

THE NEW WORLD DISORDER:

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE POST-9/11 WORLD

First Thesis:

9/11/01: THE SHATTERING EVENT

Country singer Alan Jackson asks in a song, “Where were you when the world stopped turning that September day?” We will all remember it vividly for the rest of our lives. I had met in a coffeehouse with some university students for an early morning Bible study. It was a beautiful morning in College Station, as it was in New York City and most of the United States, sunny, clear, and mild.

When I got home I turned on the television to a cable news channel. It took me a minute to figure out what was going on: live coverage of a fire in one of the World Trade Center buildings. Reporters were talking about a plane crashing into the building piecing together facts and reports and raising questions whether it was a small plane or a jetliner, an accident or (unthinkably) a deliberate act. It was all very strange and fascinating to watch, but still not terribly alarming. We have become all too accustomed to seeing disturbing and violent pictures on our television screens.

Then the second jetliner tore through the twin skyscraper. It is beyond description to see that and realize one is witness to the instantaneous death of hundreds, perhaps thousands of people. It was instantly apparent that New York City—and the entire United States—were under attack. Immediately the news coverage took on a new tone, the government took on a new posture, and we the people experienced a sense of real, pit-of-the-stomach awfulness as we waited helplessly to see what would happen next. It was a feeling that most had never had before, but those who were around when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor talked about having flashbacks to December 7, 1941.

Then our nation’s capital was attacked as the third hijacked airliner dove into the Pentagon. And still another plane crashed somewhere in Pennsylvania—interrupted in the course planned by the terrorists, as it turns out, by the heroic stand of its doomed passengers. It is no exaggeration to say that it was a day that shook the world. I think almost everyone had a sense that everything had changed and that nothing would ever be the same again.

It is my thesis that the world changed on September 11, 2001; that 9/11 was the day the 21st century truly began.

I realize that the words above may sound trite. If they were meant as a merely sentimental expression the statement would indeed be a mere cliché, not a serious point of discussion. I do not, however, put it forward for its emotional impact. I believe it is true and meaningful as a statement of historical interpretation. I do believe that the course of human history was redirected on 9/11/01, and that it is the date of the true beginning of the 21st century. I also believe that it is important for Christians to *know* so, and to understand *why* it is so. God has placed us at a crucial turning point in history,

and hand laid upon us the obligation of living for him and representing the Lordship of his Son at such a time as this.

In I Chronicles 12 there is a description of how the tribes of Israel rallied behind David to be king after the collapse of the house of King Saul. Verse 32 contains a fascinating note about one of the smallest tribes, Issachar, who despite their few numbers made a significant contribution to David's cause. It says that they "understood the times and knew what Israel should do." May God grant to us understanding of our own times, so that we may know what we should do.

To that end I am pursuing a study of the impact of 9/11 on our generation, along with a projection of what it will mean to the generations to follow. My first offering in that study deals with the subject, "The Shattering Event."

The First Day of the 21st Century

My first point is that September 11, 2001 was the effective beginning of the much-ballyhooed "New Millennium." Far from being the "Age of Aquarius" envisioned by New Age dreamers—harmony and understanding, sympathy and love abounding, and all that—the oncoming era will reveal new developments in ancient, unsettled conflicts. I further suggest to you that the terrorist attack on that bloody day was neither a fluke, nor a mere blip on the radar screen of history. Rather, it is the herald of the kind of world we will be living in for a good while.

In particular, the shocking attack and devastation of the World Trade Center and all the social and political repercussions that continue to issue from it, constitutes something I call a *shattering event*.

Let me first explain what I mean when I say that September 11, 2001 was the first day of the 21st century.

There are two ways of defining the periods of human history. One is to fit human events into a strictly chronological grid. So, we bracket the lives and events of the Twentieth Century between 1901 and 2000 (or, if you prefer the popular idea, between 1900 and 1999—it makes little difference).

This kind of chronicle is useful as an index for locating times and sequences, but it doesn't do much to help our understanding. What, after all, does the fact that an event happened in a particular year (or century) have to do with its causes and effects? Unless we believe in astrology (and we don't!), the date on which an event occurs is the least significant thing about that event.

The other way to divide history is by the events themselves, looking for those happenings and episodes that had the greatest impact on society and mankind in general, and seem to mark turning points in human affairs. Now the question arises: which events, and what kind?

Some point to *invention* as markers for the boundaries of history. Perhaps then the 20th Century began in 1903. That's when the Wright brothers staged the first successful flight of a heavier-than-air craft. The impact of that invention went way beyond the crucial field of transportation. It was a boundary-breaking invention that expanded the imagination of mankind. If man can fly, what else might it be possible for him to achieve—both for better and for worse?

It could also be argued that *discovery* is the appropriate standard for marking time. If discovery is our criterion, then surely 1905 is the true beginning of the 20th Century. That is the year Einstein laid out the theory of relativity. It was not apparent at the time, but the formula $E=mc^2$ changed pretty much everything—at least everything the mind can think about.

However, I think the most cogent and understandable way of interpreting history is to examine the events that have had the greatest influence on the current of human affairs, that in themselves become the signature of an era.

Alas, most of those events tend to be traumatic ones. I am not thinking primarily about natural disasters, although hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes may have an enormous, even global impact. Neither do I refer here to spectacular manmade disasters, like the sinking of the Titanic.

Our attention should be directed, rather, to events that reveal deep-seated, broad-based *conflicts*. Conflict is, after all, the stuff all stories are made of (and history is first of all a story)—not to mention the fact that it both spawns and makes dreadful use of marvelous inventions and amazing discoveries. Consider, for example, the importance of aircraft to 20th century warfare, and of the theory of relativity to the development of weapons of mass destruction.

By this way of reading history, the 20th Century as a historical period perhaps began in earnest in August 1914, with what seemed at first like a singular, small-time act of political terrorism. The assassination of an Austrian archduke lit a short-burning fuse that exploded in the First World War, which in turn completely rearranged the map of Europe, Africa, and Asia. The war also set the stage for a worldwide economic depression, a second World War, and a Cold War—all directed by issues that dominated the lives of virtually everyone who lived during that time.

The point is that the 20th century as a time marker began with the rotation of the earth and the completion of another revolution around the sun, and hence the rollover of another date. But the character of the issues with which those who lived in that century had to deal was more truly revealed, not by the calendar, but by that generation's first great trauma in human relations, the First World War.

To return to the starting point, all the anxiety and apocalyptic dread about the arrival of the year 2000 (remember the Y2K computer bug?) proved to be a non-issue. The calendar changed from 1999 to 2000, then from 2000 to 2001 without much

happening to distinguish one year from another. There were conflicts and disasters aplenty, but nothing epoch-making.

When members of a terrorist network called Al Qaida attacked New York City and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001, the world changed and the 21st Century as an historical period truly began.

To call the trauma of that day a *shattering event* is not a generalization, but something specific. First, we shall define what that concept means, and then see how it applies to 9/11.

What Is a Shattering Event?

First, what *is* a shattering event, and how does it change society and culture?

To call the terrorist atrocity of 9/11 a “shattering event” is not a statement of its emotional impact, but rather its historical impact. To help explain what this means, let us look to an illustration from world history.

The Destruction of Jerusalem as a Shattering Event. In the year A. D. 70 four Roman legions under General Titus breached the wall of Jerusalem, killed its Jewish defenders, and completely destroyed the temple—razed it to the ground. All that was left and yet remains of it was a small section of the western face of the retaining wall, not even part of the temple itself. This is the famous “Wailing Wall,” where faithful Jews (and many others) still return to pour out their hearts and offer supplications to God.

Forty years earlier Jesus had foretold the coming war and the destruction of the temple. He went so far as to say that not one stone would be left standing on another, and his words were literally fulfilled. The prophecy was inconceivable to his disciples. They immediately concluded that such an event must be the end of the age and herald of the final Day of Judgment.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple was not quite as momentous as the apostles thought it would be. We are, after all, still awaiting the Second Coming and the final judgment. Even so it was an event that changed the course of history. A survey by the Christian History Institute of 500 church historians identified this event as Number One of the 25 most important events (after the composition of the New Testament) in the history of Christianity.

Why was the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple such an important event? In his book *Turning Points* historian Mark Noll explains:

From the perspective of the very earliest Christians, Roman decimation of Jerusalem probably seemed like an unspeakable tragedy. Christianity was born in the cradle of Jerusalem.... The Gospels were written, in large part, as a demonstration of the way that Jesus brought Israel’s earlier history to its culmination.... Other early Christian writings that would also become

part of the New Testament were preoccupied with negotiating the boundaries between Judaism and Christianity.

The great turning point represented by the destruction of Jerusalem was to move Christianity outward, to transform it from a religion shaped in nearly every particular by its early Jewish environment into a religion advancing toward universal significance in the broader reaches of the Mediterranean world, and then beyond.¹

Prof. Noll concludes,

The blows that the...Roman generals rained upon Jerusalem...liberated the church for its destiny as a universal religion offered to the whole world.²

In other words, the year now known to us as *the year of our Lord 70* marked an abrupt change in both the nature and the self-image of the Christian church. Before 70 Christianity was a Jewish sect with an increasing number of Gentiles swelling its ranks. After 70 Christianity was a *Gentile* movement of faith with a rapidly shrinking number of Jews. The whole center of gravity for Christianity changed from Jerusalem where the Lord died and rose, to Rome where the apostles Paul and Peter were martyred.

Moreover, we are not dealing merely with the effect of this event on the religious history of Judaism and Christianity. The rise of Christianity as a universal movement set off something like a historical chain reaction. The subsequent history of Western Civilization would become virtually synonymous with the history of the Christian church until the modern era. To this day the secular Western world still numbers the years of our lives—grudgingly—by the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into the world. Even in a day in which faith in the Lordship of Christ wanes in the West, it appears to be spreading rapidly on the continents of Africa, Asia, and South America.

The point here is that the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple is a prime example of a shattering event.

Now let us propose a definition: *A shattering event is an acute crisis in human affairs that marks a great divide between historical eras. It marks this great divide, not only through the direct and indirect consequences that follow, but also through its symbolic power as an emblem of greater issues and conflicts.*

All human life is punctuated by crises of one kind or another, and every crisis jolts us, and every crisis imposes some kind of change in our behavior and outlook. What is in view here are those events that mark truly profound changes.

¹ Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997): 26, 27.

² Ibid, 26.

Shattering events of this definition can occur on every level of human existence: the lives of individuals, families, communities, nations, the world. By definition they are rare. They stand out because they change us in fundamental ways. They change the circumstances of our lives and even the way we look at ourselves. They call forth the best and the worst elements of ourselves. They force us to make changes we otherwise would not make, and in that way mold us into something we would not otherwise become.

Moreover, a shattering event is more than just a turning point. Not all turning points constitute a shattering event. With a shattering event something is being shattered or brought down. A turning point may represent an *invitation* or *call* to a new way of life. A shattering event is a *forced eviction* from a previous way of life.

Three Characteristics of a Shattering Event. There are three factors that elevate a particular crisis above the other common crises of our lives and enable us to identify it as a shattering event.

- 1. The event itself is momentous in its own right as an occurrence in history.** One way to gauge this is to ask, “Where were you when this happened?” These are the days when you remember every detail about where you were and what you were doing when it happened or when you heard about it. Why? Because even if it did not happen to you personally, it affected your life deeply—along with the lives of perhaps millions of others. A world-class shattering event will have a direct impact on the lives of a significant segment of the human population.
- 2. The event acts as a catalyst.** It sets in motion other issues that are not necessarily directly related to the event itself. While it may put an end to one human conflict, it also seems to trigger another. This point refers not only to changes that are directly *caused* by the event. Shattering events tend to gather together the combined force of a number of related conflicts that have been quietly stewing and launch others that have already been actively brewing. Thus, it becomes a catalyst for wider developments.
- 3. The event takes on a symbolic significance for issues larger than the event itself.** “Symbolic significance” refers to more than the immediate emotional response people have toward the event, or the fact that it may linger in most people’s memory. People do remember the facts of what happened, quite vividly. But they also associate those facts with images that seem to relate to and explain other things that are happening around them. The shattering event becomes an emblem for a movement in history. It is a signpost that people look to and say, “After this, everything changed.”

As stated above, a shattering event can occur on any level. For an individual it does not have to be a necessarily a tragedy. It may mean the shattering of illusions or the breaking down of barriers, and that is not inherently a bad thing. I can personally identify

a few such events in my own life that profoundly affected me and were used by God to shape my life and my faith. Romans 8:28 comes to mind: “All things,” even shocking, shattering events, “work together for good to those who love God, who are the called according to his purpose.”

Beyond the sphere of individual and family experiences and into the larger spheres of community, it is apparent that shattering events take on an increasingly negative connotation. That is because they are almost always associated with some kind of conflict or disillusionment. I once served a church where the death of an elder deeply affected the church and drastically changed its direction. Beyond the grief, many seemed to be dealing with bitter disappointment that God had not answered their prayers for his healing. The church eventually split, and afterwards I looked back and observed how many conflicts began to surface following the death of this man. In my estimation his death was, for that church, a shattering event.

An event does not have to be defined as a single incident or circumstance. It may also be inclusive of a major conflict or period of crisis. The Great Depression certainly stands out as a grand-scale shattering event. The Civil War comprises a shattering event made up of many shattering events, climaxed by the assassination of Lincoln—a shattering event in its own right.

Single-episode shattering events are relatively rare, however. Until September 11, I think, the greatest single shattering event in my lifetime was the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. It meets all three criteria.

Not only was the event itself a national trauma, it heralded a decade of turbulence, and it marked the death of modern optimism. It opened the front door to one of the stormiest ten-year periods in American history—one that finally seemed to close with the Watergate scandal and the resignation of a president, a shattering event in its own right. Meanwhile we were soon shocked by the slayings of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., raising the question whether America would descend to an era governed by political assassinations. The Vietnam War divided the nation and its generations, while urban riots stirred fears of racial revolution.

In fact, there *was* a revolution of a very different type in ferment. A generation that was coming of age in 1963 effectively rejected the slain president’s inaugural call to, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” Instead it began listening to voices encouraging them to, “Tune in, turn on, and drop out.” This was, I believe, the true beginning of the Postmodern Movement that came to prominence in the late 20th century and is still with us today. Its hallmarks include rejection of authority, rejection of objective and verifiable truth, and a quest for subjective personal experience.

Perhaps all this is why there has been so much long-lasting fascination, speculation, and skepticism surrounding Kennedy’s death. American society was so drastically altered in the aftermath of the killing that it is hard to believe that it was done by a lone gunman. We start looking for a conspiracy to reassure us that surely someone

otherwise inconsequential, someone like a Lee Harvey Oswald, cannot change our lives that much.

Case Study: Hiroshima. In world history we can look to a number of collective events that may rightly be called “grand scale” shattering ones: The Black Plague, the French Revolution, the two World Wars of the 20th century. All these “events,” however, are actually names that encompass myriad events and span several years. I would offer, however, one case study to show how a singular event can fit the three criteria named above. It was the climactic event of the Second World War: the destruction of the Japanese city of Hiroshima by the atomic bomb in August 1945. (The follow up attack on Nagasaki did not so much constitute a separate shattering event as to it did to extend the impact of the first bomb. Hence the two attacks are usually referred to together.)

In the first place, the event directly affected the lives of a significant segment of the human population on a large scale. This refers both to the primary effects of the event itself, and the collateral repercussions of the event. When the first nuclear weapons were used, obviously the devastation that occurred in the targeted cities was terrible beyond description. Vast numbers of men, women and children perished in an instant, and thousands of others remained to suffer hideous effects of radiation.

The toll in human life, real property, and regional ecology was monstrous, but not unheard of in time of war. Why was the destruction of these cities different in kind from the dreadful devastation of London during the blitz, or the firebombing of Dresden by the Allies, or from the devastation the Japanese themselves wreaked upon Manchuria for that matter? It is because an entire city was turned to ashes and rubble in one instant by one weapon with astonishingly little effort of delivery. One airplane, one bomb, one minute, and a great city and its population were wiped off the face of the earth. It still takes the breath away just to contemplate it—especially in light of the fact that the two bombs that were dropped were mere dwarfs compared to the weapons developed afterwards.

Certainly, the bombing exacted a heavy toll of thousands killed and tens of thousands maimed for life, including civilian noncombatants and innocent children. For this reason, it has been considered by some not merely an act of war but a supreme atrocity. However, the moral line cannot be drawn so simply, even with the benefit of historical perspective.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki were chosen as targets because of their material support for the Japanese war effort. Yet clearly the direct effects of that foretaste of nuclear holocaust went far beyond the destruction of two Japanese industrial cities. U. S. forces had driven Japanese imperial forces back to their own mainland and left them crippled and with few strategic options. Nevertheless, the empire still had some fight left in it. The Japanese had amply demonstrated that they preferred suicidal combat to surrender, and it has recently come to light that the empire had developed its own weapon of mass destruction—bubonic plague! —and was ready to deploy it.

The use of the bomb forced Japanese leaders to accept defeat and rendered unnecessary the planned American and Allied invasion of Japan. It ended the

bloodletting and permitted both sides to begin a postwar healing and rebuilding. Moreover, the ending to the war with Japan brought to a close the widest and costliest conflict in human history, the Second World War. The effects of bringing that war to an end—with democracy sharing a significant part of the victory—were felt not only by the United States and Japan, but by every nation that had been drawn into that war and by every other nation that had been affected by it. All these things can be put under the category: Direct Effects of the Dropping of the Atom Bomb. Yet there is something more that can and must be said about the effects of the Bomb, and of every true shattering event.

The Breaking of Things. To speak of a shattering event implies that things are broken beyond repair and restoration to their former state. The first thing that is broken is a people's sense of security. A shattering event makes people examine what they believe, and question what they once trusted. It shakes power structures. It pushes true leaders forward (if any are there) and reveals pretenders for what they are (and they are always there). It creates new heroes, villains, and scapegoats. It alters the way people see themselves, both as individuals and as members of a society. It forces them to reexamine their value systems. A shattering event exposes all those things we casually suppose to be true and forces us to face them critically. Some of those assumptions and suppositions will be discarded, and new ones will take their place while some assumptions may be rather be strengthened as common convictions, as foundational axioms of society—for better or for worse.

9/11 as a Shattering Event

It is in the nature of historical analysis that judgments rendered in the immediate aftermath of events tend to give way to revisions as temporal distance from them increases. Moreover, when an assessment of an event takes the form of an abstract concept, admittedly there is much room for subjective interpretation. It is hard enough to assemble the facts of what happened into a coherent narrative, let alone be able to justify the meaning of that narrative. Many still dispute the conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald was alone the assassin who killed President Kennedy, and the meaning of that deed changes depending on the theory one accepts. Even so, evidence is abundant that this president's death (and the manner of it) affected the nation deeply and indelibly.

In the same way there are those who cannot accept the finding that Islamist terrorists are solely responsible for a coordinated attack on New York City and Washington. Nevertheless, there is abundant if anecdotal evidence that the 9/11 attack and its aftermath both triggered and embodied a landmark change in U. S. and world history. This thesis does not depend on the specific outcome of any investigation into the event itself, but rather stands as a broader observation about how an event can signify issues beyond itself.

A Date that Speaks of Itself. Consider first of all that the date itself has become a signature for the event, a title for itself—a fact that is, if one thinks about it, unusual if not unique. What other date, announced by itself with no other amplification, conjures up not only the memory of an event but also summons an immediate emotional response?

July 4? Yes, but that also has a title: Independence Day. December 25? Not really, for our response to the date is secondary—it reminds us, “Christmas.” December 7? Perhaps for those alive and aware of events in 1941; but remember that President Roosevelt amplified the date with a declaration that it would “live in infamy.” No one pronounced such an imprecation on 9/11, nor did anyone have to. That numeric designation of a date—something to which we have become accustomed only in our age of digital information—is seared in the collective memory of our society in a way that stands by itself.

Indeed, the date to some extent even became a cliché. In the immediate aftermath of the attack some in public media annoyingly recited the date as “Nine-One-One” rather than “Nine Eleven,” a play on the standard emergency telephone number. That cliché that faded for a short time until left-wing filmmaker Michael Moore released his anti-war, anti-Bush diatribe “Fahrenheit 9-1-1” (“nine-one-one”), a title in mimicry of Ray Bradbury’s famous futuristic novel *Fahrenheit 451*.

The Immediate Impact. How did this date become so soon embedded in our national consciousness? I believe it is because of the profound depth of the shock our nation experienced that day, which the rest of the world seemed to share in an unusual way.

The power and depth of that shock is indicated by the fact that it was strong enough to make Americans do without the National Football League for a couple of weeks in 2001, and just when the season was gaining momentum. This point is not intended to be facetious. Professional football is something like a national religion, not to mention the love of money which certainly rises to the level of idolatry in America. For the NFL to feel compelled to cancel one week of a season and postpone another at a cost of millions of dollars indicates more than jitters about a potential terrorist attack on a crowded stadium. It also indicates the sense of sobriety that fell upon our country. Suddenly football and many other things that Americans pursue with great fervor appeared trivial. That sense of sobriety has since faded, scarcely noticeable even on the anniversary of the attack, but pollsters were still finding its residue months after the attack.

During that same period many things that Americans had taken for granted for years suddenly took on higher priority—patriotism being at the top of the list. Stores sold out of American flags within hours of the attack on September 11, 2001, and the red, white and blue was flying everywhere one looked for weeks and months afterward. People lined up to give blood and money to the cause, although the cause was not very well defined. In the days and weeks following 9/11 enlistment for public service hit an all time high, and young people in particular stepped forward to enter the medical and teaching professions, the armed services, even the CIA. There was a new sense of respect for the military that had not been seen since the Persian Gulf War—perhaps not even since World War II.

For a brief time, Congress paused from being an institution of quarrelling Democrats and Republicans and acted like an institution of Americans. The non-

partisanship was probably talked about much longer than it lasted, but it really did happen, and it was extraordinary.

The shock of 9/11 also had an immediate impact on individual lives throughout the land. People reconciled with relatives and friends who had been estranged. Those who could not be reconciled at least postponed their divorces, and the numbers of them were statistically significant. (These are things that were reported at the time by news media.)

The national emergency also had a strange (though probably predictable) effect on the national libido. Major papers and magazines had feature articles to describe how people were turning to sex for comfort and reassurance in the time of crisis—and it did not even have to be with people they knew or liked. On a darker note, by November the abortion provider Planned Parenthood was reporting a sharp increase in their business of terminating “unwanted pregnancies” (their term).

Not all those pregnancies were unwanted, however (the U. S. did experience a mild baby boom in June and July of 2002), and not all the sex was reckless. People felt a stepped-up sense of urgency about their lives, and either broke off relationships or made permanent commitments—to marry, or to remain single; to have children, or to remain childless. All these things indicate the depth and breadth of the shock felt by the country in the wake of the terrorist attack.

The National Discussion. The watershed significance of 9/11 was shown even in the early days following in the national discussion regarding the event. I have compared 9/11 to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. I am not the only, nor even the first to draw the comparison. A Time Magazine/CNN poll in late 2001 revealed that two thirds of Americans believed the events of September 11 would define a generation the way the Kennedy assassination did.

The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago went further and compared the public response to 9/11 to the response to the assassination in 1963. The comparisons were interesting, perhaps revealing. In 1963 there was a greater feeling of depression and national shame, as opposed to 2001 when there was a greater feeling of anger along with a surge of national pride. More interesting for the point of this essay is the fact that serious research began right away toward making this kind of comparison. Where sociologists begin, historians seem likely to follow.

The national discussion during the extended aftermath (6-9 months after 9/11) also focused on the generation that was coming of age in the midst of these events. As a case in point, the cover story of the November 12, 2001 issue of Newsweek was titled “Generation 9-11.” The story had some illuminating observations, noting:

It’s too soon to tell whether 2001 will be like 1941 when campuses and the country were united, or 1966, the beginning of a historic rift. So far, there have been only scattered signs of a nascent antiwar movement. [Most] students’ views are in sync with the rest of the country....

But students also understand that the future is increasingly unpredictable and that long-held beliefs and assumptions will be tested in the next few years.

As the article points out, “Before September 11, American college students were remarkably insular. Careers were their major concern.” It quotes a 24-year-old graduate student who makes this perceptive comment about his generation:

We had no crisis, no Vietnam, no Martin Luther King, Jr., no JFK. We’ve got it now. When we have kids and grandkids, we’ll tell them that we lived in the roaring 90’s when all we cared about was the No. 1 movie or how many copies an album sold. This is where it all changes.

The story goes on to say, “Despite their perceived apathy and political inexperience, this generation may be uniquely qualified to understand the current battle.” It quotes the president of the University of Pennsylvania, who says:

I think they realize more than the adults that this is a clash of *cultures*, something we haven’t seen in a thousand years.

A “clash of cultures” that “we haven’t seen in a thousand years.” This is a thought that we shall return to in a later essay.

All I mean to point out at the present is that the national discussion about September 11, 2001 immediately began ascribing historical significance to it, and continues to do so now, seven years later. Can there be any question about it? 9/11 remains a central issue in American politics, social policy, and national self-image.

President Barak Obama in his 9/11 memorial speech in 2009 and again in 2016 sought to minimize the martial and political associations America had with the date, and to transform it into a memorial of sacrificial community service. In so doing he illustrated how Americans continue to grapple with the implications of what took place on this day.

A hundred years from now will 9/11/01 still be considered a watershed event? At this point, I do not see how it can be otherwise. It has brought to the fore fundamental, enduring conflicts between cultures, and gave a clear signal that the 21st century would not be an age of peace but a mortal struggle between worldviews—not merely between the West and radical Islam, but also between opposing worldviews within the West.

A shattering event calls for a response. How ought the Christian mind respond, and what answer can the Christian community give to the world? For that we might look for guidance from the greatest Christian mind ever to witness and be affected by the collapse of a civilization and wrote in response. I speak of Augustine of Hippo Regius and his magisterial *Civitas Dei* (*City of God*). But that will require another essay.