

# Trust Women.

A Christian ethical framework  
that recognizes abortion as a moral decision  
and honors *all* the reproductive paths women travel  
as they thoughtfully, responsibly make  
moral decisions about their lives  
and their families.

An introduction to the book *Trust Women* by Rebecca Todd Peters

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Quotations and page numbers refer to the paperback edition:

*Trust Women: A Progressive Christian Argument for Reproductive Justice*

By Rebecca Todd Peters

Beacon Press, Boston (2018)

## A new vision of parenting:

**“Child-bearing is a deliberative moral act  
rather than an accident of nature.”**

—*Trust Women*, p. 172

Becoming a parent is a sacred responsibility.  
Parenting is making a covenant commitment to a child.

But it is not a required or prescribed role for women. No one is morally obligated to become a parent. It is a role that must be chosen freely and one that may be freely declined.

No one should be forced to carry a pregnancy or become a parent.  
Every pregnant person should have the opportunity to embrace or to reject their pregnancy.  
A pregnant person makes this decision carefully in the complex context of their own life and their family, situated in a particular economic and social world.

We can trust women to make good moral decisions for themselves and their families. We should focus on helping women solve whatever problems they face in their reproductive lives—from lack of access to safe abortions to lack of economic support and parental leave when they become parents.

(pp. 172-177)

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**“A woman’s willing participation is a prerequisite for pregnancy to be understood as a moral act. Coerced pregnancy under any circumstance, for any reason, is a fundamentally immoral act that violates bodily integrity, respect for individual persons, and the human rights of individuals to choose to procreate or not to procreate.”**

—*Trust Women*, p. 175

## Key questions addressed in *Trust Women*:

- **Why do 1/4 of women get abortions & why do most women not regret their abortions? (pp. 30-52)**
  - What obstacles in our society get in the way for women who want to embrace a pregnancy and become a parent to a new child?
  - What obstacles in our society get in the way for women who want to end a pregnancy?
  - Why do women who carry unwanted pregnancies to term overwhelmingly choose not to put their child up for adoption? (pp. 173)
  - Why does our culture and society treat women as if they are incapable of making a good decision about their pregnancy? (pp. 108-11)
  
- **Why does a narrow justification framework dominate public discourse about abortion? (pp. 3-7)**
  - What are the Christian roots of the justification framework? (pp. 124-131)
  - How does the binary (pro-life vs pro-choice) nature of the framework distort the conversation about abortion? (pp. 132-136)
  - How does this narrative impact non-religious people? Where are the voices of other Christian traditions?
  - How has this framing misrepresented the views of a majority of people in the U.S, around the world, and throughout history? (pp. 132-137)
  - How has this framing hurt women by requiring them to justify their reasons for ending a pregnancy? (pp. 139)
    - Why is it hypocritical to allow certain socially acceptable justifications for abortion but reject others? How has society used this distinction to control which women are encouraged to have babies and which are forbidden? How has access to abortion been an issue of privilege in our society? (pp. 140-147).
  
- **How should we think about a potential child in utero? Let's use a new term: "prenate" instead of "fetus" or "baby." (pp. 4-5)**
  - What is the history of our views about the prenaté? (pp. 92-95, 100-105, 128-131, 151-155)
    - What does the Bible say about the status of the prenaté? (pp. 94)
    - What non-religious groups have influenced our understanding of the prenaté? What were the goals of those groups and movements, and how have they undermined women's authority over time? (pp. 105-113)
  - How can we use the idea of a social, relational personhood that develops over time to understand the unfolding process of pregnancy? (pp. 155-162)
  - How can we develop a rich Christian ethics of sexuality and parenting that rejects our culture's patriarchy and empowers women to discern and live out their callings? (pp. 90-96, 170-172)
  - How can we recognize and acknowledge the value of potential life AND also recognize and acknowledge the fundamental distinction between a newborn person and a not-yet-born prenaté? (pp. 163-169)

**“The moral question we face is how to create a society where women’s lives and well-being, and the well-being of their families and communities, are public-health priorities.”**

*--Trust Women, p. 186*

**In a just world:**

- Everyone has the human right to decide whether and when to become (or try to become) a parent.
- Parents have the human right to raise children in safe, healthy and supportive environments.
- The only person who can embrace a pregnancy and agree to carry it to term is the pregnant person.
- No one will be forced to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term *for any reason*, including an inability to access or afford contraception or a safe abortion.
- No one will be forced or coerced to end a wanted pregnancy *for any reason*, including economic constraints, lack of support or maternity leave, fear of domestic violence, social pressure, or social stigma.
- A pregnant woman may make a good, faithful moral choice to reject and end her pregnancy.

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**“Our public policy ought to focus on addressing systematic social problems rather than attempting to police the behavior of individual pregnant women”**

*--Trust Women, p. 55*

## Religion and Abortion

Because a minority, conservative Christian tradition has set the terms of the pro-life/pro-choice debate, religion shapes the lives even of those who are not religious (pp. 124-136).

And yet mainline Protestant churches overwhelmingly support the legal protection of abortion (though their perspectives on the issue are largely ignored in media coverage relative to Catholic and evangelical Christians).

Christians disagree about the moral status of the pre-nate, now and throughout history. Historically, pregnancies weren't confirmed until quickening (4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> month) and so prohibitions against abortion referred to ending pregnancy after 16-20 weeks. The primary concern was the fear that abortion would allow a woman to cover up her (and her partner's) sexual sin, rather than any particular concern for the pre-nate. The Bible does not mention abortion at all (pp. 90-95).

## Abortion access in the U.S.

**“Not only is the history different for different groups of women—Protestant, Catholic, immigrant, US-born, black, white, married, unmarried—but attitudes and opinions about which women should have babies and under what conditions have changed dramatically over time”**  
—*Trust Women*, pp. 98-99

Our patriarchal society has a long history of trying to control women's bodies beyond criminalizing abortion. Our rules have prohibited certain women from having children: as recently as the 1970s, we have forced sterilization of Native American and Puerto Rican women, and we continue to attempt to prevent poor women from having children. We have also forced women to bear children, as in our history of enslaving Black women (pp. 113-119). We also have exerted this pressure more subtly through narrow ideas of gender roles equating women with mothers. The movement to criminalize abortion only got momentum when middle-class, married white women began widely using abortion to control their fertility in the 1850s (pp. 109-111, 119-120).

We have always accepted certain abortions as permissible, if tragic, but only in the cases where women fit our ideas of how a woman should behave and what she should want (for instance, a “sexually pure” woman who was raped—or a woman who wants to become a mother but faces the tragedy of a medically complex pregnancy). **These exceptions to our attitudes about abortion show us that our rules have been more about controlling the women who don't fit our gender roles than about having universal ethical principles about the morality of abortion (pp. 140-145).**

## **Problems with the pro-life/pro-choice framework**

The pro-life/pro-choice debate harms and undermines women, and it fails to do justice to the moral issues at stake. We should move away from a justification framework and towards a justice framework.

### **The justification framework**

Our dominant cultural approach to abortion uses a justification framework. This framework emphasizes the wrong moral questions:

- Which abortions are permissible? What are adequate reasons—justification—for abortions?
- The pro-life/pro-choice debate gives answers to those questions. (p. 135).
  - A pro-life perspective says: there are no justifications for abortion (or very narrow, limited justifications).
  - A pro-choice perspective says: Yes, abortion is justified. (“When the issue is framed as a violation of women’s bodily integrity and forcing women to bear children against their will, there can be no doubt that women must be able to decide whether to continue a pregnancy” (p. 136).)

But both of these positions are inadequate.

- “In their most extreme forms, the pro-life frame’s emphasis on the “unborn baby” supplants any meaningful recognition of pregnant women as worthy moral actors, and the pro-choice frame’s singular attention to women’s rights to bodily integrity eclipses recognition of any potential moral worth of the prelate. These frames are inadequate for dealing with the moral complexity of abortion and distort our public conversation” (p. 136).

### **The justification framework makes two key assumptions.**

1. Women should bear children; and therefore have an obligation to give birth when they become pregnant.
2. The prelate has an equal or greater moral status as the pregnant person.

If we challenge these assumptions, we can see the possibility of new frameworks for understanding the morality of abortion.

- “If there was not a presumption of an obligation to carry to term, a woman would be free to make a *decision* about whether to continue a pregnancy” (p. 137).
- “When we decenter the prelate from the equation and approach the situation from a neutral perspective, we can see that the moral dilemma is not whether abortion is justified, but what to do in the face of an unwanted or problem pregnancy” (p. 131).

**“While we regularly require women to justify their desire to end a pregnancy, there is no parallel requirement for women to justify keeping a pregnancy and subsequently becoming a mother.”**

*–Trust Women, p. 146*

### Problems with a justification framework

- Requiring justification assumes that abortion is always an illicit act. But: “For many women, terminating a pregnancy is a positive moral step within the story of her life” (p. 137).
  - Many women feel no moral obligation to carry every pregnancy to term, and it is one narrow religious perspective that is responsible for this idea (p. 138).
  - It is possible that in some cases it is actually immoral to carry a pregnancy to term, when a woman lacks the ability or desire to maintain a healthy pregnancy or raise a child (p. 138).
  - “It bears repeating however, that only the women themselves are in a position to assess their circumstances and evaluate the moral nature of the options they face” (p. 139).
- Requiring justification creates a cultural climate “in which the decisions and behavior of all pregnant women are subject to public moral scrutiny” (p. 140).
  - This contributes to our cultural trends of erasing the moral agency of pregnant women “even as their bodies and the most intimate details of their private lives [are] made hypervisible and subject to public debate” (p 111).
    - We don’t trust women to make a good decision for themselves, but we do assume law makers, doctors, and religious authorities can make a moral decision by looking at her situation from the outside.
- The kinds of reasons we accept as justification lead us to only have compassion for women who “conform to traditional expectations about women’s sexual behavior and motherhood” (p. 145).

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**“As we consider what sort of framework should replace the justification framework, we should remember that it must not only respect women and their moral agency but also provide the necessary support that women need to make positive moral decisions about whether to continue their pregnancies.”**

*–Trust Women, p. 139*



## A new framework for understanding pregnancy

**“A woman’s acceptance of a pregnancy and her willingness to enter into a relationship with the prenaté signals the beginning of her moral obligation to carry that particular pregnancy to term.”**  
*--Trust Women, p. 175*

Pregnancy is a special, liminal state. It is a biological state, but also a social one that slowly transforms the identity of the pregnant woman (pp. 155-159).

When we focus on the social realities of pregnancy, we can see the importance of a pregnant person’s free choice to embrace or reject her pregnancy (pp. 172-177). When she embraces a pregnancy, she begins the process of relationally preparing for the personhood of the prenaté—a personhood that will begin with birth and a newborn’s separation from its mother, when it ends its total dependence on the body of another (pp. 160-169). Other people cannot embrace a pregnancy in the place of the pregnant person. It is ultimately her decision, and the decision is always made in the context of an actual specific pregnancy she is faced with at a precise moment in her life (p. 162)

**This interpersonal, community-based understanding of the pregnant person and the prenaté is a deeply Christian understanding of identity and relationship.** We become people through our relationships with others, and this is true also of a prenaté, who becomes an independent person at birth, but is not one yet. God shows us what it means to enter into covenants and community-commitments freely. God gives us the ability to discern our callings. An unplanned pregnancy is a moment where a woman must discern her calling and consider whether she is willing to embrace the covenant commitment of parenting this potential child. She has no moral obligation to accept this role unwillingly (pp. 174-177).

The unfolding social-biological process of a wanted pregnancy creates a bond between a pregnant person and a prenaté (pp. 158-163). Almost all women who carry a pregnancy to term will reject the option of adoption and will come, through the experience of pregnancy, to accept their moral obligations to a new child (moral obligations that a woman in the early stages of pregnancy does not yet have to an embryo or fetus) (pp. 172-173). A woman may embrace a pregnancy and then discover medical complications. Women who choose abortions in these situations recognize the differences between their not-yet-fully-formed obligations to a potential child and their real moral obligations to living children (pp. 167-169). These difficult decisions are made with love and moral seriousness.

A woman may freely choose to reject any particular pregnancy for any reason. The biological presence of an embryo or fetus does not in itself create a moral obligation or a relationship. The prenaté is a potential human life and worthy of moral consideration, so the choice to embrace or reject a pregnancy is a solemn moral decision. But the prenaté does not have a complex, independent moral status as a person, equal with the weight of the personhood of the pregnant person (pp 162-165). The prenaté is not a pregnant person’s enemy or antagonist (pp. 168). Pregnancy is not punishment for sexual sin, nor is it necessarily a

blessing from God (though parents come to find that their children bless them in many ways) (pp. 54, 171, 202-203). The existence of a pre-nate is a biological fact that initiates a social, moral decision-making process that can transform the identities of the pregnant person and the pre-nate. This moment is just one crossroad in the full, complex reproductive life of a woman.

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**We should support women in discerning their callings. We should give women the resources they need to make good moral choices about their reproductive lives.**

**When women choose to embrace a pregnancy, we should ensure they have access to health care, economic stability, safety, and the resources they need to follow through with their commitments to a child (pp. 191-195).**

**When women choose to reject a pregnancy, we should ensure they have access to health care, safety, economic stability, and freedom from social stigma and censure. We must treat all women with respect for their carefully made choices, without shaming them or undermining their God-given moral competence (pp. 180-184, 203-206).**

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## **Abortion as a good moral decision**

We should trust women to make thoughtful, moral decisions for themselves and their families.

**“Drilling down into the realities that shape the lives of women with unwanted pregnancies demonstrates that they are making reasonable and informed moral decisions to end their pregnancies.”**

*–Trust Women, p. 40*

Abortion is a common part of the stories of women’s reproductive lives.

Abortion is almost universally not regretted (p. 139). Women who have abortions are aware of the magnitude of their decision. Most women who get abortions are already parents. Almost all abortions are done in the first trimester, and most second-trimester abortions are done at that time because a woman lacked the knowledge and/or access to have procured an abortion in the first trimester (pp. 30-52).

We must listen to women and respect the factors they consider in making the huge moral decisions about their reproductive lives.

Some women with an unwanted pregnancy or a wanted-but-medically-complex pregnancy will reflect deeply about the moral status of the prenaté, and they might experience abortion as a tragedy and a moral dilemma. (But even these women almost never come to regret their abortions.) Other women will experience the situation of an unwanted pregnancy as a decision—not a moral dilemma at all. Abortions become one piece of a person’s ongoing reproductive story (pp. 204-206).

We must challenge the voices that seek to undermine a woman’s authority to discern the best choices for herself and her family.

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**“Women’s capacity to control their fertility is a moral good. Abortion can be a good and responsible decision that women make faithfully, without regret, and without shame.”**

*–Trust Women, p. 205*

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