the charismatic renewal movement was spreading to other denominations, and reminiscent of the lava metaphor, Argue took note of the fact that Pentecostals no longer had a monopoly on the manifestations of the Spirit. It is interesting to note, however, that she did not lament this development, but embraced it wholeheartedly. As she reminded her readers, many of the earliest Pentecostals had come out of other denominations originally, and so this new development should not be viewed as a failure on the part of Pentecostals, but rather as a new move of God, to recruit even more believers into the things of the Spirit. That nimble and open spirit meant that Argue's writing had enduring appeal, even as the Pentecostal/charismatic movement took a significant turn in the last decades of the century.

Conclusion

Zelma Argue's writing changed over time from unbridled enthusiasm and reporting of campaign successes in the 1920s and 30s; to acknowledging the hardships of ministry during wartime; to a postwar emphasis that recognized the waning of Pentecostal enthusiasm yet encouraged a stalwart faithfulness and adaptability even when the expected eschatology was not unfolding within the timeframe Pentecostals had originally expected. In each of these stages of her writing career, Zelma Argue's central role in the North American Pentecostal movement was reinforced and her authoritative voice was clearly heard. Despite other developments to the contrary for the majority of Pentecostal women, Argue's influence continued throughout the twentieth century. In her writing career from 1920-1969, Argue defied the gendered limitations typically ascribed to her sex.

Endnotes

1. Sheryl Shearer claims that Zelma Argue “wrote more articles for *The Pentecostal Evangel* than anyone except C.M. Ward” (see Frederick A. Muster and Mel Gram, “Obituary of Zelma Argue,” *Christian Life Center*, (29 January 1980), quoted in Shearer, “Zelma Argue: Handmaiden of the Lord,” *A/G Heritage* (Spring 2002): 21. Indeed the claim about Argue’s prolific publishing is easily substantiated with an online search of the periodicals available at the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center website: www.ifphc.org. A search for “Zelma Argue” in the online digitized periodicals reveals 202 items.
2. On Zelma Argue’s theology, see Pamela Holmes, “The Theology of Zelma and Beulah Argue,” Unpublished paper presented at the 38th Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Eugene, Oregon, 25 March 2009.
3. Zelma Argue, *Contending for the Faith*, 2nd ed. (Winnipeg, MB: The Messenger of God Publishing House, 1928), 66. This publication was a revised version of a 1923 publication entitled *What Meaneth This*. Both publications are held at the archives of Calvary Temple, Winnipeg, Manitoba.
4. Argue, *Contending for the Faith*, 83.
5. Brian Hogan, “Print and Organized Religion in English Canada,” in *History of the Book in Canada: Volume III 1918-1980*, ed. Carole Gerson and Jacques Michon (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 287.
6. *The Pentecostal Testimony* 18, no. 10 (October 1937): 26.
7. Kevin Kee, *Revivalists: Marketing the Gospel in English Canada, 1884-1957*. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007).
8. Robyn Sneath, “Imagining a Mennonite Community: *The Mennonitische Post* and a People of Diaspora,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 22 (2004): 217-18.
9. Sneath, “Imagining a Mennonite Community,” 210.
10. Sneath, “Imagining a Mennonite Community,” 215. Sneath concludes: “To the outside observer, the periodical may appear to offer little; its conventions of speech and cultural scripts of weather, crops, and greetings to a seemingly endless, faceless list of individuals, seem to make for lackluster reading. However, the *Post* is not meant for outside observers. For the adherents of this community this is the story of their lives, and the ostensibly arbitrary details of weather and names are the threads that sustain the community. In many respects, this community is not imagined at all. Its members are just as tangible, their experiences just as recognized, their burdens as shared, and

their voices at least as loud, as if every member of this community lived in the same literal village and sat at the same table . . .”

11. The four titles were: *The Beauty of the Cross*, *Strenuous Days*, *Prevailing Prayer*, and *Practical Christian Living*.
12. *The Pentecostal Testimony* 18, no. 10 (October 1937): 26.
13. Of a total of 235 articles, 175 (70%) were published in *The Pentecostal Evangel*, 43 (20%) in *The Pentecostal Testimony*; and 17 (less than 10%) in *The Latter Rain Evangel*. Her publications in *The Latter Rain Evangel* appeared between 1927 and 1939 when it ceased publication.
14. Because she was so prolific, publishing her work simultaneously in the three periodicals under consideration here, one might suspect that at least some of the writing was reprinted from one magazine to another. However, upon close examination of her titles, there were only ten occasions when this seemed to be the case, and even then, only six of these articles were exact reprints, appearing within a matter of weeks in two magazines (four times in *The Pentecostal Evangel* and *The Pentecostal Testimony*; and twice in *The Latter Rain Evangel* and *The Pentecostal Evangel*). Significantly, the duplication usually occurred in the period when she was travelling most frequently, that is, before 1935; after that, while she sometimes wrote on the same theme in two different publications, her titles were similar only four times, and the content was substantially different in the two publications. *The Latter Rain Evangel* ceased publication by 1939, so in the two later periods of Argue’s life, there are only two papers under consideration.
15. Carole Gerson, “Publishing by Women,” in *History of the Book in Canada Volume III*, eds. Gerson and Michon, 319.
16. Argue, *Contending for the Faith*, 82-83.
17. The announcement of Zelma Argue taking over this column from her brother, Watson Argue, was published in “Our Get Acquainted Page,” *The Latter Rain Evangel* (March 1938): 2. For more information on *The Latter Rain Evangel*, see <http://ifphc.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=products.agpublications>
18. She featured the following ministries: The Mizpah Missionary Rest Home, New York City run by Miss Lillian Kraeger; the Pentecostal Work in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, pastored by Harold C. McKinney; the Lakeshore Pentecostal Camp at Cobourg, Ontario, started by Pastor G.A. Chambers; the Living Waters Pentecostal Camp Meeting Grounds and Evangelistic Center in Western Pennsylvania, about twenty-two miles northeast of Indiana, under the direction of Brother David McDowell; a Home Missionary Project in the Kentucky Mountains, and the initiative to establish the Mountain Bible

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School, under the direction of Rev. O.E. Nash of Cincinnati, Ohio; the story of the founding of Trinity Gospel Tabernacle in Bloomington, Illinois, pastored by Miss Elsa Schmidt; the story of Bethel Pentecostal Church in Ottawa, Ontario, pastored by Zelma Argue's brother-in-law, C.B. Smith, and her sister Beulah Argue Smith; and the story of The Appleton Gospel Temple, in Appleton, Wisconsin, pastored by Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Goudie, a former city fire inspector.

19. Zelma Argue, "Paving the Way for a Miracle," *The Pentecostal Evangel* (19 September 1936): 2-3.
20. Argue, *Contending for the Faith*, 83.
21. "From the Depths of Despair to Heights of Glory," *The Pentecostal Evangel* (13 November 1937): 4.
22. Zelma Argue, "Gather ... That Nothing be Lost," *The Pentecostal Evangel* (8 July 1944): 7.
23. Zelma Argue, "Daily in the Temple and in Every House," *The Pentecostal Evangel* (11 December 1943): 9.
24. Zelma Argue, "Do the Work of an Evangelist," *The Pentecostal Evangel* (21 August 1943): 7.
25. Zelma Argue "My Soul Desireth the First-ripe Fruit," *The Pentecostal Evangel* (15 April 1944): 7.
26. Zelma Argue, "Courageous Commandos," *The Pentecostal Evangel* (10 February 1945): 2.
27. Zelma Argue, "When God's Clock Strikes the Hour," *The Pentecostal Evangel* (29 January 1952): 4.
28. Zelma Argue, "Do the Work of an Evangelist," 7.
29. *The Pentecostal Evangel* (31 July 1955): 2; (30 May 1965): 15; and (18 May 1969): 3-4.
30. *The Pentecostal Evangel* (28 August 1966): 5; (2 June 1963): 6, 29; (20 September 1959): 20-21; (20 February 1966): 5; (10 March 1957): 4, 29; and (19 January 1964): 7-8.
31. Zelma Argue, "Memories of Fifty Years Ago," *The Pentecostal Evangel* (22 April 1956): 29.
32. Zelma Argue, "Molten Lava," *The Pentecostal Evangel* (15 April 1933): 6.