



Places of Spirit and Light

by Larry Mendenhall



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Commentary

Small, country churches are about as common a photographic subject as our sand dunes, rocks and trees, waterfalls, and rusty cars. White church portfolios crop up with amazing frequency in our submissions reviews, but this project stood out from the crowd. Instead of focusing on the building, the furniture, the stair cases, where the windows and doors, Mendenhall draws our attention to the light. All the physical objects are simply props that show us the light. His entire portfolio is a deft handling of light and shadow. This may be a white church, but it feels like a light church.

For years, I've chided my fellow photographers who say that photography is "about light." I often insist that photography is "about *life*." Well, they say there are exceptions for every rule.

Photography *can* be "about light" inasmuch that light is as much a part of life is anything else. In this project by Larry Mendenhall, light *is* the subject—or at least one of the subjects. Every image in this portfolio includes essential directional light and/or the gentle shadows created by that light.

This is a terrific example of the importance of knowing precisely what it is that one is photographing. If this were a portfolio of the building, it would've required a completely different approach to exposure and processing. Knowing he was photographing the light, however, meant that all of his exposures were tuned to emphasize that end of the total scale.

The project is filled with deep shadows, barely visible details in the darkest tones, and delicate highlights that glow against these dark backgrounds.

HDR is all the rage these days and many photographers would be tempted to use that technique to balance the extremes. But, an HDR approach would be useless for this project. Be careful about viewing the world as a nail when you have a new shiny hammer in your toolbox.

This image also illustrates one of the challenges of the global audience we have today. In Western culture, the window seen in this image is immediately understood as religious architecture. It isn't necessary to explain to us that this is a church, and therefore it's not necessary to explain to us that this book is some religious text—probably a Bible, or perhaps a book of sermons or hymns. All of that is inherently understood because we know the cultural reference from the architectural detail. On the other hand, show this photograph to some distant and far-reaching culture unfamiliar with Christian architecture and this photograph might fail completely to communicate any spiritual overtone. Photography may be a universal medium, but the content of a photograph may include symbolism that is not as universal as we might assume.