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Henry Gamble's Birthday Party

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Henry Gamble's Birthday Party

Abstract

This is a film review of *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party* (2015), directed by Stephen Cone.

Author Notes

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Henry Gamble's Birthday Party is about one day in the life of an evangelical Christian family, namely Henry's birthday. Henry's party guests include Henry's church friends, some secular friends, and adults from Henry's church, where his father, Pastor Bob, is the minister. Many of the partygoers are keeping secrets and most of them are dealing with issues of sexuality in one way or another. The secrets and how partygoers deal with their sexual desires are revealed throughout the movie.

The movie opens with a scene of Henry and his best friend Gabe masturbating to the image of one of the girls they both know. This is a secret they cannot share. Henry's sister, Autumn, a student at a Christian college, has lost her virginity to her ex-boyfriend. She's angry about this but cannot tell anyone why she's so angry. Henry's mother, Kat, confesses to Autumn a secret affair. Henry's father claims to have forgiven Kat, and while it looks at first like the marriage has weathered the storm, it turns out that Kat needs time away from Pastor Bob after all. During the party, Gabe surrenders to temptation with one of the girls, saying "Lord forgive me," over and over, to the rhythm of his intercourse. And on, and on. Finally, at the end of the film, we find Henry asking Logan, a homosexual friend, if he would like to kiss.

This is a movie where it would be easy to mock evangelical Christians for being hypocritical, self-righteous, harshly judgmental, and lacking humility. But the movie does not take this turn. What the movie shows us is how members of this particular evangelical community (the family and church of Pastor Bob) try to deal with the powerful feelings they have and try to navigate the complex relationships of their lives. What we find is that their approach to the most complicated elements of their lives is formulaic. They have a set of rules that must be followed. "No sex before marriage." "No sex outside of one's marriage." "No drinking." "No vulgar

music.” “No inappropriate dress.” They also have clichés they use to deal with the “sinful” situations in which they find themselves, like asking the Lord’s forgiveness while in the act of sinning or using the phrase “Love the sinner, hate the sin.”

How does this formula or method work for the evangelical community of the movie? Not well, of course, as we can see from the secrets and sexual behaviors of the party goers. This might be taken as a slam on evangelicals, but many people who are not evangelical Christians also try to navigate the complexities of life through a method or formula (rules and clichés). Thus the movie’s message is to everyone who tries to turn the complexities, subtleties, nuances, and anomalies of life into something simple, something to be mastered by means of rules and clichés. Judgment and insight will serve us better than a method or formula. This is a message for all of us.

Albert Camus once said, “When one has no character one *has* to apply a method.”¹ Building or developing one’s character is hard work and a never-ending process. It is complicated and difficult. But character gives us the opportunity to live life and make decisions through judgment or discernment, rather than the application of rules or formulas. We are much more likely to live well by developing character than by following rules.

¹ Albert Camus, *The Fall* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 11.