

ADOLPHE MONOD: THE VOICE OF THE AWAKENING¹

A contemporary said of him “As a defender of the truth that is in Christ, he had the heart of a lion; as a Christian, he had the heart and simplicity of a small child, the heart of a lamb—if I dare say so—meek, good, inoffensive, and always charming. His Christian character combined qualities rarely found together: the masculine energy of a Saint Paul and the gospel gentleness of a Saint John.”²

Yet this lion’s heart, this lamb’s heart was also and above all a shepherd’s heart. One of the great evangelical preachers of the nineteenth century and one of the greatest French-speaking preachers of all time, Adolphe Monod (1802-1856) longed to spend more time on the pastoral side of his ministry. Yet for him, preaching was a sacred obligation, demanding all of his best efforts, and he knew God had called him to this task. Thus we hear him uttering this cry of anguish: “Oh, cross of preaching the cross!”

Other cries of anguish had, however, preceded this one in his life. Like many of God’s most faithful servants, he had endured great spiritual battles in his early years.

A Godly Heritage

The Monods were an international family. Born in Denmark, brought up in France, and educated in his family’s native Switzerland, Adolphe once wrote “I have three homelands, which is to say I have none. I am *Adolphe without a country*.”³ Adolphe’s grandfather, Gaspard-Joël Monod, was a pastor in both Geneva and Guadeloupe. Adolphe’s father, Jean, met his wife, Louise, in Copenhagen and later worked there as a pastor while he began rearing his family. Adolphe-Louis-Frédéric-Théodore Monod, their sixth child, was born on January 21, 1802. After the birth of two more children, the family moved to Paris in 1808 and finally grew to include eight sons and four daughters.

¹ This biography is taken, with a few slight modifications, from the one published in Adolphe Monod, *Living in the Hope of Glory* (Phillipsburg NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), Constance K. Walker, editor and translator; © 2002, Constance K. Walker, All rights reserved.

² Pastor Grand-Pierre, quoted by G. Goguel, *Adolphe Monod, notice sur sa vie, son influence, ses écrits* (1865).

³ *Adolphe Monod, souvenirs de sa vie. Extraits de sa correspondance* (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1885), p. 77.

Though large, the Monod family was closely knit. In spite of his many ministry responsibilities, Jean directed the education of his sons, four of whom followed him into the ministry. His own teaching was supplemented by private tutors and by courses at two of the colleges in Paris. For her part, Louise maintained close relationships with each of her children. Her grown sons corresponded faithfully with her, candidly sharing their struggles and triumphs.

The Search for Personal Faith

Although Adolphe Monod came from a family of Protestant ministers, his was no easy or automatic ascent to faith. Even after entering the ministry, he struggled long and hard before truly grasping the message and power of the gospel and before fully embracing the evangelical faith that he had long sensed to be true.



**Adolphe Monod
as a young man**

Adolphe received his call to the ministry at age fourteen and never doubted its validity, even during his times of spiritual crisis. He and his brothers pursued their theological studies in Geneva, where they were welcomed by family members and friends. The faith of the oldest, Frédéric, came vibrantly alive there as he was swept up in the first Awakening, and he was to remain a strong guiding influence on his brothers. Yet by the time Adolphe and his brother Guillaume arrived in Geneva in 1820, Frédéric had already left, as had Robert Haldane, the Scotsman who had been instrumental in his life. The first great wave of the Awakening had also passed. Thus Adolphe was, for a while, tossed around by various winds of doctrine, wandering through a spiritual wilderness. It was not a question of abandoning Christianity but of finding his place within it and, more importantly, of finding his place in Christ. The journey was to last seven long years.

Always careful, always thorough and striving for excellence, Adolphe was at first happy to take his time in sorting through the issues rather than risk going astray. Then another Scotsman, Thomas Erskine, arrived and was a powerful witness for experiencing the very presence of God. Adolphe's interest was aroused. He could sense the power and truth in the Awakening but was unable to embrace it for himself, and his frustrations mounted.

Aware of his lack and yet certain of his call to the ministry, he accepted ordination at the end of his studies in 1824. As was common in that era, he did not immediately accept a pastoral position but pursued further studies in Paris, hoping that this would bring him clarity. He especially wanted to spend time delving into Scripture. His seminary training had been so deficient in this regard that the Bible remained, as his brother Frédéric put it, *terra incognita*. A year after his ordination, Adolphe wrote, "I read the Epistle to the Romans. What obscurity, what astonishing language! ... I read it, I reread it, and nothing; I see nothing there." Yet, in spite of his efforts and his respect for the Awakening, his spiritual struggle went on.

From Darkness to Light

On a trip through Italy in 1826, Adolphe found a group of French-speaking Protestants in Naples who had no church, no pastor, and no means of worship. He gathered them together, agreeing to be their interim pastor, but soon found his spiritual struggle escalating into a crisis. The strain of preaching a gospel that was not real to him—though he fervently desired it to be real—produced inner turmoil, causing him to alternately intensify and abandon his search for clarity. Recognizing that he could not leave a new congregation without a pastor, he also knew that exposing his doubts to them would only do them harm. Thus he said, “I choose the necessary course, which is still painful to my candor, of preaching what the gospel teaches without considering whether I believe it or not.”⁴ At one point early in 1827, convinced that he had lost his faith, he was ready to leave the ministry, but friends dissuaded him.

Adolphe’s family was aware of his inner conflicts, and their concern was both deep and prayerful. His oldest sister, Adèle Babut, living in London, experienced for the third time the death of a dearly loved and only child. In writing to Adolphe, however, her greater concern was for him:

How wrenching is the agony through which I have just passed. ... I thought of you, dear Adolphe. If my daughter, in her death, could preach to you with more eloquence and more conviction than all those who have sought your good, ah, how true it would be to say that the day of her death has greater value than the day of her birth. ... Adolphe, dear Adolphe, give him your heart. Love him for the good that he has done for me, while waiting for the time when you will love him for the good that he will do for you.⁵

What an amazing family! How could such love and faith and prayer go unanswered for long?

Near the height of this crisis, Thomas Erskine visited Italy and spent many days talking with Adolphe.

I see in Mr. Erskine and in others a happiness, a peace, an order, a conviction that I totally lack. ... The creature’s perfection can consist only in his relationship with the Creator. Yet—and this is my sin—until this very moment, I have been my own center. I wanted to make my own religion, instead of taking it from God. ... Only an external influence can save me.⁶

Finally on July 21, 1827 the sun broke through. It is hard to know what, on an earthly plane, finally wrought the dramatic change in Adolphe Monod’s life that he had sought for so long, but God’s time for him had arrived. Real peace came into his life. “Previously I was without God and burdened with my own well being, while now I have a God who carries the burden for me. That is enough for me.”⁷ He had

⁴ *Adolphe Monod. Choix de lettres* (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1885), p. 10.

⁵ *Adolphe Monod. Souvenirs...* pp. 102-105.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

been born of the Spirit, and a new inner life began for him—a life that grew over the years and was reflected in his preaching.

The Testing of His Faith

Shortly after this, at barely twenty-six years of age, he was called to join the pastoral staff of the large Reformed Church of Lyon. As Monod's new faith matured, his preaching took on new clarity and power. He boldly proclaimed the plan of salvation and other biblical truths, which sometimes led him to attack the social injustices of his time, including the practice of slave-holding. This had the effect of drawing back the evangelicals who had previously left the congregation but also of angering the consistory, the ruling body of the church. First they told him not to preach on salvation by grace. He refused. Then they demanded his resignation. Again he refused. Finally they curtailed his preaching and ministry opportunities, while circulating rumors and petitions to help them in gaining the government's approval to dismiss him.

Then the issue of communion arose. The consistory already knew that Monod was troubled by the lack of adherence in the Lyon church to scriptural and denominational standards on who should eat the Lord's Supper, but the language of his sermon "Who Should Take Communion" was unequivocal and enraging. "I would rather place the body of Christ on a stone and throw the blood of Christ to the winds than deliver them into an unbelieving and profane mouth."⁸ They tried to force the issue by requiring Monod to preach and serve communion on Pentecost. After much agonizing prayer, Monod delivered his sermon and left the building prior to the distribution of the elements. The next day, the consistory voted to dismiss him and suspended him from all formal ministry, pending the government's decision on his case.

Eventually, in 1832, after three years of unpleasantness, Monod was forced from his position. This was the first time that the government had approved the dismissal of a pastor without specifying a cause—a precedent that disturbed evangelicals all across the country. Through all of this, however, Monod's faith remained solid.

Turning down a teaching position at the new School of Theology in Geneva, he agreed to pastor a group of about seventy people, many of them relatively poor, who had already left the Reformed Church of Lyon. He was encouraged in this by his older brother Frédéric. "The Christians of Lyon must not be abandoned. It is of great importance to show the consistories that if they can remove faithful pastors from the national church, they cannot remove the gospel from those places where it has begun to be



Frédéric Monod

⁸ *Sermons, Deuxième édition, Première Série, Lyon* (Paris: Librairie Ch. Meyrueis, 1855), p. 282.

preached.”⁹ Monod was again in the position of establishing a young church, but this time he had the advantage of a strong and tested faith.

Years of Fruitful Ministry

Adolphe Monod remained at his post for four years as the new Evangelical Church of Lyons grew steadily. Then an offer came that was so manifestly of the Lord that he and his parishioners realized he had to accept it. His call to a professorship at the national church’s seminary at Montauban was as unexpected and even improbable as it was unsolicited. Yet Monod was drawn toward teaching and hoped to help return more spiritual life to the Reformed Church of France. As a final confirmation, the Lord provided the right man to take over the shepherding of his flock.

Monod spent nearly a decade at the Theological Seminary at Montauban, holding professorships first in Gospel Ethics and Sacred Eloquence, and then in Hebrew. Finally, he was appointed to the newly created chair of New Testament Exegesis and Sacred Criticism. These were happy, fruitful years. Freed from the many demands of pastoral ministry, he had more time to spend with his growing family and also a chance to develop his writing skills. Even during this period, however, he regularly found himself occupying the pulpits of local churches and making extended preaching tours, both in France and abroad, during breaks in the academic year. He was becoming something of a voice for French evangelicals; “The voice of the awakening.”

His pastoral heart also was not lost during this time. He and his wife took the unprecedented step of opening their home to the seminary students. This at first led to some consternation and dismay on the part of the students but eventually produced close and helpful relationships that long outlasted the students’ days at Montauban.

Adolphe Monod’s seminary life was interrupted by another call from God in 1847. The changing climate at Montauban made him sense that his influence there was likely to diminish sharply, and he had begun to think about returning to pastoral ministry. Then, once again through highly improbable and unexpected circumstances, he was called to the Reformed Church of Paris. He was offered the post of suffragan pastor, helping the aging M. Juillerat, the president of the consistory. There he would join Frédéric on the staff and be close to his mother and other family members. It was something of a homecoming.

But the “cross of preaching the cross” reasserted itself in Monod’s life with real vigor. In Paris, the majority of his time was taken up with preparing and delivering sermons. The entire city was organized as one large parish, with tens of thousands of members spread among three houses of worship and served by a team of pastors who shared many of the duties on a rotating basis. Monod’s Sunday preaching carried him to far-flung corners of the metropolis. Beginning at 7 a.m., he was called to speak first at a secondary school, then quite often at a prison, and at

⁹ *Adolphe Monod. Souvenirs...* p. 199.

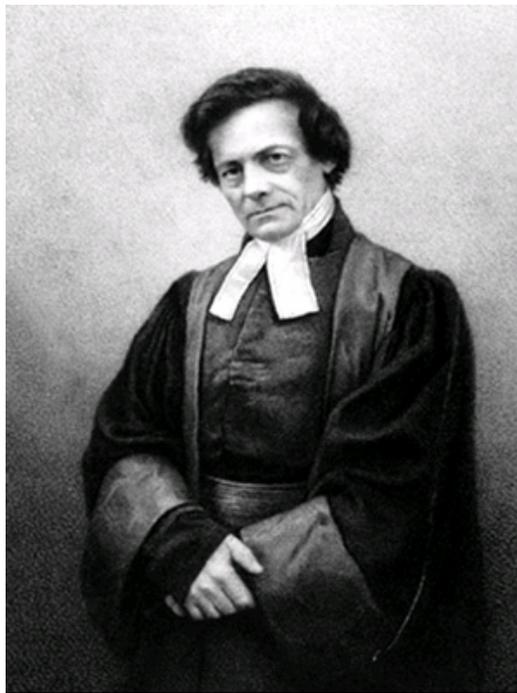
noon at one of the main churches. In some sense, however, his real parish—the one that gave him the greatest opportunity to guide spiritual lives—was a less formal group started by Frédéric, that gathered on Sunday evenings at the Church of the Oratoire.

One year after his arrival in Paris, some of the evangelicals within the denomination withdrew to form the Union of Evangelical Churches. After much earnest prayer, Adolphe remained in the national church to work for change within it, while Frédéric left to become a leader in the new denomination. Still united in their faith, the brothers concluded that the Lord was calling them to do different work, and when the first synod of the new organization was held, Adolphe made a point of inviting all of its members to a gathering in his home. In the end, he was appointed to fill the position in the Reformed Church that Frédéric had just vacated.

Adolphe Monod continued in the pastoral ministry in Paris until his death in 1856.

The Man Behind the Message

In his mature years Adolphe Monod was described by a contemporary as “modest, humble, simple in his appearance and dress.”¹⁰ There was a genuineness to



Adolphe Monod in around 1855

his faith and a depth to his love of God that carried through to every part of his life. He was orderly and disciplined, feeling that this would help him be and do his best for his Savior. But above all he was a man of prayer, praying constantly for guidance during sermon preparations, and rising early each day to devote himself to meditating on the Word and to prayer.

His personality was reflected in his preaching. He was widely regarded as eloquent, but his was not a flowery rhetoric. It was an eloquence that was designed not to impress but to impart. His goal was to awaken the “unconverted Christians” and to help the true Christians to live more closely with their Lord and be more and more conformed to his image. He expounded the truths of Christianity simply and carefully as they were revealed to him in Scripture. Yet he found ways to do so that made the familiar seem fresh and

¹⁰ *Select Discourses by Adolphe Monod, Krummacher, Tholuck and Julius Müller* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman & Company, 1858), p. 15.

vivid. His lion's heart made him firm and straightforward; his lamb's heart made quick to allude to his own need to hear the very truths he was preaching to others; and his shepherd's heart, his sincere love for his hearers, was always in evidence, lending warmth to his sermons.

Having grown up in a strong, loving, and Christ-centered home, Adolphe Monod made every effort to pass on those benefits to his children. He married Hannah Honyman while still serving in the Reformed Church at Lyon. Hannah was from a Scottish family residing there, a family to whom Adolphe had ministered. She was well educated, strong in her faith, and simple in her spirit, all of which made her an admirable companion for her husband.

Theirs was a large household. They had three daughters and a son in Lyon and another three daughters (one of whom died at the age of one) during the Montauban years. In addition they looked after a small number of young men entrusted to them for their education. Finally, because of the mild climate of southern France, the Monods invited his sister Adèle Babut and her family to live with them in Montauban as her husband's health was failing. As head of the house, Adolphe took an interest in the welfare of all, including the servants.

Adolphe Monod took parenting seriously. He was strict but fair, never disciplining unjustly or capriciously or in the heat of anger. In addition to concerning himself with the children's general education, he taught them—by precept and example—to value humility, discipline, and hard work, and to heed God's call to holiness and devotion. Though normally somewhat reserved, he knew how to make himself available to his children, taking time each day to join in their games. He was deeply loved and respected, but he was also fun to be with.

Adolphe Monod's public ministry and his earthly life were cut off when he was still in his middle fifties. He died from cancer of the liver. Yet the ministry that he had from his sick-bed during the last six months of his illness, the ministry of *Les Adieux*, has perhaps had a greater effect on the evangelical church than all of his earlier labors. It was not the ministry he would have chosen, yet because it came to him directly from the hand of God, he accepted it as the more important ministry that it turned out to be. A week before his death he said "I have a Savior! He has freely saved me through his shed blood, and I want it to be known that I lean uniquely on that poured out blood. All my righteous acts, all my works which have been praised, all my preaching that has been appreciated and sought after—all that is in my eyes only filthy rags."¹¹

¹¹ Much of the information for this brief biography came from *Adolphe Monod, Souvenirs de sa Vie* (Recollections of His Life), published by his family in 1885 and told largely through excerpts from correspondence and diaries. A secondary source is the account of his life by B. Decorvet and E. G. Léonard in the French edition of *Les Adieux* printed in 1978 and published by Editions des Groupes Missionnaires (Annemasse, Haut Savoie, France). A biographical note at the beginning of *Select Discourses*, published in 1858 by Sheldon, Blakeman and Co. (New York), and the brief sketch at the beginning of *Looking unto Jesus* were also consulted.