

Making Sense of Us is a timely and captivating study. It's rare in that it balances timeless wisdom with clear application for the pressing issues of our day. I agree wholeheartedly with its theme—namely, that our culture offers counterfeit stories of identity and meaning, but only the gospel fulfills our deepest longings.

—**Sean McDowell**, PhD, professor of apologetics at Talbot School of Theology, author of more than 20 books, and a popular YouTuber

If you've ever wondered how to think critically and biblically about the stories the culture tells, and how to tell a better story, this resource is for you. Each teacher helps us consider how our greatest longings ultimately lead us to the only One who truly satisfies. I can't recommend this resource enough.

—**Vanessa Hawkins**, author and director of community life at Redeemer Lincoln Square, New York City

Christianity's influence on our society is undeniable and invaluable. The values our modern society holds most dear, and the goals it wants to progress toward, find their foundation in the fundamental ascendancy of the Christian worldview. Supposing progress—or any cultural longing—can exist apart from Christian values is a pie-in-the-sky pipe dream. As Glen Scrivener skillfully highlights in his *Making Sense of Us* lesson, it's because we are, knowingly or not, immersed in a Christianized society that our desires make sense to begin with.

—**Wes Huff**, historian, researcher, YouTuber, and vice president with Apologetics Canada

It's tough to imagine a better lineup than the one TGC has put together here. Each of these leaders is an expert in reading both the Bible and our culture. The spirit of Tim Keller—and behind him, Lesslie Newbigin—is alive and well in them. Each cultural narrative is explained simply

yet with enough of a twist that you're left going, "Wow, that was fresh and profound."

—**J. D. Greear**, pastor of the Summit Church and author of *Everyday Revolutionary: How to Transcend the Culture War and Transform the World*

We are shaped by the stories we believe. Sadly, we're also surrounded by false narratives that leave us confused, longing, and hopeless. *Making Sense of Us* examines six of the most common of these narratives and helps us see them in light of the biblical storyline—the true, good, and beautiful story God has given to us. Each author skillfully shows us how we can anchor our lives more deeply to the only narrative that gives life.

—**Courtney Doctor**, Bible teacher, director of women's initiatives for The Gospel Coalition, and author of books such as *From Garden to Glory* and *In View of God's Mercies*.

Making Sense of Us is such a timely resource. Engaging with six stories central to Western culture, the study combines theological wisdom, evangelistic creativity, and historical insight with a compelling presentation. It will help people make sense of the world around them, their neighbors, and themselves.

—**Andrew Wilson**, teaching pastor at King's Church, London

What story are you living in? When doing both Christian evangelism and discipleship today, we'd do well to start with that question. We're drawn into stories of courage and honor, friendship and failure, good and evil, and suffering and hope because they speak to our deepest desires and fears. The problem is that the cultural narratives that script our lives have dangerous and deadly plot holes. While unmasking these cultural narratives, the teachers in *Making Sense of Us* neither wag their fingers in condemnation nor shrug their shoulders in passivity. Instead, with clarity and wisdom, they point us to the gospel story. There we see how Jesus crucifies these

false narratives then brings them back to life, redeeming them as subplots in the greatest story ever told.

—**Josh Chatraw**, Billy Graham chair of evangelism and cultural engagement at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama

Cultures, communities, and individual lives are shaped by the stories that surround us, but sometimes these narratives can be hidden beneath the surface. *Making Sense of Us* carefully teases out the stories forming us, then examines each one from the perspective of the Christian metanarrative.

—**Timothy Paul Jones**, PhD, C. Edwin Gheens endowed chair and professor of Christian family ministry at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and author of *Did the Resurrection Really Happen?*

The videos are cinematic and compelling. The workbook is clear and accessible. Either in a class or a small-group setting, *Making Sense of Us* will serve both seekers and followers who want to understand their world and take next steps as followers of Jesus. I can't wait to use this in my church!

—**Seth Troutt**, teaching pastor at Ironwood Church, Mesa, Arizona

Modern life offers so many forms of casual idolatry that promise fulfillment but, in fact, make us miserable. This course brings together some of today's most thoughtful Christian teachers to help us see through the false promises of mainstream 21st-century culture and fix our eyes on Jesus instead.

—**Molly Worthen**, American historian, author, and professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

MAKING **sense** *of* Us

EXPLORING 6 STORIES
THAT SHAPE HOW WE LIVE

A resource from

The Keller Center
for **CULTURAL APOLOGETICS**

Making Sense of Us: Exploring Six Stories That Shape How We Live

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Foreword

Imagine. In the heart of New York City—the city that never sleeps, a place of dreams, ambitions, and stories—this single word draws people from all walks of life. The Imagine mosaic in New York’s Central Park isn’t just a tribute to John Lennon; the artwork itself tells a story that draws us all in, because this word asks us to dream up the world we want. The imagination is the playground of the heart. It’s where we work out the stories we tell ourselves. It animates our lives.

But what if the narratives we think belong to us don’t? What if they’ve been passed down to us, and we’ve absorbed them without even realizing it?

These stories, or *cultural narratives*, answer life’s big questions: Who are we? What are we here to do? How do we find happiness and meaning? Few of us actively think about these questions, because the narratives around us seem to have answered them. These stories shape our assumptions, values, actions, and emotions. They tell us who we are, what we’re here for, and how to live. Let me detail six main stories we tell to make sense of ourselves:

Self: In movies, shows, plays, and books, our culture says, “Follow your heart and be true to yourself.” On Broadway and in film, stories like the one told in *Wicked*’s “Defying Gravity” embody the narrative of the self. Elphaba feels limited by those around her, and so she’ll defy gravity. She won’t let anyone bring her down to earth. This message resonates with us because our culture tells us we get our sense of self not from what others outside us tell us, but only by looking on the inside and discovering our deepest desires.

Happiness: Our culture says, “Do what makes you happy, and don’t let anyone keep you from it.” This narrative asserts that our purpose in life is

to be happy. Since all we can be sure of is the material world, happiness should be found in the right career, relationship, or possession. All the ads you see or hear promise that if you just get *this*, have *that*—then you'll be happy. They don't explain what happens when you get that thing and it doesn't really satisfy you.

Science: We're taught that only science and reason can tell us what's true and fix our problems because science is fact and everything else is just someone's opinion. But if science purely tells us what *is* in the world, can it tell us how things *ought to be*?

Justice: Our culture says morals are socially constructed—not fixed points of reference from an outside authority—but that you should still work for what's right and good for everyone. And unless you do it our way, we'll cancel you. This is a paradox. To insist that right and wrong are relative while advocating for particular views of justice and equality makes us disjointed both in how we treat each other and in how we act ourselves. We might feel that something is good or bad, but we don't have the language or foundation to declare it so. Culturally, we don't have a shared sense of right and wrong, so we're unable to persuade or reason with one another. Instead, we're constantly in conflict, like trains headed in different directions on the same track.

Liberty: We're told, "Live free—just do no harm," "Life's best with the fewest restrictions on my choices," and "If I'm going to truly live, I can only do so if I'm free from constraints. I need to be able to experience all life has to offer without being bound to others." Pay no attention to the studies and experience that show we gain meaning and fulfillment in life through obligations.

Progress: Finally, our culture says we're moving forward in history, away from superstition, religion, and bigotry and toward greater freedom, rationalism, material prosperity, and happiness. We look to the past and we see how we've progressed to the nation we are now. But what can we say about progress when things get worse and not better?

Is it possible that our cultural narratives aren't giving us the complete story about who we are and what our purpose is? Is it possible that while there's

some good in them, they overpromise and underdeliver? Is it possible that these incomplete stories have left us anxious, angry, and alone?

I'm grateful to be an inaugural fellow with The Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics. Launched in 2023, The Keller Center helps Christians share the truth, goodness, and beauty of the gospel as the only hope that fulfills our deepest longings. We've created this curriculum to help you make sense of yourself by understanding the stories that shape our culture and our lives. We'll take a closer look at these powerful narratives—self, happiness, science, justice, liberty, and progress.

As you watch each video and explore the curriculum, our aim is to help you understand these stories and see where they fall short and how they point us to a true and better story—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For each of these narratives, we'll ask, Why do people find this narrative so compelling? Where does this story fall short? How have we inadvertently adopted this narrative in our own lives? And ultimately, how does the gospel speak a better word that more fully meets the need this cultural narrative is trying to address? The goal is to help you (1) identify these narratives, (2) understand how they operate in our lives, (3) see how they're incomplete, and (4) discover how Christianity surprisingly does more than what these narratives promise.

The Christian story is the story of God's love for us, even when we fall short, and the story of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. In the Bible's story, we get a sense of self that's not achieved but received. We find a liberty not from all constraints but through Jesus. We find happiness not in fleeting things but in the joy of his love.

So turn the page, open the first video, and join us on this journey as we seek to make sense of ourselves by understanding the stories we live by and how God is writing a better story for us all.

Michael Keller

Founding and senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian
Church—Lincoln Square



LESSON 1

Introduction: What Are Cultural Narratives?

JOHN STARKE

I live in New York City, and in this city, noise becomes part of the air you breathe. Traffic rumbling outside your window, your neighbor's music bleeding through the walls, sirens blaring at all hours—you eventually start tuning it out. But even when you stop noticing it, it's still shaping your day. In the same way, we live in a culture that's constantly telling us stories—stories about who we are, what matters, and how to be happy. Even when we're not aware of them, they're still shaping us.

Our culture's stories seek to answer the deepest questions of life: Who are we? What's gone wrong? What's the solution? These stories—these *cultural narratives*—ground our reality and help us make sense of ourselves. Though we often don't realize it, these competing “visions of the good life”¹ are the stories we live by. Our cultural narratives aren't just ideas; they're scripts we inherit, the frameworks we rely on to tell us who we are and how to live. At the most basic level, they're what we put our faith in.

But there's another side to these stories. They're brittle. They can't carry us through suffering. They promise identity, purpose, justice, freedom, truth, and joy. They offer us meaning, but they often leave us

CULTURAL NARRATIVES

The scripts and
frameworks we inherit
that tell us who we are
and how to live.

1 Trevin Wax, “A Tool for Evangelism,” in *The Gospel After Christendom: An Introduction to Cultural Apologetics*, ed. Collin Hansen, Skyler R. Flowers, and Ivan Mesa (Zondervan Reflective, 2025), 19.

disoriented because they fail to deliver on their promises. Because we've absorbed our culture's narratives, we're left restless, confused, and searching for something more stable, something true.

For instance, we've been disciplined to "be true to ourselves," to "live our truth," to "believe that things will get better." But if those scripts work, why are so many of us still anxious, burned out, and unsure of who we are? It's not simply that people are "doing it wrong." It's that these stories can't bear the weight of our longings. We need a story true enough to hold us—a story that doesn't collapse under pressure but carries us through it. We need a better story, one that won't fragment us but will form us.

The gospel offers us that better story. The apostle Paul said, "But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship" (Gal. 4:4–5, NIV). This story isn't just another option. It's the story of God and his purpose for the past, present, and future. It's the true story of the world—a story that makes sense of our longings, struggles, and hopes. As Christopher Watkin writes, "The Bible makes sense of us. It makes better sense of us than we can make of ourselves."²

Just think: What if identity isn't something we discover but something we receive? What if freedom isn't just the absence of limits but the presence of purpose? What if justice didn't just condemn the guilty but could restore what's broken? The gospel offers a story that helps us make sense of ourselves in light of the One who made us. As John Calvin suggested, we can't truly know ourselves apart from knowing God.³ The gospel helps us see ourselves not through the

THE GOSPEL

The good-news announcement that because of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection, God saves from sin and graciously welcomes everyone who believes into his eternal kingdom.

2 Christopher Watkin, "A Biblical Vision," in *Gospel After Christendom*, 36.

3 John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1 (Westminster John Knox, 2011), 1.1.1.

fragmented lens of cultural ideals but in the light of God, who knows us and calls us to himself.

Through the *Making Sense of Us* study, we're inviting you to explore six common cultural narratives and then to discover how the gospel provides a better word.

- **Self:** We're all asking, "Who am I?" Our culture's story of self answers this question by saying, "Listen to your heart! Look deep inside and you'll find your true self." But if that's true, why are we still insecure? It's because self isn't what we're made for. Jesus calls us to make our lives count—not by fulfilling all our dreams but by us dying to self and being crucified with him (Luke 9:23–24).
- **Happiness:** When we ask, "Why are we here? What's our purpose in life?" our culture often answers, "To be happy—to seek comfort and pleasure on our own terms." The Bible doesn't dismiss our desire for happiness; the Bible reorients it. True happiness is a by-product of giving ourselves to God. When we seek him first, we often discover that joy has been taking root all along—quietly, steadily, beneath the surface (Matt. 6:33).
- **Science:** If you're like me, you've wondered, "How do I know what's real? What can I trust?" In a world flooded with information and competing voices, our culture often turns to science as the final authority. If something can be measured or tested, it must be true. But we're also told that science and faith conflict, that believing in God means checking our brains at the door. Thankfully, the Bible doesn't pit faith against reason. It gives us a bigger story—one where science is a good gift, a tool for exploring God's creation, but not the lens through which we understand our deepest purpose (Isa. 45:18–19).
- **Justice:** We all sense that some things are wrong and must be made right. Our culture assumes that injustice is obvious and that we don't need God in order to pursue what's good. But if there's no higher authority—no transcendent moral standard—then justice becomes a matter of opinion or power. The Christian story tells us something far more hopeful—that a perfectly just God sees every wrong done both to

us and by us, and he will one day set everything right (Ps. 89:14; Rev. 21:4). Because Jesus has already entered the world to bear injustice and defeat evil, we can trust that his justice doesn't just punish; it also heals.

- **Liberty:** When we begin to recognize the world's brokenness—and our own—we naturally ask, "Why do I feel stuck? Is there a way out?" Our culture tells us that liberty comes through shedding every restraint. But the Bible offers a deeper freedom—one that doesn't come through self-definition but through surrender. True liberty isn't found in autonomy but in being joined to the One who frees us from sin, death, and the lies that keep us bound (John 8:36).
- **Progress:** Eventually we all ask, "Is there any real hope for the future?" Our culture tends to say, "The past is a burden, but the future is full of promise if we just keep moving forward." The Christian story gives us a different kind of hope. It doesn't deny progress; the Christian story redefines it. The arc of history isn't a steady climb, as if our hope is in human progress—it moves downward first, into death, before it rises in resurrection. In God's story, hope doesn't come from humanity's achievement but from a crucified and risen King who makes all things new (Isa. 2:3–4; Rev. 21:5).

Why does all this matter? This isn't about arguing against culture. It's about understanding the longings underneath all of us. It's about helping everyone see the story we've been living in—and pointing each other to the one true story that offers real life. So I want to invite you to join us. Let's take these stories seriously. Let's examine them, and let's listen together for the better word the gospel speaks.

REVIEW (10 minutes)

Discuss the following questions with your study group.

- What stood out to you from the video?

- John defined cultural narratives as the “scripts we inherit, the frameworks we rely on to tell us who we are and how to live.” Of the narratives listed above, which one have you heard most often from family, friends, or neighbors? Which one appeals to you the most?
- John said our cultural narratives are “brittle.” He elaborated, “We’ve been disciplined to ‘be true to ourselves,’ to ‘live our truth,’ to ‘believe that things will get better.’ But if those scripts work, why are so many of us still anxious, burned out, and unsure of who we are?” In what ways have you seen these common cultural assumptions fail to deliver on their promises? How have they failed you personally?
- The apostle Paul defines the gospel as the truth that “Christ died for our sins” and that in him we are “made alive” (1 Cor. 15:3, 22). Do you believe the gospel can help us to make better sense of ourselves? In what ways is it difficult to believe this?
- Which of the six stories are you most excited to explore more during this study? Why?

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DIG DEEPER (20 minutes)

Read Galatians 4:1–7 (NIV) out loud.

¹As long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. ²The heir is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. ³So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world. ⁴But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. ⁶Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “*Abba*, Father.” ⁷So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

Verse 3 describes the fundamental structures that govern our world. These “elementary principles” (ESV) or “elemental spiritual forces” (NIV) are Paul’s way of describing the assumptions people hold about the world we live in. These assumptions include the cultural stories we live by. Our culture’s narratives reveal our deepest longings and desires for peace, security, belonging, and purpose. How are these good desires answered by the gospel’s better story?

Paul compares the role the “elementary principles” play in our lives to the role of the guardians or trustees of a minor who hasn’t yet come into his full inheritance (see also Col. 2:8, 20). These principles dictate what we must do to grasp the “good life.” What sort of inheritance, or “good life,” do our culture’s narratives offer us?

Jesus offers the privileges of “adoption to sonship” to those who have faith in him. List some of the benefits Christ offers us as part of our spiritual inheritance (see Rom. 8:12–39 and Eph. 1:3–10).

CONVERSATION, PRACTICE, AND APPLICATION

(20 minutes)

Discuss the following with your study group.

- In what ways do people today seek to make sense of themselves? In what ways have you tried to make sense of yourself?
- Why do we find these paths to self-knowledge so compelling?
- What questions might you ask a friend to show how our culture's way of "making sense of us" falls short?

Read this quote from John Calvin and discuss it with your group.

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.⁴

It's tempting to think that when Calvin talks about knowing ourselves, he means understanding our feelings, personality, temperament, or family history. There's a place for all this, but Calvin chiefly had in mind understanding the wonder of God's love for us and our desperate need for the salvation he provides.

- What biases, character flaws, and sins keep us from understanding God and ourselves?
- What virtues or practices might help us to better understand both ourselves and the Lord?

4 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.1.

CLOSING PRAYER

Contrary to our culture’s messages, the “good life” isn’t found by digging deeper into ourselves or running headlong after a cause but is found in the unchanging person of Christ. Pray with your group that God would give you a deeper understanding of himself and his good purposes for you as you go through this study.

Father, thank you for revealing yourself to us in your Word. Thank you for sending Christ when the set time had fully come. Give us humble hearts and listening ears to make sense of ourselves, our culture, and you. Amen.

HOMEWORK

Look for cultural narratives this week. You may find them in a book, magazine, movie, TV show, commercial, social media post, or conversation with a friend. Record what you see and be ready to share these observations with the group next week.

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LEARN MORE

To learn more about cultural narratives, check out these resources:

Beginner

Glen Scrivener. *The Air We Breathe: How We All Came to Believe in Freedom, Kindness, Progress, and Equality*. Good Book, 2022.

Daniel Strange. *Making Faith Magnetic: Five Hidden Themes Our Culture Can't Stop Talking About . . . and How to Connect Them to Christ*. Good Book, 2021.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West. *The Gospel Way Catechism: 50 Truths That Take On the World*. Harvest House, 2025.

Intermediate

Joshua D. Chatraw. *Telling a Better Story: How to Talk About God in a Skeptical Age*. Zondervan Reflective, 2020.

Timothy Keller. *Preaching: Communicating Truth in an Age of Skepticism*. Viking, 2015.

Timothy Keller and Michael Keller. *The Stories We Live By: How Jesus Critiques and Completes What Our Culture Tells Us*. Zondervan, 2026.

Advanced

Collin Hansen, Skyler R. Flowers, and Ivan Mesa, eds. *The Gospel After Christendom: An Introduction to Cultural Apologetics*. Zondervan Reflective, 2025.