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Change?

I grew up shopping at Montgomery Ward; “Ward’s” as they were known to everybody. On December 28, 2000, Ward’s announced it was filing Chapter 7 bankruptcy and closing its doors. They were one of the nation’s oldest retailers.

The company’s early history is quite a story. Aaron Montgomery Ward worked as a salesman for various dry-goods merchants throughout the Midwest and South. He found many consumers in rural areas were at the mercy of local merchants who often overcharged them. He had an idea, railroads and mail service were improving. What if he bought dry goods directly from manufacturers and sold them via mail order to rural customers, eliminating the middlemen? He launched in 1872.

Ward’s early success was nothing to write home about. A new idea changed things. Emblazoned on their catalog was their new motto: “Satisfaction guaranteed or your money back.” The business took off. Ward’s tenacious labor began to pay off. The company that started off with \$1,600 of capital in 1872 had sales of \$300,000 in 1878. Nine years later, Ward’s sales rose to \$1 million. By 1900, the company catalog grew to 500 pages and was being mailed to more than one million people a year.

In 1901, Ward retired. For the next 20 years, the company thrived. However, around 1910, some things began to change. In 1886, Sears, Roebuck & Co. had been founded and it, like Ward’s, was a catalog-based operation serving rural consumers. When both companies began, most of the U.S. population lived in rural areas. But urbanization was sweeping the land. The 1920 census showed that for the first time in the

nation’s history, most Americans lived in urban centers and shopping habits were changing as a result.

Robert E. Wood, former Army Quartermaster General, was hired to run Ward’s in 1919. He saw the coming boom in retail sales. His plan was to open stores in cities where people could shop in person. The company owners were unwilling to go along with the idea. This was the first of a series of decisions dealing with changing times and demographics that would prove to hasten the end of this company.

Wood left Ward’s in 1924 to serve at Sears as vice president. He convinced the people at Sears to take a chance on urban retail stores. The following year, a test store was opened in Chicago. It was an immediate success. By 1929, the company had built more than 300 stores. Even during the Depression, while Ward’s was holding back, Sears continued to expand. In 1931, Sears’ retail store sales surpassed catalog sales. Wood became the chairman of Sears and the company became the country’s most successful department store chain.

Montgomery Ward never recovered from that first refusal to change. For the last 25 years of the 20th century, it struggled to keep its doors open. One hundred and twenty-eight years after a great idea took hold, Ward’s closed forever.

Some Lessons?

First, Ward’s refused to pay the price to change. Familiar ways, comfort zones, automatic practices, established habits, and traditions were apparently seen as more valuable than the long-term viability of the company. Second, Ward’s refused to change strategy to connect

with a changing world. They were not being challenged to change their mission, their merchandise, or their core values. It was their strategy that needed an overhaul. Third, Ward’s first refusal to change led to a series of refusals to change. Resistance to change became a mindset, the norm, and maybe a core value. Fourth, Ward’s refused to believe that doing business the way they did it yesterday might not be effective today.

There are clinical terms to describe people who deny reality. Ours is a world of change. Do I have to say it? Of course, God and His Word have not, and will not change. How we function in and communicate with our world does change. Distinguishing between the unchangeable and the changeable shouldn’t be that difficult. It is necessary.

Reality: Urbanization has revolutionized our world. Technology has changed how we live in, see, and interact with our world.

The need: Warriors who will hold the unchangeables tightly and change whatever else makes for effective world evangelization. A mindset of resistance to change will produce bad decision after bad decision. Many churches have become so insulated from their communities that they are irrelevant. That’s called hiding your light. We need to ask ourselves, “If we keep going like we’re going and doing like we’re doing, will the faith of our fathers be available for our grandchildren?”

Ward’s missed it. God help us if people miss heaven because we couldn’t understand the times and know what to do.