

Translation Questions: A Brief Study of Romans 14:1-3 By Bob Young

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is corrective, based on the fact that the text is frequently misunderstood and misapplied because of translation problems. Specifically, at times the text is applied to almost every area of disagreement, including doctrinal issues. Such an application goes beyond the intent of the original author.

This article suggests a reasonable (logical), biblically valid translation of the text, in an attempt to help discern what topics and areas of disagreement can be correctly included, that is, in what areas the text can be legitimately applied.

The article argues against the use of the word opinion, primarily because the Greeks have a word for opinion, *gnome*, which is not the word used in this text.

OVERVIEWING THE TEXT: CONTEMPORARY TRANSLATIONS

Of the Spanish translations reviewed (listed in the appendix), only the SSE does not use “opinion.” SSE has “discernimientos dudosos.”

In English, the translations are more varied. ISV and ESV have “opinion.”

MKJV has “judgments of your thoughts.”

ASV has “decisions about scruples.”

BBE has “do not put in doubt by your reasonings.”

CEV has “do not criticize for beliefs different than yours.”

ERV has “do not argue with them about their different ideas.”

A LITERAL TRANSLATION WITH EXPLANATION

The text literally reads, “Receive to yourselves the one who is weak in *pistis* (belief/faith), but NOT [emphasis, by] for *diakrisis* (distinguishing/discerning/judging) of/about [genitive case, by] *dialogismos* (inward reasoning/thoughts/deliberations and questions/hesitations and doubting).” By extension, the word *dialogismos* can have the meaning of disputes or arguments, but the meanings included in the literal reading are more likely those in view in the context of Romans 14-15.

Because the word *gnome* (opinion) does not appear in the Greek text, I argue against the use of the word opinion in translation. The word opinion in contemporary usage has definitions that go beyond the meaning and intent of the text when considered in context. The basic difficulty is that to use the word opinion today usually implies that there are options. Opinion, in its typical usage today, suggests personal preference or understanding and thus suggests liberty or freedom. Such a translation favors one side over the other, because the context speaks of the liberty of the “strong in faith” Christian with a less restrictive conscience, and the conscientious restrictions of the “weak in faith” Christian. To translate *dialogismos* with the word opinion causes the text to say the opposite of what the context demands and fails to address the problem. The point of the text is that the “strong” must recognize that the hesitations and doubts of the “weak” are conscience and not opinion.

GNOME

To understand how the New Testament, including Paul, uses the Greek word *gnome* (opinion), one can consult the following texts.

Acts 20:3

1 Cor. 1:10; 7:25, 40

2 Cor. 8:10

Philemon 14

Rev 17:13, 17

ANALYZING THE TEXT AND THE CONTEXT: TWO VERBS

Further analysis of the text of Romans 14 provides help in understanding the context and informing a valid translation. In addressing the responsibilities of the two groups (strong and weak), the context repeatedly uses two Greek verbs, applying one verb to one group and the other verb to the other group. This indicates the nature of the conflict.

- To the weak, the text says, do not judge/criticize/condemn.
- To the strong, the text says, do not depreciate/demean/look down your nose at...

The use of the word *krisis* (judge) with reference to the responsibilities of the weak leads me away from using the same word in the translation of instructions directed to the strong. Thus, I prefer to discern or to draw distinctions for the text of verses 1-3.

WHAT ARE LEGITIMATE APPLICATIONS

References in the larger context to the Gentiles (see chapter 15) suggests the possibility of questions related to Jewish and Gentile relationships in the church.

What areas (beyond the two mentioned, eating and observing days) are valid applications? Is circumcision a legitimate application?

The text mentions eating vegetables or greens. Does this have to do with the question of eating meat, as in 1 Cor. 8-10? Is this a reference to genuine vegetarianism, or does it mean avoiding meats of certain types or on certain occasions?

It is hard to understand how the text can legitimately be applied to public matters. In the two matters used as illustrations, one could act in private in a certain way and restrict one's actions in public for the sake of the restrictive conscience of a brother or sister. When the liberated brother insists on including something in the public arena (the activities or assemblies of the church), the brother with the restrictive conscience has no option but to absent himself from such.

The text also makes clear that the areas of application are not doctrinal. This is apparent because Christians must always be ready to judge, identify and oppose false doctrine. Also, Paul does not use the word doctrine in the context. In the questions Paul addresses he knows there are distinct understandings of what is acceptable, according to individual conscience. Some saw the matters as binding requirements; others not. In such areas (only), one is to apply the text. When a person makes distinctions based on the hesitations and doubts of another, questions the thinking and reasoning of others, and urges others to accept an alternative position contrary to conscience, that person is transgressing the clear and obvious teaching of this text.

WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

In such areas as Paul addresses, Christians are to receive one another.

Do not try to convince the other of an alternative position; these are matters of conscience and each must follow his or her own conscience.

Do not put a stumbling block in the way of others. Do not demand that the other group accept the alternative, opposing understanding, thus offending conscience.

The principles of the text will apply especially in public settings, so that eating meat and observing days are not to be forced on another Christian contrary to the conscience of that other person. (In other passages, Paul makes clear that person freedom remains in private settings.)

This text, along with 1 Corinthians 8-10, seems to allow freedom in these areas in private settings, but always exercising caution lest one's public example be a stumbling block to another with a more restrictive conscience.

The weaker (more conservative, more restrictive) are not to be judgmental, critical, condemning. The weaker must follow his or her conscience.

The stronger (less restrictive) must not think less of the person with a different conscience, should not depreciate, demean, look down upon, dishonor.

CONCLUSION

A major problem in translating the text is that the situation addressed deals with those situations in which one Christian sees an absolute and another sees freedom. The person with more freedom of conscience (less restrictive) sees the matter as optional (opinion). The person with the restrictive understanding sees the matter as a requirement (and for such a person, it is a requirement, based on conscience). The translation must do justice to both understandings.

Therefore, the use of the word opinion can lead to misunderstandings. The translation should not be slanted to one side or the other in the disagreement. The translation should accurately reflect the meaning of *dialogismos* (inward reasoning/thoughts/deliberations and questions/hesitations and doubting), often the source of disputes and arguments, which is what Paul condemns. Looking at various English translations, one can note that the concept includes beliefs, judgments, thoughts, scruples, reasoning, and ideas.

The following is proposed as a translation: "Receive the one who is weak in belief or faith, but not with the intention of making distinctions and judgments about the thoughts and questions, hesitations and doubts of that person."

To repeat: When a brother judges my hesitations and doubts, questions my thinking and reasoning, and urges me to accept an alternative position contrary to my conscience, that person is transgressing the clear and obvious teaching of this text.

[Appendix A begins on next page]

APPENDIX A
SPANISH AND ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF ROMANS 14:1-3

SSE, Rom 14:1 *Al enfermo en la fe sobrellevad, pero no hasta discernimientos dudosos.*

Rom 14:2 Porque alguno cree que se ha de comer de todas las cosas; otro enfermo, come legumbres.

Rom 14:3 El que come, no menosprecie al que no come; y el que no come, no juzgue al que come; porque Dios le ha levantado.

RVG, Rom 14:1 *Recibid al débil en la fe, pero no para contender sobre opiniones.*

Rom 14:2 Porque uno cree que se ha de comer de todo, otro, que es débil, come legumbres.

Rom 14:3 El que come, no menosprecie al que no come, y el que no come, no juzgue al que come; porque Dios le ha recibido.

NBLH, Rom 14:1 *Acepten al que es débil en la fe, pero no para juzgar sus opiniones.*

Rom 14:2 Uno tiene fe en que puede comer de todo, pero el que es débil sólo come legumbres.

Rom 14:3 El que come no desprecie al que no come, y el que no come no juzgue al que come, porque Dios lo ha aceptado.

LBLA, Rom 14:1 *Aceptad al que es débil en la fe, pero no para juzgar sus opiniones.*

Rom 14:2 Uno tiene fe en que puede comer de todo, pero el que es débil sólo come legumbres.

Rom 14:3 El que come no menosprecie al que no come, y el que no come no juzgue al que come, porque Dios lo ha aceptado.

ISV, Rom 14:1 *Accept anyone who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of arguing over differences of opinion.*

Rom 14:2 One person believes that he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.

Rom 14:3 The person who eats any kind of food must not ridicule the person who does not eat them, and the person who does not eat certain foods must not criticize the person who eats them, for God has accepted him.

ESV, Rom 14:1 *As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.*

Rom 14:2 One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.

Rom 14:3 Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.

MKJV, Rom 14:1 *And receive him who is weak in the faith, but not to judgments of your thoughts.*

Rom 14:2 For indeed one believes to eat all things; but being weak, another eats vegetables.

Rom 14:3 Do not let him who eats despise him who does not eat; and do not let him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has received him.

ASV, Rom 14:1 *But him that is weak in faith receive ye, yet not for decision of scruples.*

Rom 14:2 One man hath faith to eat all things: but he that is weak eateth herbs.

Rom 14:3 Let not him that eateth set at nought him that eateth not; and let not him that eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him.

BBE, Rom 14:1 *Do not put on one side him who is feeble in faith, and do not put him in doubt by your reasonings.*

Rom 14:2 One man has faith to take all things as food: another who is feeble in faith takes only green food.

Rom 14:3 Let not him who takes food have a low opinion of him who does not: and let not him who does not take food be a judge of him who does; for he has God's approval.

CEV, Rom 14:1 *Welcome all the Lord's followers, even those whose faith is weak. Don't criticize them for having beliefs that are different from yours.*

Rom 14:2 Some think it is all right to eat anything, while those whose faith is weak will eat only vegetables.

Rom 14:3 But you should not criticize others for eating or for not eating. After all, God welcomes everyone.

*ERV, **Rom 14:1** Be willing to accept those who still have doubts about what believers can do. And don't argue with them about their different ideas.*

Rom 14:2 Some people believe they can eat any kind of food, but those who have doubts eat only vegetables.

Rom 14:3 Those who know they can eat any kind of food must not feel that they are better than those who eat only vegetables. And those who eat only vegetables must not decide that those who eat all foods are wrong. God has accepted them.