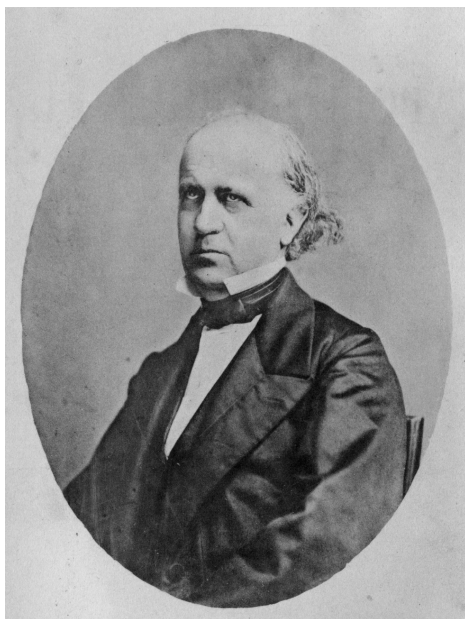


Napoléon Roussel – a short biography



Napoléon Roussel (1805-1878)

Although he was “one of the most dynamic evangelists of the Evangelical Society of France”¹ and “one of the most original figures of the *Réveil*”², Napoléon Roussel is hardly known today. He is, however, well worth knowing, he of whom Jean Monod has said that “initiative, courage, fearlessness [...] were the dominant traits of his character and life”³ and that “the incisiveness of his word, his clear and logical teaching, the respect which his person commanded and his utter selflessness were striking”⁴.

Napoléon Roussel was born in Sauve (Gard, Languedoc-Roussillon) on November 15, **1805** to Pierre Roussel (1775-1851), a former soldier in Bonaparte’s army, and Marie Rey (1770-?). Both parents worked in the manufacture of stockings.

Napoléon grew up in Lyons; from the age of 14 on he worked as a merchant’s apprentice. When his parents saw his thirst for knowledge, they asked for a scholarship at the Theological college of Geneva. Napoléon began his studies in **1825**. He met, among others, the young Adolphe Monod, who became his friend.

In **1829** he finished his theological studies. He married Antoinette Romane (1805-1837) in Geneva and then took up a post as an assistant pastor in Le Havre, but soon came back to Lyon. His son Adolphe († 1891) was born in December **1830**; his godfather was Adolphe Monod.

In **1831** he was appointed pastor in Saint-Etienne (Loire, Rhône-Alpes). A year later a protestant junior school was established and Roussel’s brother-in-law was appointed teacher.

¹ Sébastien Fath, *Du ghetto au réseau. Le protestantisme évangélique en France (1800 – 2005)*, Labor et Fides, Geneva, 2005, p. 107

² Léon Maury, *Le réveil religieux dans l’Eglise réformée à Genève et en France (1810-1850)*, Fischbacher, Paris, 1892, p. 472s

³ Jean Monod, « Un pionnier de l’Evangile », *Revue Chrétienne*, 1st of April 1889, p. 285

⁴ Jean Monod, *op.cit.*, p. 286

His own conversion also took place around that time. In **1832**, his second son, Jules († 1902) was born.

In **1835** Roussel began publishing polemical fliers directed against the Roman-catholic Church. This was also the year in which the Consistory of Saint-Etienne put an end to his ministry⁵ because his sermons were found to have “a Methodist touch”⁶. Very much like Adolphe Monod in Lyons, he then established an independent Church with some friends.

At the end of that year, Roussel travelled to Algeria in order to study the opportunity to establish a mission among the French settlers⁷. In Marseille he met a former fellow student, Isidore Armand-Delille (1811-1890), who was then assistant pastor of the local Reformed Church. Armand-Delille had a conversion experience shortly afterward.

The mission in Algeria was no success, because the settlers were not interested⁸. This notwithstanding, Roussel’s year in Africa made a lasting impression on the young pastor. He published a book of his memories, *Mon voyage en Algérie*.

On his way back from Algeria, Roussel again stayed in Marseille and preached there. Having heard his sermon, the local Consistory invited him to become a pastor of the local Church.

Shortly after his arrival in Marseille, there was a cholera outbreak. His wife Antoinette was among the first victims. Thus Roussel was left alone with his two small boys. He entrusted them to Adolphe Monod and his wife in Montauban. The royal decree of his appointment as pastor of Marseille was published on November 26, **1837**.

Towards the end of **1838**, he had his sons come back to Marseille and married Emma Gale (1803-1856). The family lived together with a retired British couple as well as the pastors Armand-Delille (and his wife Louise) and Horace Monod (1814-1881).

In the spring of **1839**, Roussel left Marseille and came to Paris where he became the editor of the periodical “L’Espérance”, which had been created a few months before. He was in charge of this publication for several years, and quite successful in this endeavour. The journal was published twice a week (instead of once) and became the unofficial organ of the newly created “Société des intérêts généraux du protestantisme français” (Society for the defense of

⁵ André Encrevé, *Protestants français au milieu du XIXe siècle. Les réformés de 1848 à 1870*, Labor et Fides, Geneva, 1986, p. 129 has some interesting information on the end of Roussel’s ministry in the Reformed Church of Saint-Etienne: “He has to leave his post in 1835 at the request of the Consistory who, when inviting him to come, had taken the precaution to make him promise that he would present his resignation in case he modified his theological opinions. As a matter of fact, he had become a revivalist.”

⁶ Léon Maury, *op. cit.*, p. 473.

⁷ André Encrevé, *op. cit.*, p. 74, describes this ministry in the following terms: “Napoléon Roussel undertakes to evangelise the European settlers (and not the native people, because the government had objected to that) in Algeria. Roussel is, for some time, an agent of a society that had been created by Protestants of the South of France in order to promote the evangelisation of North Africa. The Evangelical Society of France then takes over and establishes a minister in Alger; the government recognises him as pastor in 1840.”

⁸ André Encrevé, *op. cit.*, p. 75, mentions the testimony “of the evangelist Léon Roussel (sic; this might be a contraction of Napoléon Roussel and Léon Pilatte) from Marseille, who writes on November 25, 1849, in a letter to the committee of the Evangelical Society of Geneva, after a stay in Algeria: “The impression I had was painful, I have only seen demoralisation and cupidity; and the persons mentioned as being the most recommendable mostly are people which we in Marseille and Geneva would not want to have any business with.” [...] Roussel adds that he considers it useless to try and evangelise the Muslims if it is not possible to offer them “examples of Christian love and virtue and make them forget our robbery.””

the general interests of the protestants of France). Roussel was a member of the administrative council of this society.

His daughter Emilie⁹ was also born in this year. She later published a biography of her father under the name of her husband, Delapierre.

In **1842** a delegation of inhabitants of the village of Seneville in the vicinity of Mantes (Yvelines) asked Roussel to help them establish a Reformed Church. He agreed, but the proprietors of the chapel, who were among the signatories of the official declaration, were brought before an investigative judge even before the first service took place. Roussel strove to obtain a lease for the chapel and celebrated a service on July 3. On the following Sunday, 50 armed soldiers hindered him from doing it again! Roussel and a few others were brought before the police court dealing with criminal offences (*tribunal de police correctionnelle*) in Mantes. Although Odilon Barrot pleaded for the accused on November 22, 1842, Roussel and the other defendants were sentenced to fines; the tribunal dissolved the association and ordered the closure of the building. The affair caused a great deal of commotion and triggered protests of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches. The Court of First Instance of Versailles confirmed the decision on February 22, **1843**. Roussel took the case to the Court of cassation, but his appeal was dismissed. Thus Roussel had to stop the services in Senneville¹⁰.

In 1843 Roussel also had to put an end to his involvement in “L’espérance”¹¹.

But Roussel’s vitality was not broken by these adversities. Having been contacted by inhabitants of Villefavard (Haute-Vienne), he celebrated a service in this town on March 31, 1843, in the presence of all the inhabitants. After the service, the local police placed seals on the church and threatened Roussel with imprisonment. But finally, after one year of negotiations, the ministry finally granted the authorisation. Roussel and his family moved to the Limousin. At first, his sons stayed in Keller’s boarding school in Paris. Roussel’s home in the Limousin consisted in an upstairs bedroom and one room that was transformed into a provisional classroom. As soon as the official authorisation to celebrate a protestant service arrived, the farmers destroyed the Church altar, removed all representations of the saints and reversed the stoup. All of the inhabitants of Villefavard were present at the service. The Evangelical Society sent two schoolmasters soon thereafter.

In **1844**, peddlers in possession of anti-Catholic leaflets written by Roussel, as well as the printer and a librarian were taken to court, but finally they were acquitted.

In July **1845**, Roussel granted a request of the village of Balledent (about 6 miles from Villefavard) and celebrated a service there. A Temple was built in 1846, and the Evangelical Society sent a pastor and a schoolteacher. Then the town of Rancon expressed its desire to become Protestant. Four more outposts were established between 1845 and 1846: Thiat, Clavières, Droix, and Chateauponsac. The regional capital, Limoges, was also touched by the renewal of the protestant faith. Napoléon Roussel made fund-raising trips as far as to England

⁹ According to the site of the *Société Genevoise de Généalogie* her name is Eléonore.

¹⁰ William Edgar, *La carte protestante. Les réformés francophones et l’essor de la modernité (1815-1848)*, Labor et Fides, Geneva, 1997, p. 82, tells us what happened afterwards: “[Roussel] is condemned and the prefect of Senneville prohibits services. As a consequence, 90 petitions are sent to the Chamber of Deputies. The Minister of the Interior, in a circular letter dated February 28, 1844, reminds the prefects that the freedom of worship has to be respected. A few months later, services are held again in Senneville.”

¹¹ André Encrevé, *op. cit.*, p. 129 mentions that Roussel is being “replaced by the Lutheran pastor J.-J. Hosemann (1805-1886) to whom [Jean] Pédézert succeeds in 1845”.

in order to raise money for the construction of a suitable temple. He then established places of worship in Mansle and Angoulême (Charente region). The entire region appears to have been touched by a religious revival¹².

His undertakings in Mansle resulted in a new lawsuit against him. Having declared the service to the mayor only, without any formal authorisation by the government, Napoleon Roussel and two co-workers, the former Catholic priest Trivier and the notary Lavallée were sentenced to pay a fine of 50 francs. They filed an appeal and were acquitted, but the reasons for the decision rendered on December 26, 1846, were contrary to religious freedom. Count Delaborde brought the case before the Court of cassation, but the decision was not reversed (January 6, 1848). The resistance against the new protestant activities continued. In 1851, the prefect of the Haute-Vienne department issued a decision banning “clubs or other public meetings”. The pastor of Villefavard was arrested and fined, but finally acquitted by the Court of cassation. A decree of March 25, 1852, made any meeting, including religious meetings, subject to prior authorisation by the government. In December of the same year, all the protestant schools of the Haute-Vienne department were closed. In January 1854, the police interrupted the service in Villefavard and placed seals on the doors of the temple. The temple of Rancon was also closed. Several pastors and schoolmasters were brought before the courts and severely fined. The temple of Villefavard was finally reopened in 1856; the protestant schools were allowed to resume their activity in 1861, but they could only accept protestant children.

But let us come back to Napoléon Roussel. In **1847**, he returned to Paris and created a School of practical evangelism. Jules Bonnet, Isidore Armand-Delille, Adolphe Monod and Edmond de Pressensé were to lecture in this school. However, this enterprise came to an end because of the revolution of **1848**. His pupils having left Paris, Roussel withdrew to the South of France and settled down in the surroundings of Vigan (Gard). He found some rest, although he also did some itinerant preaching. However, he had to face the hostility of several pastors. Moreover, Roussel was strongly criticised by the journals of the liberal party of the Reformed Church, so that he found it necessary to threaten them with legal action in **1849**¹³. He and his family returned to Paris in **1850**. Roussel worked as an evangelist among the ragmen of the rue Mouffetard¹⁴. In **1851** he was called to London in order to evangelise the French having come to see the universal exhibition¹⁵.

¹² Jean Monod, *op.cit.*, p. 287 sums up: “... the Gospel was being announced in about 150 places and, when N. Roussel returned to Paris in 1847, after several years of serving in the Limousin and the Angoumois regions, he left behind twelve places of worship and twelve schools.” Interestingly, Jean Baubérot has understood the great number of conversions to express the yearning for “a religious modernity” (*cf.* Sébastien Fath, *Une autre manière d’être chrétien en France. Socio-histoire de l’implantation baptiste (1810-1950)*, Labor et Fides, Geneva, 2001, p. 73).

¹³ André Encrevé, *op.cit.*, p. 309 reports this incident as follows: “[The journal] *Le Lien* of September 15, 1849, commented the speech given by N. Roussel at a pastoral consecration ceremony in the following terms: “Among other words expressing his aggressive fanaticism, which deeply shocked the assistance and troubled a ceremony which would normally be moving and solemn, with violent ideas and insults, the preacher criticised and almost excommunicated the teachers of lies and error which had surrounded the future pastor at the beginning of his studies [i.e. the Faculty of Geneva].” When publishing Roussel’s reply, *Le Lien* added: “We know the aggressive Methodism of this person [...] we do not wish to honour him by appearing together with him before the courts.” (issue of October 20, 1849, [...])”

¹⁴ André Encrevé, *op.cit.*, p. 166: “Under the Second Republic, Roussel attempted to evangelise the workmen in Paris, but without any considerable success.”

¹⁵ André Encrevé, *op.cit.*, p. 330, mentions « ... that in 1851 the evangelist N. Roussel obtains the authorisation to open a place of worship in the Saint-Marcel suburb”.

It is around that time that Roussel started having vision disorders and had to use a secretary for reading and writing.

Still in 1851, the librarian Grassart was sentenced with three months of imprisonment and a fine of 500 francs for having stored a few hundred of Roussel's polemical leaflets in his library.

After the coup of December 1851, Roussel felt threatened and exiled himself to Belgium and to the Netherlands in order to give lectures and collect funds for the temple in Angoulême. In **1853**, he spent three months in Ireland in order to evangelise the French attending the Dublin exposition.

In **1854** he published his work on *Catholic and Protestant nations compared in their threefold relations to wealth, knowledge, and morality*.

In **1856** his second wife, Emma, died. He remarried in **1857**. His third wife, Mary Stewart (1824-1897) was British. The year of his remarriage was also the year of publication of his homiletic treatise *How not to preach*.

He then withdrew to Cannes where he worked as an independent pastor from 1857 to 1863 and published a great number of books on a variety of topics. During that period his daughters Elisa (1859-1941) and Marie (1862-1932) were born.

In October **1863** he accepted a call from the Evangelical Church of Lyons (first established by Adolphe Monod) and became a pastor of that church. His daughter Léonie (1864-1936), his son Stuart Leo (1865-1921) and his last daughter Blanche (1867-1933) were born in Lyon. Roussel was growing tired. Here is how his daughter Emilie has described the situation:

“... his activity drew to a close. He was not old, but his thirty years of never ending battles and often renewed hardships counted double. His weariness was increasingly apparent. He walked at a slower pace, he found his work to be less easy and less fruitful. A strange, mysterious illness began to show its first symptoms and made his thoughts more rigid, of which he was not aware. Much later it was found that his bone marrow had slowly desiccated. Under the influence of the first harbingers of this physical disability he underwent a sort of crisis ...”¹⁶

Roussel left Lyon and its Church in July **1868** – “as a consequence of scruples of conscience triggered by a sort of theological crisis which he underwent at that time”¹⁷ – and retired to Menton (Alpes-Maritimes).

In **1873** he moved to Geneva in order to facilitate the studies of his younger children. He died in Geneva on June 8, **1878**, at the age of 72.

Besides his eight children, Roussel left behind a great number of publications, in particular a great many leaflets. A list of all his works (with the exception of his articles in journals) can be found in his biography that has been written by his daughter¹⁸.

¹⁶ Emilie Delapierre, *Un pionnier ...*, p. 347s

¹⁷ Léon Maury, *op. cit.*, p. 473

¹⁸ Emilie Delapierre, *Un pionnier ...*, p. 357-360

Main source: Emilie Delapierre, *Un pionnier de l'Évangile : Napoléon Roussel (1805-1878)*, Lausanne, Georges Bridel, 1888, 361 p.