

AlbertMohler.com

An Unexpected New Motherhood Debate

Tuesday, September 2, 2008

Labor Day 2008 came with a bang as Hurricane Gustav plowed into the Gulf Coast and as the presidential campaign of Sen. John McCain revealed that the daughter of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin is five months pregnant, and yet unmarried. The word spread quickly, even as Americans celebrated their end-of-summer holiday with an unusual attentiveness to the news.



A statement released by the McCain campaign got right to the point, quoting Gov. Palin and her husband, Todd:

“Our beautiful daughter Bristol came to us with news that as parents we knew would make her grow up faster than we had ever planned. We’re proud of Bristol’s decision to have her baby and even prouder to become grandparents.”

The release added little to that statement, other than that the father is an 18-year-old named Levi and that the young couple plans to get married.

McCain advisor Steve Schmidt said, “Life happens.” McCain speechwriter Mark Salter commented, “An American family.” Millions of Americans wondered, “What’s going on here?”

The Palin family asked to be left to deal with this privately, an understandable impulse for any family. But this isn’t just any family at the present. The moment Sen. John McCain announced Gov. Palin as his running mate, the entire Palin family became a public issue. This was amplified by the fact that the entire Palin family (except for the oldest son, Track, soon headed for deployment in Iraq) stood there before the public.

One central feature of the public introduction to the Palins was the presence of Trig, the 4-month-old baby boy who is the couple’s fifth child. Trig was diagnosed with Down syndrome prior to his birth, and the Palins translated their pro-life beliefs into a beautiful portrait of human dignity. As the couple said, they never even considered aborting the baby, but considered him a gift from God.

Now there is another gift — this time in the form of a pregnant daughter and a child conceived outside of marriage. The Palins spoke of their pride in the fact that their daughter would keep her baby and marry the father. Once again, the Palin family chooses life over death, birth over abortion, when aborting the baby would be justified by many and considered the easy way out of an embarrassing situation. Yes, that baby is a gift, as is every single living human being, born and unborn.

But the entire nation felt the awkwardness of the situation, and even part of the embarrassment. Yes, as Steve Schmidt said, “Life happens,” but not always like this. And Mark Salter is certainly correct in describing the situation as “an American family.” Still, this is not the script many families would choose — especially evangelical families who had been most encouraged by Gov. Palin’s choice as Sen. McCain’s running mate.

Will this damage the McCain-Palin ticket in November? Time will tell, but there is good reason to doubt that it will.

Teenage pregnancy is hardly unknown these days, and the very public decision to keep the baby will encourage pro-lifers all the more. The press is likely to leave this issue alone, at least as much as possible.

A more interesting angle on this story has to do with the question of motherhood. In this case it is the Governor as mother that is the issue, rather than the daughter. As Jodi Kantor and Rachel L. Swarns of *The New York Times* frame the issue:

When Gov. Sarah Palin of Alaska was introduced as a vice-presidential pick, she was presented as a magnet for female voters, the epitome of everymom appeal.

But since then, as mothers across the country supervise the season's final water fights and pack book bags, some have voiced the kind of doubts that few male pundits have dared raise on television. With five children, including an infant with Down syndrome and, as the country learned Monday, a pregnant 17-year-old, Ms. Palin has set off a fierce argument among women about whether there are enough hours in the day for her to take on the vice presidency, and whether she is right to try.

It's the Mommy Wars: Special Campaign Edition. But this time the battle lines are drawn inside out, with social conservatives, usually staunch advocates for stay-at-home motherhood, mostly defending her, while some others, including plenty of working mothers, worry that she is taking on too much.

I was asked about this on Friday in an interview with Stephanie Simon of *The Wall Street Journal*. As that paper reported:

So Ms. Palin's decision to accept the nomination for vice president just four months after the birth of her disabled son gave pause to a few conservatives. But just for a moment.

"If I were her pastor, I'd be very concerned for her and her family," Mr. Mohler said. "But it looks as though she's found a way to integrate it all in a way that works."

Well, I would be even more concerned now. Do I believe that a woman can serve well in the office of Vice President of the United States? Yes. As a matter of fact, I believe that a woman could serve well as President — and one day will. Portraits of significant men of history hang on the walls of my library — but so do portraits of Queen Elizabeth I of England and former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

The New Testament clearly speaks to the complementary roles of men and women in the home and in the church, but not in roles of public responsibility. I believe that women as CEOs in the business world and as officials in government are no affront to Scripture. Then again, that presupposes that women — and men — have first fulfilled their responsibilities within the little commonwealth of the family.

Is this kind of public role what most women want? Clearly not, and for that I am honestly thankful. The tasks assigned to women within the home are monumental. The maternal role is crucial, and the vast majority of women find their greatest fulfillment in this role — and for good reason. In the roles of wives and mothers women do what no one else can do so naturally and so well.

What does all this mean for Gov. Palin? *The New York Times* reported:

For decades the anti-abortion movement has brought together a broad alliance of conservatives concerned about both the moral value of a fetus and traditional gender roles. Ms. Palin rejects both abortion and stay-at-home motherhood, and most conservatives have praised her choices. The news that she would be a grandmother only enhanced their enthusiasm, with many describing themselves as thrilled to see so prominent a display of pro-life commitment.

Count me in on the thrill of seeing such a public display of pro-life commitment, and such a prominent pro-life candidate added to the ticket. I still believe that Gov. Palin can — and I hope will — serve with distinction as Vice President of the United States.

Still, there is something to give us all pause in this picture, and those who care for the future of the family should take note and think hard.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.