In this well-documented and insightful book on children’s church and children’s sermons the Kampen emeritus professor Houtman skillfully analyzes numerous sermons as well as their many specific preaching and publishing contexts. Houtman’s volume is divided into five parts: 1) the historical background of the phenomena; 2) an overview of the sermons’ transition into literature; 3) a description of children’s church and sermons within the context of the national church in the first half of the nineteenth century; 4) a contrasting analysis of their usage in the second half of the century in orthodox and liberal circles; and 5) bonus samples of children’s sermons for the holy days.

Children’s church and sermons emerged early in the nineteenth century in the aftermath of revivalism which had swept through western nations, including the Netherlands. Houtman also detects Enlightenment influence behind the development. Churches revived interest in the faith-formation of children in this charged, social context.

Lacking specific church order regulations to govern the practice, variations inevitably evolved. The common thread, however, was a growing consensus that the regular services and, especially, the sermons, were beyond the reach of the little lambs; so there was impetus for a more kid-friendly church experience. For the Word to be heard it must be in the language of the listeners, young listeners included.

When offered, children’s church usually occurred on Sunday afternoons between the ordinary worship times. These special services were either reserved for particular Sundays or conducted for predetermined stretches during the church year.

Indications are, according to Houtman, that children’s church was considered a bonafide worship experience, geared for children from around six to sixteen years of age. The regular liturgical order was retained except for the sacraments. If he had the gifts and desire for it, the pastor himself led the service and preached the sermon. In fact, some ministers gained the warm reputation of a ‘children’s preacher.’ That being said, sometimes a school teacher or elder would bring the message. In some locations, children took part in leading the service as in the Scripture reading. Such involvement was noted more than once to be performed with more preparation and inspiration than readings at the regular services.

Children’s church is not to be confused with another practice which also arrived with revival winds. Sunday schools targeted the unchurched and were
conducted more free-wheeling. However, usually all youth were welcome and encouraged to attend the children's church. Some adults took back row seats to keep an eye on their children or if there happened to be a particularly talented preacher on hand. It was also not unknown to conduct services in juvenile correctional facilities and orphanages. Designed for youngsters, a rule of thumb limited children's worship to merely an hour.

Not a few pastors stepped down from the pulpit to preach more intimately, closer to the children. Sermons were delivered in simple, direct language a child could grasp. Almost always focused on stories of children from the Bible, if not a simple catechesis, the messages never failed to deliver explicit application (don't lie, don't fight, and obey your parents). When preaching morality from Bible characters, you sometimes must improvise a bit as the young listeners were assured by one pastor that when Noah’s sons found their father in an embarrassing circumstance that surely he was no street drunkard but rather, unprepared for the exquisite quality of the grapes on the refreshed earth.

A significant number of children's sermons found their way into print which, according to Houtman, cast them into a new genre. These were not only employed as ‘reading sermons’ when a capable speaker was unavailable, they were also, albeit rarely, used in Sunday schools. But especially, it is surmised, they were utilized in the homes during family worship and by the children themselves.

As to be expected, not everyone was pleased with the whole idea. Some felt that while a brief word for the children in a sermon was fine, the youth were obligated to get as much as possible from the regular services as presented. Others insisted that it degraded the pulpit when the pastor spoke in a childish manner. Finally, there were those who pined for the old Reformation catechetical service designed as a somewhat informal family teaching event rather than having evolved into a lengthy theological lecture.

Houtman uncovers growing differences in children sermons during the second half of the century reflecting the new, theologically diverse, ecclesiastical landscape. Unsurprising, the content of the messages of the orthodox seceders and the state church tended to take on their own distinctives.

The Afscheiding churches ventured a more cautious approach at first. Where it did occur, sermons resonated with an historical-redemptive thrust centered on the cross, emphasizing the wages of sin, forgiveness through the blood atonement, the priority of personal devotions, urgency to spread the Good News among the lost—whether abroad or nearby, and alms for the poor.

The Dutch mainstream church, de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, had retained a fair number of their own conservatives but ‘enlightened’ sermons tended to focus on the benevolent actions and teachings of Jesus as an example