

The Palin Parable - Bristol Says Abstinence 'Not Realistic At All'

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Bristol Palin, the 18-year-old daughter of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, made headlines last summer when it was revealed that she was about to become an unwed mother. On December 27, she gave birth to a baby boy named Tripp. Now, Bristol Palin is back in the news again - and this time by her own choice. She granted an interview to Fox News Channel's "On the Record."

At the same time the pregnancy was made public last summer, Bristol's mom had just been announced as Sen. John McCain's choice to be his running mate. This put the pregnant teenager into the glare of national publicity. Many were impressed and thankful as Bristol Palin and Levi Johnson, her fiance' and the baby's father, made a commitment not to have an abortion but to welcome the baby. They lived up to that pledge, and baby Tripp seems to be doing quite well.

Bristol's parents also affirmed the sanctity of human life when they made a similar commitment during Gov. Palin's pregnancy with a child with Down syndrome. The vast majority of unborn babies identified as carrying the marker for Down syndrome are now aborted, but the Palins said they never even considered aborting their baby. Little Trig Palin, soon to be a year old, was seen by millions of Americans during the course of the campaign. That one baby became a testimony to the worth of every single human life.

Bristol Palin is back in the headlines, and some Americans may be shocked. Bristol told Fox News that teenagers should not have sex. However, she also said that sexual abstinence for teens is "not realistic at all."

These comments seem contradictory, but the national media immediately leapt upon Bristol's apparent rejection of sexual abstinence as an expectation for teenagers. To her credit, she maintained a clear pro-life perspective, even as she admitted the difficulty of being a teenage mother. But the rejection of sexual abstinence as "not realistic at all" caught many off guard.

As reported in the press, Bristol's statement lacked context. But, many in the media simply reduced the story to her statement about abstinence. Consider this headline from the Associated Press: "Palin's Daughter Says Abstinence 'Not Realistic.'"

Many people who admired the way that the Palin family handled their family crisis last summer will be rightly disappointed with this new word from Bristol. But, leaving Bristol's personal situation aside for now, her comment deserves a closer look.

Is sexual abstinence realistic for teenagers and young adults? Well, abstinence is certainly not realistic when teenagers put themselves - or they are put there by others - into a situation where sexual activity is likely. At some point, sexual abstinence becomes very unrealistic indeed.

The real issue for Christian teenagers and their parents is not to debate whether sexual abstinence before marriage is realistic or not. The larger and more important issue is that sexual abstinence until marriage is the biblical expectation and command. Once this is realized, the responsibility for everyone concerned is to ensure that expectations and structures are in place so that abstinence is realistic.

The debate over whether abstinence is realistic or not misses the more important issue - abstinence must be made realistic.

Parents and teenagers must make certain that adequate protections and expectations are in place so that sexual abstinence is very realistic indeed. Far too many Christian parents allow their teenagers to be part of the "hooking up" scene of teenage culture. In that highly sexualized context, sexual abstinence would appear unrealistic in the extreme.

Premature pair dating and unsupervised liaisons, set within the supercharged culture of teenage sexuality, can put teenagers into very vulnerable situations. Asking whether sexual abstinence in those contexts is realistic can appear almost irrational.

Those who reject the norm of sexual abstinence for teenagers will leap on Bristol Palin's statement as evidence for their cause. But the real issue here is our responsibility to ensure that abstinence is made realistic and stays realistic. Anything short of this is truly "not realistic at all."

