



“True Evangelical Faith” in Anabaptist-Mennonite Hymnody: A Barthesian's Semiotics Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the meaning of the hymn lyrics "True Evangelical Faith" using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The main focus is to identify the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings contained in the symbols contained in the hymn lyrics. The method used is qualitative with semiotic analysis. Data collection involves observing the lyrics of the hymn True Evangelical Faith, then studying them in depth using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. The data analysis includes three stages: first, analyzing the denotative meaning to reveal the literal meaning of each symbol; second, connotative analysis to explore the deeper meaning related to the command to love in the Christian teachings described; and third, identifying the myths formed through the hymn's symbols. The results of the study show that the meaning of the lyrics of this hymn depicts total love for others as the embodiment of the ideology of "fear of God", as well as the embodiment of feelings that influence one's motivation both physically and emotionally, through various symbols such as flesh, blood, shelter, and so on. In other words, the lyrics of the hymn True Evangelical Faith fully represent the love Jesus taught.

Keywords: Anabaptist-Mennonite Hymnody, Barthesian Analysis, Evangelical Faith, Hymnody, True Evangelical Faith.

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INTRODUCTION

“True Evangelical Faith” is a song composed by Menno Simons (1496-1561), the founder of the Anabaptist church. This hymn-style song, as part of the liturgy of the GKMI (Muria Christian Church of Indonesia), was translated by Charles Kristanto and titled “Iman Injili” (Evangelical Faith), and is used primarily during the mission segment of worship services. In GKMI worship, “True Evangelical Faith” appears in PPR I (Spiritual Praises, Volume II), second edition, published by the GKMI Synod in Semarang. Larry Nickel's melody conveys a solemn yet majestic atmosphere.

GKMI is an Anabaptist-Mennonite church, a movement first pioneered by Menno Simons. Simons himself did not write a comprehensive doctrine. His writings consist solely of practical answers to the challenges of Christian life. Based on this fact, Wagner (1991), for example, suggests that the distinctive characteristics of Anabaptist-Mennonite thought are more biblical in nature than theological. Nevertheless, these teachings are still evident in several key points, namely: 1) the Old and New Testaments are sources of faith inspired by the Holy Spirit, and the Bible serves a role in a person's salvation and sanctification rather than being used as a means to construct a theological system (Rodh, 2005), 2) the Anabaptist-Mennonite focus lies on the nature of the Church and its place in society. For adherents of this tradition, the Church and the state must be separated; 3) the Church is viewed as an egalitarian, fraternal community. Therefore, the Mennonites do not accept a hierarchical system. They base their beliefs on Jesus' teaching in Mark 23:8 that “...you are all brothers,” 4) the Church must do everything possible to bring back members who have fallen into sin so that they may return to the right path without the use of force (Kraybill, 1998), 5) they reject the concept of sacraments. Therefore, Mennonites refer to certain church ceremonies only as symbols or ordinances. Nor do Mennonites view baptism in a magical (mystical) sense as a means of calling the Holy Spirit to enter the believer's life; rather, baptism is the way Christians demonstrate their commitment to God through Jesus Christ and open their hearts to the presence of the Holy Spirit as the One who sanctifies, reconciles, corrects, and assures humanity (Mulvaney, 2020), (6) According to the Anabaptists, the essence of Christianity does not lie in sacraments or theological systems, but rather, as Wagner (1991) emphasized, “the essence of Christianity was thought of as discipleship, a faithful ‘following-after’ of Christ, a resolute obedience to the ethical demands of the New Testament” (Horton, 2017; O'Reggio, 2016).

These core tenets of Mennonite teaching, in the context of praxis, are an ongoing process and culminate in what are known as the “core spiritual values” of the Mennonites, which include several elements: 1) the value of “Gelassenheit/Yieldedness” (fruitful obedience) in both internal and external aspects, 2) the value of radical discipleship, 3) the value of nonviolence, and 4) the value of peacemaking praxis to advocate for restorative justice and conflict transformation. These spiritual values, which are authopneumatic in nature, do not stand alone but manifest dynamically and dialectically through sound doctrine (orthodoxy) and in the practice of a righteous life (orthopraxy) (Listijabudi, 2018; Martin, 2022; Rempel, 2020).

That is the “spirit” of the song “True Evangelical Faith,” which is more deeply inspired by Jesus’ own command in John 5:24: “Truly, whoever hears my words and believes in him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.” The lyrics of “True Evangelical Faith” are based on a passage from a paragraph in one of Menno Simons’ treatises, “Why I Do Not Cease Teaching and Writing,” from 1539 (Menno, 1966). Based on this song’s text, Simons emphasizes that true faith or true knowledge gives rise to love, and love gives rise to obedience to God’s commandments. This obedience to God’s commandments is absolute and non-negotiable. This true faith or true knowledge is grounded in certain values, particularly the value of “Gelassenheit/Yieldedness” (fruitful submission), both internally and externally, as well as the value of radical discipleship (Listijabudi, 2018). Thus, God’s command is clear: to love God by serving others. Menno (1966) wrote it as follows.

....in this way true faith or true knowledge begets love, and love begets obedience to the commandments of God. Therefore, Christ Jesus says, He that believeth on him is not condemned. Again, at another place, Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. John 5:24. For true evangelical faith is of such a nature that it cannot lie dormant, but manifests itself in all righteousness and works of love; it dies unto the flesh and blood; it destroys all forbidden lusts and desires; it seeks and serves and fears God; it clothes the naked; it feeds the hungry; it comforts the sorrowful; it shelters the destitute; it aids and consoles the sad; it returns good for evil; it serves those that harm it; it prays for those that persecute it; teaches, admonishes, and reproves with the Word of the Lord; it seeks that which is lost; it binds up that which is wounded; it heals that which is diseased and it saves that which is sound; it has become all things to all men. The persecution, suffering, and anguish which befalls it for the sake of the truth of the Lord is to it a glorious joy and consolation (Wenger & Menno, 1984).

Song lyrics essentially serve not only as a means of communication, entertainment, or purely aesthetic expression, but also as a reflection of society and culture (Zorkeply et al., 2022), as well as a means of expressing emotions (Amelia & Aryaneta, 2022). In the context of church music, the function of lyrics becomes even more complex, as song lyrics also serve as a means of spiritual expression due to their spiritual nature (Sasongko, 2021). In the context of church music, various themes emerge in common spiritual expressions such as the Word, love, the body, blood, the cross, friends, hope, grace, and so on.

The hymn “True Evangelical Faith” is one of many Christian hymns centered on the theme of love. The “love” referred to here is agape—selfless, boundless love. In the lyrics of this hymn, love is not merely expressed explicitly through words, but also through symbols that draw on visual and metaphorical imagery. Such expressions create a profound experience for the congregation as they sing along. Congregants are faced with the task of interpreting these symbols. Through the use of rich symbolism, this hymn creates an ideal experience of fulfilling Christ’s command—one of serving unconditionally, yet in a way that liberates and brings joy. This phenomenon is worth examining through a semiotic approach, as the meanings it contains appear to be deeply profound and beautiful.

In this article, the author seeks to examine the meaning behind the lyrics of the hymn “True Evangelical Faith” through Roland Barthes’s semiotic approach. Barthes offers a framework for analyzing how meaning is created in texts—whether in the form of writing, images, or written discourse—including song lyrics (Hatam, 2021). Barthes’s concept of semiology is fundamentally inseparable from Ferdinand de Saussure’s concept of semiotics, yet it is broader than Saussure’s, which is limited to linguistic aspects. According to Saussure, a “sign” consists of a signifier and a signified, while “meaning” is what the sign denotes. Barthes distinguishes meaning into denotative meaning—that is, the literal or descriptive meaning of a sign—and connotative meaning—that is, additional meaning of a conceptual or cultural nature. For Barthes, connotation refers to something new, which he describes as a “myth” (Barthes, 1957). Thus, a myth exists on the level of connotative meaning and is metaphorical in nature; according to Barthes, a myth is a system or mode of communication that conveys a message: “‘myth’ as a system of communication bearing a message” (Hatam, 2021; Muskan, 2024). Thus, a myth is not an idea, a concept, or an object, and this is also Barthes’s new concept of myth; a myth is not a story about gods and goddesses.

Many researchers have studied the meaning of love behind a song, but most of these studies have focused on secular music. Semiotic studies of church music based on Roland Barthes’s semiotic theory are extremely rare—if not nonexistent. In the realm of secular music (Indraswari & Sofyaningrum, 2025), uncovering symbols within lyrics can create emotional meaning, but this is not systematically linked to any specific semiotic theory. Fitri (2024) examined the use of love metaphors, but analyzed only linguistic aspects rather than semiotic ones. Azzahra et al., (2024) explored how symbols in songs are used to represent feelings of longing and sadness in the context of love, but did not analyze their cultural meanings (myths). Siddiq and Salama (2021) reveal that song lyrics contribute to social change; song lyrics have the ability to capture people’s attention to convey a message, but they do not go so far as to analyze the lyrics as myths.

Based on these facts, an analysis of the representation of love in the lyrics of the song “True Evangelical Faith” using Roland Barthes’s theory is important, because the meaning of love can be derived from an exploration of its denotative and connotative meanings, as well as its myths. A sound, accurate, and straightforward understanding of the meaning of love contained in this song will enable the Anabaptist congregation to realize their faith more tangibly in their daily lives.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method, drawing on Roland Gerard Barthes’s semiotic approach to examine the meanings in the lyrics of the hymn “True Evangelical Faith” by Menno Simons. This qualitative approach is more appropriate because the study aims to identify and understand meanings—in this case, those within Barthes’s semiotic system. The visualization of semiotic notation for the song’s lyrics is classified according to the denotative (D), connotative (K), and mythological (M) meanings in the lyrics, based on an analysis of the signs

and symbols in the hymn. The lyrics of “True Evangelical Faith” are examined in depth to identify the denotative and connotative meanings in each line of the poem.

During the data analysis phase, the researcher employed a three-stage semiotic analysis technique: first, an analysis of denotative signs that reveal the direct meaning of the hymn’s lyrics; second, a connotative analysis to explore deeper meanings related to the lyrics presented in the hymn; and third, the identification of myths contained within the hymn. This method allows the researcher to uncover the layers of meaning hidden within the hymn’s lyrics, thereby providing deeper insight into its most profound meaning. This approach enables a reading that is not only descriptive but also interpretive, so that the research findings can reveal the construction of meaning in the lyrics in a more in-depth and contextual manner. In this interpretive model, Roland Barthes distinguishes between the denotative and connotative levels of meaning. Denotation is the level of description and literal meaning as agreed upon by members of a culture (Hatam, 2021). This third stage is the mythological reading. According to Barthes, a myth is a way of conveying a message; the meaning of that message requires interpretation. Myths cannot be described through the object of the message, but rather through the way the message is conveyed, and ideology often hides behind myths (Hatam, 2021). In the context of the song “True Evangelical Faith,” the symbols within it reflect the ideology (in the form of core ideas or teachings) of love that is widespread in Christian tradition and civilization.

RESULTS

The Meaning of the Song “True Evangelical Faith”

An analysis of the hymn “True Evangelical Faith,” composed by Menno Simons, reveals that the commandment to love is presented through visual metaphors, emotional symbols, and a strong mythical structure. This hymn reflects how, in the Anabaptist tradition, the commandment to love is portrayed as a deeply intense emotional experience—full of hope yet imbued with tenderness. In this study, semiotic analysis is used to uncover the meanings contained in the lyrics of the hymn “True Evangelical Faith.” Through Roland Barthes’s semiotic approach, this study focuses on understanding the denotative signs that shape the representation of love in the hymn. The following table presents the results of the analysis of the hymn’s lyrics, identifying the denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings associated with the symbols in the song. The semiotic notation of the song’s lyrics is classified based on denotative (D), connotative (K), and mythological (M) meanings. A denotative sign consists of a signifier and a signified; it is conceived by humans, is fixed, literal, and possesses universal meaning. A myth is a system of communication; therefore, every message always carries meaning. Below are the original lyrics of “True Evangelical Faith” (Wenger & Menno, 1984).

Song Lyrics	(D)	(K)	(M)	The Meaning of Love
The true evangelical faith is such a nature that	√	√		A characteristic expression that comes from Christ.
it cannot lie dormant; but manifests itself in all righteousness	√	√	√	An emotional outpouring and intense passion for love.
and works of love; it dies unto the flesh and blood	√	√	√	The spirit and determination to make sacrifices in order to uphold one's faith.
it destroys all forbidden lusts and desires;		√	√	Love is the power that fights against sin.
it seeks and serves and fears of God;		√	√	Forms of love in action.
clothes the naked;		√	√	An expression of love.
it feeds the hungry;		√	√	The embodiment of Christ's teachings.
it comforts the sorrowful;		√	√	The embodiment of Christ's teachings.
it shelters the destitute;	√	√	√	Love made Real.
it aids and consoles the sad;		√	√	Being there for those in need.
it returns good for evil;	√	√	√	The embodiment of Christ's teachings.
it serves those that harm it;	√	√	√	The commandment to love one another.
it teaches, admonishes and reproves with the Word of the Lord;	√	√	√	The nature and manifestation of the Holy Spirit's work.
it seeks that which is lost;	√	√	√	Christ, who loves His people.
it binds up that which is wounded;	√	√	√	Spirit of Service
it heals that which is diseased	√	√	√	Being There for Others
and it saves that which is sound;	√	√		A companion that is always by your side.
It has become all things to all men.	√	√	√	To be a blessing to all people.

Table 1. An Analysis of True Evangelical Faith

Information:

(D) = Denotative

(K) = Connotative

(M) = Myth

When analyzing the meaning in a hymn's text, Barthes's semiotic approach offers a systematic framework for understanding the symbols it contains. Generally, semiotic analysis unpacks meaning starting at the denotative level—or literal meaning—then moves to the connotative level, which carries emotional and cultural significance, and ultimately reaches the mythical level, which reflects broader social and cultural constructs. In this study, this model is applied to the lyrics of the hymn "True Evangelical Faith," which reveal deeper meanings.

Below is a diagram of a semiotic analysis model that illustrates the process of reading a text—from denotative meaning to myth—in a step-by-step and operational manner.

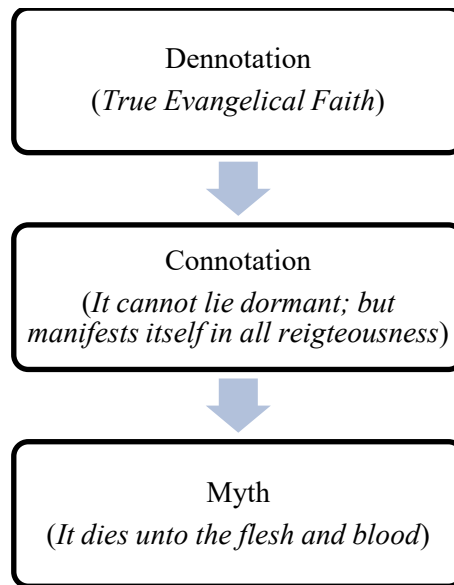


Figure 1. Semiotic Analysis Model

The lyrics of the hymn “True Evangelical Faith” depict various characteristics and manifestations associated with Christ’s teachings, which are analyzed through their denotative and connotative meanings. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a word, as in the line “it seeks and serves and fears God,” which describes an “action”—that is, doing something good for others or one’s neighbors—as indicated by the words “seek” and “serve.” However, the connotation of this expression runs deeper: “fears of God.” This means that the action is not merely about serving, but is motivated by a fear of God. In other words, the fear of God serves as the “spirit” that drives one to seek and serve others. This illustrates that God’s command influences a person’s motivation on a deeper, more emotional level. In this context, “seek” and “serve” symbolize deeper feelings that demonstrate sincerity and emotional engagement, while also reflecting the Mennonite perspective—namely, being a disciple of Christ with awareness, willingness, and wholehearted devotion (Kriswanto, 2020).

The Implied Meaning in True Evangelical Faith

Based on Roland Barthes’s semiotic analysis of the lyrics of the hymn “True Evangelical Faith,” several implied meanings emerge, as follows.

Fear of God Affects a Person’s Motivation

In the subsequent verses, it becomes evident that the “fear of God” permeates the entire meaning of the poem—as in “clothes the naked,” “feeds the hungry,” “comforts the sorrowful,” “shelters the destitute,” “aids and consoles the sad,” and so on—which translates into motivation for concrete actions. The denotation of nearly the entire poem is concrete service, while its connotation depicts the characteristics of Christ’s followers. This concept is related to the idea of true love for God, which has a direct impact on tangible actions. According to Barthes’s theory, a symbol is a system embedded within meaning that conveys values,

ideologies, and significance. Love in the lyrics of the hymn “True Evangelical Faith” is depicted through symbols that manifest in behavior; acts of love are not merely emotional expressions but tangible actions involving the body. In Barthes’s concept of myth, this becomes a symbol of the power that emerges when people have deep feelings toward something—which, in this context, is “the fear of God.” Thus, the realization of the concept of “fear of God” as reflected in concrete actions is to be embraced as a “way of life”; as stated in John 13:34, a way of life rooted in love is a reflection or replica of the source from which that love springs (Hia & Emen, 2023). Previous studies have shown that love, in its various dimensions, influences concrete behavior; it is an ideology that shapes the practical dimension (Ando, 2021; Baumard, 2022; Rokach, 2024).

Fear of God Gives Rise to Emotional Strength

One of the verses that illustrates the concept of strong love is “it teaches, admonishes, and reproves with the Word of the Lord.” This verse states that love provides emotional strength. Its denotation is courage in proclaiming the gospel—declaring that what is good is good and what is evil is evil—while its connotation suggests that the fear of God provides the energy and strength to proclaim the true goodness of Christ; a courage in facing the challenges of mission. In a semiotic analysis, this can be seen as a symbol of the strength granted by the Spirit of Courage through the fear of God. According to Barthes’s theory, this kind of spiritual perspective empowers a person, both physically and emotionally. Several studies, such as those conducted by Melhe (2021), Mokline & Ben Abdallah (2021), Pahwa (2022), and Russo-Netzer & Ameli (2021), indicate that a deep sense of love can enhance an individual’s emotional resilience in difficult situations. Love rooted in faith provides encouragement and often serves as a source of strength when facing adversity.

Fear of God Reveals the Hidden Meaning of Love

Lyrics has distinctive characteristics. Because it often takes the form of verse, its expressions are not complete sentences, yet they remain understandable. In other words, poetry does not require many words to convey a message. The denotation of the poem “True Evangelical Faith” is the absence of superfluous words in expressing the commandment of love based on faith in Jesus. The clauses are more imperative in nature, while the connotation is more one of awareness, voluntariness, and obedience in carrying out the command, as in the verses “it clothes the naked,” “it feeds the hungry,” “it comforts the sorrowful,” “it shelters the destitute,” “it aids and consoles the sad,” and so on. In semiotic terms, this suggests that true love needs no justification or excessive discourse, for it already has its own path. According to Barthes, symbols in culture often reveal deeper, hidden meanings and require verbal expression to be understood (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017; Dragomir et al., 2021; Ivy, 2022). This suggests that in healthy relationships, nonverbal communication is often more powerful than mere words.

Love Gives Rise to an Egalitarian Attitude

The fear of God must be an attitude shared by all Christians; thus, in God's eyes, all people are equal. This is evident in the verse "it has become all things to all people." Being all things to everyone indicates being a blessing to all people regardless of educational level, race, social class, or wealth. This anti-clerical attitude (Rodh, 2005) is also a hallmark of the Mennonites, who reject any hierarchy based on Jesus' own words in Matthew 23:8 to his disciples not to use the titles "teacher" or "father," because "you have only one Teacher, and you are all brothers." Several studies indicate that an egalitarian attitude has a positive impact on the success of a specific mission or goal (Waedoloh et al., 2022). For example, they reveal that the concept of leadership is closely related to a leader's power to acquire the means to influence the behavior of their followers, thereby enabling the group's goals to be achieved synergistically. The poems in "True Evangelical Faith" do not explicitly express anti-clericalism, but it is implicitly present in the verses. Lines such as "it aids and consoles the sad" or "and it saves that which is sound" reveal the "essence" of anti-clericalism.

Love Is Practical, Not Theoretical

This expression ultimately embodies the spirituality of the Mennonites. All the verses in the hymn "True Evangelical Faith" are inspired by the opening line, "The true evangelical faith is such a nature," indicating that this perspective prioritizes practice over theory. In other words, the verses inspired by the opening line are practical in nature, as noted by Rodh (2005): "Mennonites today tend to emphasize the practical life of Christian discipleship more than debates about abstract points of doctrine," with a central theme found in the line: "it has become all things to all men." In other words, the values of Mennonite spirituality are evident when members of the congregation are conscious of putting Christ's teachings into practice within society. As Stanley M. Burges stated in Gultom (2018), "They are categorized more as 'doers' than as 'thinkers' in the field of missions."

True Faith That Heals

The act of healing, in its denotative sense, is found in the lines "it binds up that which is wounded"; "it heals that which is diseased." This refers to a physical act of recovery—that is moving from a state of illness to health, or from a wounded state that is treated and bandaged until it is healed. However, in its denotative sense, this condition applies to those who are emotionally wounded. Sin, in this context, is viewed as capable of causing a person to be wounded and to die, for if a person persistently remains in their sin, they have placed themselves outside the bounds of the Church (Kraybill, 1998). Indeed, there has long been a debate over whether some sins lead to death and others do not (Zebua & Zega, 2023). However, at the very least, sin has caused people to suffer inner pain, feel discomfort, and experience constant guilt. As mentioned earlier, according to Barthes, symbols in culture often reveal deeper, hidden meanings and require verbal expression to be understood. In this context, symbols can be understood at the level of myth—that faith can heal, save, and give life—as

revealed in Jesus' words in Mark 10:52 through an event of salvation by faith. Theological studies examining saving faith can be found in Johanes (2024), Mauclau (2021), Satria & Malik (2023).

By understanding some of the meanings contained in the lyrics of the hymn "True Evangelical Faith," it becomes clear that this hymn is not merely a hymn like those typically found in church songbooks: it is a reflection of Menno Simons' faith in Jesus Christ. In terms of form, the lyrics are not much different from the poetic lyrics of hymns in general. However, in terms of content, the lyrics offer a distinctive perspective—one that has even become an icon for the Anabaptist church—namely, total and wholehearted service as the embodiment of evangelical faith.

DISCUSSION

Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis shows that "True Evangelical Faith" does not portray faith as a passive belief, but rather as a faith that moves toward a concrete love. Denotatively, the text describes a series of actions such as seeking out and serving others, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, comforting the grieving, protecting the abandoned, binding up the wounded, healing the sick, and serving even those who have harmed us. Connotatively, these actions mark the character of a disciple of Christ shaped by love, self-denial, the fear of God, and obedience to God's word. Mythologically, this hymn embodies an Anabaptist-Mennonite ecclesiological vision: true faith must be evident in nonviolent service, solidarity, equality, and a willingness to be a blessing to all people.

The second finding is that the motif of "fear of God" in the hymn does not function as a passive fear, but rather as an affective orientation that drives action. "Fear of God" becomes a source of moral courage to reject forbidden desires, to rebuke others based on God's word, and to serve others. Thus, love in these hymns has both an emotional and a physical dimension, meaning that love is not only felt but also put into action.

The third finding is that the hymn combines "the language of action" and "the language of proclamation." The acts of feeding, protecting, helping, and healing constitute a witness to the Gospel through praxis; whereas teaching, admonishing, and proclaiming the Word constitute a witness through words. Both converge in the expression "it has become all things to all people," which articulates the call to be present for everyone without discrimination.

This finding aligns with a major trend in Anabaptist theology that views discipleship as a concrete way of following Christ (Berry, 2016; Holmes, 2024; Weaver, 2016). In this tradition, faith does not stop at intellectual assent to doctrine but is tested through obedience to Jesus' teachings and example. Therefore, a reading of this hymn reveals that church hymns function as practical theology. The lyrics of the hymn not only reflect theological teachings but also actively shape the way the congregation understands and lives out their faith.

Within the framework of research on Mennonite peace, findings regarding loving service and not repaying evil also resonate strongly. Studies in "The Conrad Grebel Review" show that Mennonite peace practices are shaped by faith, an understanding of community, and

a vision of social justice; this tradition moves beyond mere nonresistance toward active peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Thus, lyrics such as “it returns good for evil” and “it serves those that harm it” should not be read as a passive endorsement of injustice. On the contrary, both point to a love that rejects the cycle of retaliation, builds solidarity, and seeks restoration. These verses also remind us that peace praxis must continually examine power relations, for the ideal of love and equality can lose its critical edge if it remains insensitive to violence against women, racism, or other forms of exclusion (Bergen et al., 2017).

Findings regarding the relationship between hymns and the formation of faith are consistent with practical theological research on congregational singing. Recent studies on the formative power of congregational singing affirm that singing does not merely express inner states but shapes spirituality by leading the congregation from self-centered experiences toward an orientation toward God and collective action (Bemey, 2026; Benjamins, 2021; Bjorlin, 2025; Priyanto, 2024; Tang (Michael), 2026). Similarly, research on contemporary worship music indicates that congregants can “become what they sing,” meaning that the repetition of liturgical language shapes the community’s imagination, identity, and way of life (Do, 2023; Roberts, 2024). In the context of this article, the repetition of acts of love in hymns has the potential to shape a congregational habitus that views social service, forgiveness, and presence for the vulnerable as integral parts of the evangelical faith.

From the perspective of Barthes’s semiotics, the main contribution of this study lies in its explanation of how symbols of ministry give rise to a theological myth. Words such as “flesh and blood,” “clothing,” “food,” “shelter,” “wounds,” and “illness” do not merely refer to biological needs. In the context of Christian culture and faith, it is important to understand that these signs point to a broader narrative of the Incarnation, self-denial, compassion, healing, and the church’s mission. The myth that is formed is not a fictional story about a god, but rather a system of meaning that makes an ideology seem reasonable: a person of genuine faith is one who is present and acts on behalf of others.

However, the findings of this study must also be interpreted critically. The phrase “it has become all things to all people” can support an egalitarian vision, but it can also be misused to demand unlimited service from certain individuals or groups. Christian love is not synonymous with the elimination of personal boundaries, tolerance of violence, or acceptance of oppressive relationships. Therefore, a responsible theological interpretation must be grounded in love, justice, the protection of victims, and communal discernment. This aligns with the development of Mennonite peace theology, which emphasizes the need to connect theological reflection with the concrete experiences of practitioners and to continually examine blind spots in church practice (Bergen et al., 2017).

The main strength of this study is its consistent use of Barthes’s model to distinguish between denotation, connotation, and myth. This model allows the study to move from lexical meaning to cultural and ideological meaning, so that the hymn is interpreted not as a series of separate moral statements, but as a text that shapes a vision of faith, the church, and society. Another strength is the connection between textual analysis, the history of Menno Simons,

Mennonite spirituality, and the context of the GKMI. This connection makes the interpretation more contextual than a purely aesthetic reading of the lyrics.

This study also has practical value because it links semiotic findings to the concepts of “commitment to the Gospel,” “the language of action,” and “the language of proclamation” in the context of the GKMI. Thus, the article goes beyond simply identifying symbols; it highlights the potential connection between hymns, church identity, and the practice of witness.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations, including: 1) the research corpus consists of only one hymn, so the results cannot be generalized to all Anabaptist hymns, all church music, or all GKMI congregations; 2) the analysis focuses only on the lyrics and has not examined how congregants actually understand, feel, and apply the message of the hymn. Thus, the meanings formulated by the researcher are not necessarily identical to those constructed by singers, worship leaders, pastors, or different congregational groups; 3) Barthes’s analysis is interpretive. This means that the identification of denotative, connotative, or mythological signs is influenced by the researcher’s cultural knowledge and theological stance. Therefore, readers need to distinguish between what is explicitly stated in the text, theological inferences drawn from the Mennonite context, and claims about the actual impact on congregational behavior.

The first implication for church practice is the need to view hymns as part of discipleship, not merely as a filler in a liturgical service. Worship leaders and church educators can accompany the singing with a brief introduction explaining the connection between faith, love, and action. After singing the hymn, the congregation can be directed toward concrete actions that align with the lyrics—such as food ministry, accompanying those who are grieving, visiting the sick, protecting vulnerable groups, or reconciliation initiatives. This recommendation flows directly from the finding that love in hymns is always expressed through action.

The second implication relates to theological education. This hymn can be used as a pedagogical text to teach the relationship between Christology, ecclesiology, ethics, and mission. Students can be asked to map each symbol onto Barthes’s three layers and then examine whether the resulting meanings are consistent with the Gospel, Anabaptist spirituality, and the experiences of the communities served by the church.

The third implication for church leadership is the importance of interpreting love in an egalitarian way while remaining critical of power. The idea of serving everyone must be translated into practices that are not paternalistic. The church should involve people experiencing poverty, trauma, conflict, disability, and marginalization as subjects with a voice, not merely as objects of service. In Mennonite peacebuilding, the inclusion of diverse voices and attention to power relations are considered essential to prevent practices that appear loving but still perpetuate domination (Bergen et al., 2017).

A suggestion for future research is to conduct a comparative study of the hymns of Menno Simons, contemporary Anabaptist hymns, and church songs from other traditions. Future research could also combine the semiotics of lyrics with musicological analysis, the history of textual transmission, and interviews or participatory observation within

congregations. In addition, other follow-up studies could attempt to empirically test the formative impact of hymns through a mixed-methods design. Surveys could measure the relationship between the frequency of singing hymns, understanding of love, and participation in ministry; in-depth interviews could explore emotional experiences and changes in life orientation; while observations could assess whether the language of action and the language of proclamation truly go hand in hand in congregational practice. Thus, interpretive semiotic research can be complemented by evidence regarding the reception and socio-theological consequences of hymns.

Overall, True Evangelical Faith demonstrates that hymns can serve as “theology set to music.” They encapsulate beliefs, shape the moral imagination, and guide the community toward acts of love. The contribution of this research will be further strengthened if this symbolic interpretation is developed through dialogue with congregations, musicological analysis, and an evaluation of the church’s ministry and peacebuilding efforts.

CONCLUSION

Evangelical theology within the context of Anabaptist doctrine is oriented toward a commitment to the Gospel. However, this evangelical theology specifically takes the life and ministry of Jesus Christ as its point of reference. As mentioned above, the lyrics in the song “True Evangelical Faith” serve as the soul or “spirit” in the embodiment of both the language of action and the language of proclamation. Through the art of music, this Mennonite ideological message can be conveyed not only normatively but also aesthetically.

Based on an analysis of denotation and connotation within the context of Barthes’s semiotics, it was found that the lyrics of the hymn “True Evangelical Faith” convey Mennonite concepts and teachings so profoundly—both emotionally and in terms of action—that it can be said this hymn has succeeded in becoming an effective and efficient means of communication in the development of the congregation’s faith. True Evangelical Faith is depicted as a force that influences motivation, provides emotional strength, and demonstrates sincerity without the need for many words. The myths within this hymn include the idea that the fear of God can actually provide strength, deepen awareness of God’s commandments, and encourage wholehearted service to others without discrimination—which also constitutes Mennonite spirituality. Overall, the lyrics of this hymn illustrate that God’s love is not static but dynamic, evolving alongside the church. On the other hand, the implications of this study reinforce the relevance of Roland Barthes’s semiotic approach in uncovering the layers of symbolic meaning in hymn lyrics. This study demonstrates how symbols and myths in a hymn can shape social and emotional constructs—in this context, regarding the commandment to love one’s neighbor. In essence, hymns are nothing less than a form of ideology for adherents of the Mennonite movement.

Competing interests

The authors state that there are no conflicts of interest regarding this publication.

Author contributions

M.H.S. conceptualized and designed the study, acquired data, performed the data analysis, and drafted the manuscript. C.J.S and D.C.H. participated in the data analysis and article writing.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research. This study is based on Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis of the lyrics to the song "True Evangelical Faith" by Menno Simons and does not involve direct contact with human or animal participants or environmental interventions. Therefore, ethical approval from an ethics committee is not required.

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Data availability

This research uses primary data collected directly by the researchers through interviews, observations, and documentation. The researchers did not use external datasets from other parties.

Disclaimer

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