

SCAFFOLD SPEECH

Christopher Layer (1683–1723)

A leading defender of High Church and Tory principles, Francis Atterbury (1663–1732), Bishop of Rochester, fell from prominence after the Hanoverian accession. Though a committed Anglican, he eventually began corresponding with the Jacobite exiles. The discovery of a 1721 plot to kidnap King George I led to the discovery of letters implicating Atterbury and others, resulting in their imprisonment.

Although no evidence unequivocally implicated Atterbury, a group of Jacobites did indeed form a plot to place the Pretender on the Throne. Christopher Layer, a London barrister, played the leading role among the conspirators, travelling to Rome to inform the Pretender of their plans. The French regent learned of the plot and informed the English government, which immediately imprisoned Atterbury, Layer, the Earl of Strafford, the Earl of Arran, the Earl of Orrery, and Baron North, among others.

After extensive investigations, legal proofs could only be found against Layer, who was condemned to death in November 1722. The government postponed his punishment, hoping he would implicate his fellow plotters, but Layer refused to do so. Six months after his condemnation, Layer was hanged.

Tyburn, 17 May 1723

Being now in a few minutes to appear before the tribunal of God, where (although most unworthy) I hope to find mercy—which I have not found from men in power—I have endeavoured to make my peace with His Divine Majesty by most humbly begging pardon for all the sins of my life. And I doubt not of a merciful forgiveness, through the merits of the passion and death of my Saviour, Jesus Christ. For which end, I earnestly desired the prayers of all good Christians.

Some means have been proposed to me for saving my life, which I looked upon as inconsistent with honour and conscience, and therefore I rejected them. For, with God's assistance, I shall prefer any death to the doing of a base, unworthy action. I only wish now that the laying down of my life might contribute to the service of my King and country, and the re-establishment of the ancient and fundamental constitutions of these Kingdoms, without which no lasting peace or true happiness can attend them. Then I should indeed part with life even with pleasure. As it is, I can only pray that these blessings may be bestowed upon my dear country. And since I can do no more, I beseech God to accept of my life as a small sacrifice towards it.

I would not have you think that I am a member of the schismatical church, whose bishops set themselves up in opposition to those orthodox fathers who were unlawfully and invalidly deprived by the Prince of Orange. I declare that I renounce the communion and that I die a dutiful and faithful member of the non-juring church, which has kept itself free from rebellion and schism, and has preserved and maintained true orthodox principles, both as to Church and state. And I desire the clergy, and all members of the revolution church, to consider what bottom they stand upon when their succession is grounded upon an unlawful and invalid deprivation of catholic bishops, the only foundation of which deprivation is a pretended Act of Parliament.

I freely forgive such as ungenerously reported false things of me, and I hope to be forgiven the trespasses of my youth by the Father of Infinite Mercy, into Whose hand I commend my soul.

The Last Speech and Dying Words of Christopher Layer, Esquire (Newcastle, J. Swalwell, 1723).