

Sunday, May 18, 2014: 1 Peter 2:2-10

by [Mark Ralls](#) in the [May 14, 2014](#) issue

A young girl stands before her classmates and teacher. Her teacher has chosen to be cruel. “Is it true,” asks the teacher with a sneer, “that your father is a drunkard?” The girl is well aware that her father comes home very late at night. She also knows the condition he is in when he does finally come home. Yet she responds flatly. “No,” she says. “My father is not a drunkard.”

In one of his essays, Dietrich Bonhoeffer uses this example to ask the question, “What does it mean to tell the truth?” What are we to make of this girl who brazenly refutes an indisputable fact? That’s a complicated question, but for Bonhoeffer the answer is clear. The girl did not lie. She spoke a truth that was deeper than what her teacher or classmates could grasp. (I found this in Eric Metaxas’s book *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*.)

Deeper truths are not warranted by the bare facts of surface realities or present circumstances. They draw instead upon the full depth of the encounter between two people—two people who have come to love each other. The girl speaks truly out of her encounter with her father, a person who is much more to her than someone with a drinking problem.

When the author of 1 Peter writes, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (2:9), he is speaking in a similar way. The recipients of his letter lived in the northwest corner of Asia Minor, far off the grid of Roman power. They were viewed as backward people, and they were subject to demeaning prejudice and occasional persecution. Mostly, they were simply forgotten. A people with no social standing, they were deemed unworthy of defending.

It is to these people that the letter proclaims such lofty praise, with words better suited to the Roman elite who ignored them.

What do we make of this? Is the writer telling a truth, a lie, or something in between? When a statement lacks both the intentional deception of a lie and the required accuracy of a truth, we often call this “stretching the truth.” Perhaps the author of 1 Peter is pulling and pressing words like the Silly Putty I played with as a

child. *Chosen, royal, holy*—he hopes to superimpose these words over the hardscrabble circumstances of these new believers. He's applying elevated language to a reality that they do not immediately fit. So we could conclude that 1 Peter is simply stretching the truth.

The philosopher Harry Gordon Frankfurt prefers a more colorful term for this. In his celebrated little book *On Bullshit*, Frankfurt argues that those who pursue this viable alternative to lying and truth telling are not merely compromising between the two. They are doing something that is different in kind.

According to Frankfurt, truth tellers and liars get their bearings from the same thing: from something they acknowledge to be true. One moves deliberately toward it. The other moves away from it—consciously and just as deliberately as the truth teller. But the one who practices this third, much baser art—the bullshitter—never even bothers to locate the truth in the first place. “He does not care,” says Frankfurt, “whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out . . . to suit his purpose.”

“You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.” If this isn't a straightforward truth or lie, does it rightly belong in this less-than-noble third category?

I don't think so. The reason lies in the fourth declaration, in the verse that follows (2:10). You are “God's own people,” says the author of 1 Peter. He is referring not just to the letter's recipients themselves but to the encounter with Jesus Christ they now share. And he doesn't ignore their lowly present circumstance. Like Bonhoeffer's brazen young girl, he simply refuses to give this circumstance more than its due. He focuses instead on “the goodness of the Lord” that never changes and on the redemptive quality of a relationship in which mercies are bestowed as generously as mother's milk. First Peter speaks deep truth.

In *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* David Bentley Hart counsels that Christians should learn “to see two realities at once.” We see “the world as we all know it, in all its beauty and terror, grandeur and dreariness, delight and anguish,” he says. Yet we also need to see the world “in its first and ultimate truth . . . an endless sea of glory, radiant with the beauty of God in every part.”

This is important and true. But the author of 1 Peter might add that it is not enough merely to see the world in this second way. We are also to give testimony about

what we see. “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation . . . *in order that you may proclaim*” (emphasis added). As “God’s own people,” we dare to speak a deeper truth.