

Some Notes on the Atlanta Congress.

AS the Cunard White Star liner *Britannic* drew away from Southampton Docks on Saturday, July 8th, 1939, she carried parties of Baptists setting out for our World Congress, most of them allowing for a few days at New York to visit the World's Fair. My own plan was to proceed at once to Atlanta and to spend a few days there in personal contact with the delightful people who were making such gracious preparation for our historic gathering.

As the liner moved out to sea we all felt a certain relaxation from tension. Earlier in the week I had sat on a Borough Committee reviewing the arrangements for dealing with fatalities in possible air raids; and our country has some hundreds of such Committees which have been steadily arranging the preparations for defence, of which there are many grim and necessary details.

After some months of work and thought on these subjects it was an amazing relief to set out to sea and turn one's mind hopefully towards. The gain of an hour every night as the ship goes towards the setting sun makes the outward voyage across the Atlantic particularly restful.

The company was considerably reassured by the cheerful presence of Mrs. Ernest Brown, who was planning to be away from home two months, and was receiving encouraging cablegrams from the Minister of Labour.

The chief event of my first day in Atlanta was attending in an official car with Dr. Rushbrooke at the station for the reception of Dr. and Mrs. Truett at 8.30 in the evening. It was a thrilling occasion. It was dusk, with a good deal of lingering daylight. The forecourt of the station was crowded with three thousand people; a choir of two hundred were ready with a programme of choruses; a large orchestra of girls in striking uniforms, microphones, flags and bunting contributed to a scene of lively enthusiasm. Then there were the cars: the official one for Dr. and Mrs. Truett decorated with streamers and stars and stripes, the Governor's car, the Mayor's car, the Police Commissioner's blue car, the Chief of the Fire Brigade's red car, and other decorated cars, official and private. Community singing kept us all busy until the great moment when the President arrived, and was greeted with hearty cheers and several speeches of cordial welcome, all of which he acknowledged most appreciatively in a few graceful words. Then a procession of cars

moved away, through cheering and waving lines of people. The whole spectacle seemed typically American: I felt at once that there was a something in the atmosphere, something strange but not uncongenial, which was definitely different from our English ways. As a newcomer, I could not yet suggest what that something was, and perhaps a fortnight's visit is too short to form any opinions.

During the remainder of the week the Baptist women of Atlanta showered kindnesses and hospitalities upon me, so that I have stores of delightful memories, and was at a loss to express sufficiently my gratitude and appreciation.

The subjects we discussed were the religious outlook and methods of Sunday School work and church organisation, and the war menace and the conditions of life in England. Everyone wanted to tell me of the intense admiration, almost devotion, inspired by our King and Queen during their recent visit, and well understood the depths of loyalty and gratitude to them which fill our hearts to-day.

The attitude of the English towards the Abdication, a subject I never introduced myself, came into the conversation with more than half of the Americans I met, particularly with those who were not Baptists: one realised that the sensational press had used an opportunity to the full.

On the subject of church life and organisation, two aspects struck me particularly, and I had opportunities of discussing them with Dr. and Mrs. Truett and other Americans, and with Dr. Rushbrooke. One question that arose was of the elaboration and luxury of many of the church premises: vast buildings, with class-rooms, lecture rooms, reception rooms, and a suite for the minister (study, office, reception room). One church I visited had so many rooms for varied purposes that there were twenty-five pianos on the premises! I happened to mention this to a lady from Texas, who said: "Oh, that is nothing! At our church we have fifty pianos!"

A great headmaster once said that the ideal number of boys for a public school was two hundred and fifty, the greatest number which could be personally known by the Head. There is a limit to the number which can participate profitably in most human activities, especially where the element of fellowship is involved. Dr. Truett took no offence when I put plainly to him the danger of excessive numbers, the impossibility of mass-production standards of spiritual effort: he very kindly recognised that I was sincerely troubled, and endeavoured with some success to assure me of the reality and depth of the religious life and spiritual teaching which seem to find their setting in vast buildings and bustling crowds.

Dr. Truett wields an influence comparable to that of the great Spurgeon. The christening fairies gave him a remarkably fine voice, good physique, a handsome face, and dignified bearing: he is an orator, holding attention easily from the first word to the last, and like Spurgeon he combines intense eagerness as a messenger of the Lord with a kindly personality which wins warmest affection wherever he goes. No one can talk with Dr. Truett without feeling his friendliness and his transparent sincerity: he is quite unspoiled by his many years of limelight and adulation.

The second question about American religious life was in regard to Sunday School policy. It appears that large Bible Classes are attended by adults. At one school which I visited the "scholars" of the Senior Department ranged from twenty-five years upwards! I seem to have heard of such Sunday Schools in Wales years ago, and must find out whether they still exist. Meanwhile, the point arises if adults attend Sunday School from 9.30 a.m. to 10.45 a.m. will they, do they, attend also the regular morning service at 11 in addition? Also, is not the minister's work as an instructor of his people insufficiently recognised? American friends took diametrically opposite views, some maintained that all was well, others regarded the present system as disadvantageous, and as creating difficulties for the ministry. Dr. Truett was one of the former, Dr. Samuel Lindsay, of Brookline, of the latter.

Much of the space allotted to me has been used before we come to the Congress itself, and I will not attempt anything of a detailed report, hoping that our readers will have seen some of the accounts which have appeared in the *Baptist Times* and other religious weeklies, and may perhaps secure a copy of the official record in a few weeks' time.

This Congress was remarkable for the extreme friendliness of the atmosphere, engendered from the first by the warm welcome and unselfish hospitality of the Atlanta folks themselves. We met at a time of acute international tension, and with the problems of race differentiation visibly in our midst. The week did not pass by without some difficulties, but these were successfully negotiated through the wisdom and patience of our leaders.

The roll-call at an International Congress is always a most impressive and heart-searching experience. To listen successively to these groups of people bearing their simple testimony calls out all one's sympathy and admiration. The hearer thinks of their journeyings and sacrifices, of the hard climates that many endure, of the age-long traditions they challenge, of the menaces of war and persecution they face to-day. The Czech "messenger" (a good word, very preferable to delegate!) said: "I come from

a country which was, which is not, and which is to be." When I quoted this on my return, Dr. Chesterman said that it was a slogan adopted by the Czechs generally.

The spectacular side of the Congress focussed in two events : the long procession of cars and marches on Saturday, July 22nd, and the pageant of Baptist History composed by the Rev. E. A. Payne. On the Saturday I went about among the crowds in the principal streets instead of riding in one of the cars, and was interested to find how much all the folks seemed to know about the Baptists and the Congress, and how they enjoyed identifying various foreign delegates. The pageant was a fine contribution to the programme, most varied in interest and in the numbers taking part in succeeding episodes. It was a *tour-de-force* on the part of our Atlanta friends, practically the whole work of production being accomplished in three weeks.

The main subjects of the Congress deliberations were :

- (1) The Church's Task of Evangelism ;
- (2) The Church, War and Peace ;
- (3) Religious Liberty in all lands ;
- (4) The Church and Re-union.

On all these subjects the endeavour was to ascertain the mind of the Master, while giving sincere recognition to the unparalleled difficulties of our generation.

Towards the close of the Congress our beloved Dr. J. H. Rushbrooke was elected as incoming President with the utmost enthusiasm and complete unanimity. Of the other British speakers, their fellow "messengers" were very proud of them all, and if I may mention a few names, very strong impressions were made by Mrs. Ernest Brown (quite an outstanding success), by Mr. Aubrey, Mr. H. L. Taylor, and Mr. Wilson Black. I did not hear Dr. S. W. Hughes, as I had to leave on the Friday afternoon, but I hear that his speech on "Peace" met with an enthusiastic reception. Several important meetings I missed altogether, owing to illness caused by the intense heat.

If any of my readers question whether such Congresses are worth while, considering the long preparation, the expenditure of money and effort, the fatigues and travels involved, I would ask them to believe that in this way we Baptists have greatly promoted fellowship throughout the world, and have been permitted to bear witness and declare our allegiance to the Prince of Peace and our steadfast faith in His Kingdom.

"Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

M. F. Dow.