

Beer and the Bible? One Company Makes Bold Stance Against Apostasy With Alcohol

Australia's biggest domestic beer maker has pulled off the unthinkable, driving thirsty customers away from drink after it supported a church-run debate about same-sex marriage with beer bottles featuring Bible verses.

The family-owned Coopers Brewery Ltd. had so far managed to avoid scandal during its 155 years of business but quickly learned a lesson about the power of social media.

Coopers, a regular donor to religious charities, said a week ago it would celebrate the Bible Society's 200th anniversary by selling 10,000 cases of beer with Bible verses on the label.

As part of the celebrations, the brewery and the Bible Society released a video in which two beer-drinking politicians debated same-sex marriage. One of the politicians, Tim Wilson, has said he wants to marry his long-term male partner, while the other, Andrew Hastie, said he supported "traditional marriage."

A backlash quickly followed, with the Coopers Facebook page flooded with complaints.

Some pubs in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia's two biggest cities, said they would stop serving the company's beer because of its light-hearted approach to same-sex marriage, which is illegal in Australia but has wide community support.

"We will be taking their Pale Ale off tap after our current kegs are blown," Sydney's Union Hotel said in a Facebook message.

"Their views on marriage equality are at odds with not only those of our staff, but [also] our locals and the broader community," it said.

Mike Bennie, a Sydney beer and wine critic, said: "Making light of any social justice issue in Australia right now is not particularly helpful."

One Melbourne nightclub manager posted footage online of himself smashing bottles of Coopers.

Coopers said in a statement on Sunday the video was a "light-hearted but balanced debate about an important topic." It later denied authorizing the video.

Managing director Tim Cooper and finance director Melanie Cooper issued a video on Tuesday apologizing for causing offense and saying the company "supports marriage equality."

Hastie and Wilson both said they were disappointed by the backlash.

Coopers has so far defied a steady downturn in Australian beer consumption because of its reputation as an independent brewer and its strategy of building a presence in inner-city pubs, where upmarket ales are popular.

The company says its sales have grown 16 percent a year since 2003, while at the same time Australian per capita beer consumption has fallen every year but one. {eoa}