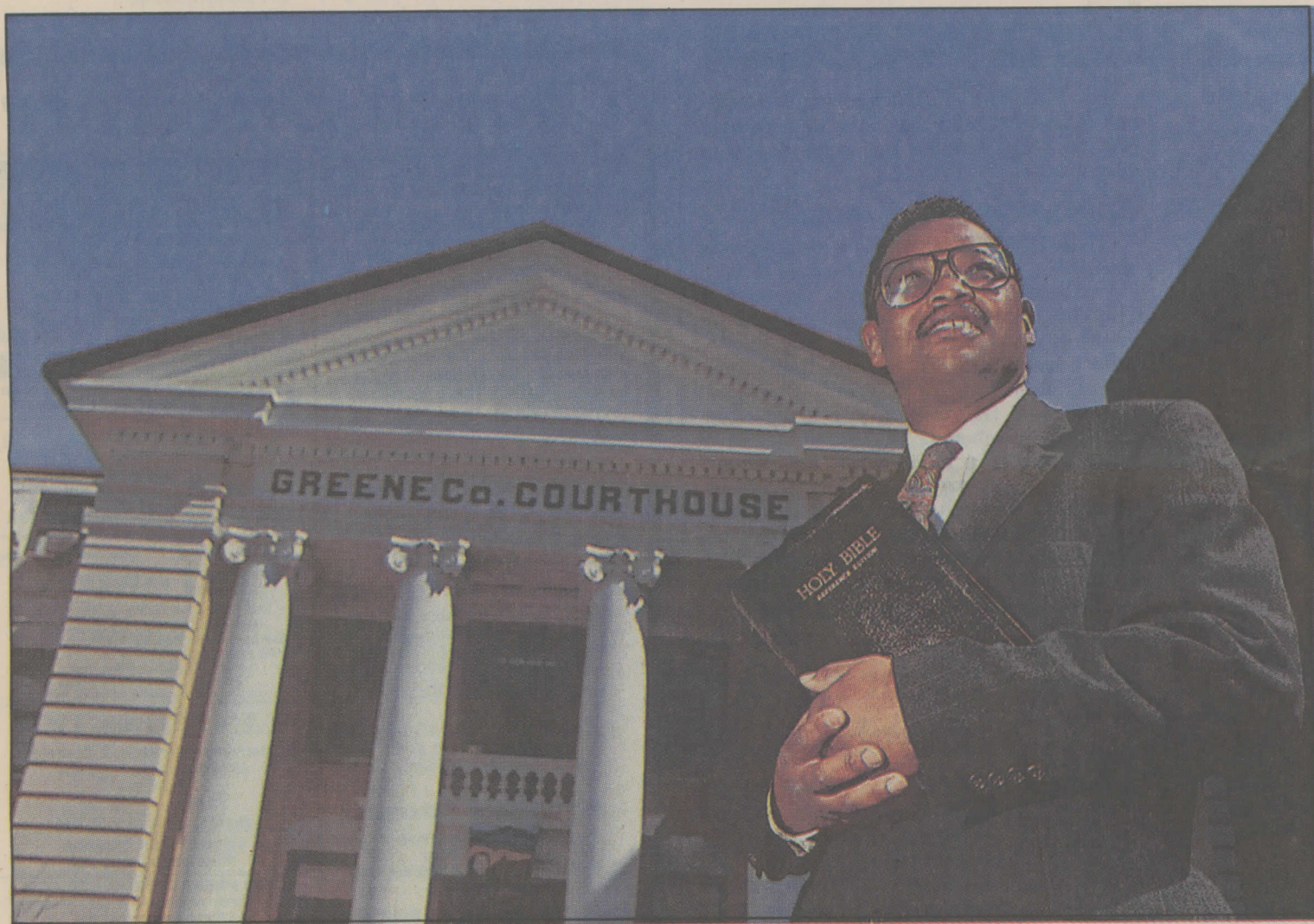


Following two paths

... and the laws of man.



Joe Howell/News-Sentinel staff

Cecil C. Mills Jr. stands in front of the Greene County Courthouse. He balances his roles as a prosecutor and an ordained Baptist minister and says the two have never presented him with moral conflicts.

By Jim Balloch

Staff writer

Cecil C. Mills Jr. does not just live by two sets of laws, he serves them both.

The laws of God, and the laws of man.

Mills, 41, has been a state prosecutor in Greene County for 11 years, and an ordained Baptist minister for 13. Since 1993, he has pastored Friendship Baptist Church, as his late father did for 37 years.

"I am a lawyer because I wanted to be a lawyer," he said. "I am a minister because I had no choice, although it took me a long time to see that. When I finally accepted the fact that I was called, a great weight fell off my shoulders."

So far, Mills has encountered no conflict requiring him to choose one path over the other. "Should that situation ever arise, then whatever the consequences may be, I will follow the laws of God," he said.

There have been less drastic conflicts.

Married and the father of three children, he sometimes frets that the time demands of his law career and his family cut into the time and attention to his parishioners.

"Sometimes, I feel like I'm cheating them," he said. "My father was there for them 24 hours a day, something I cannot be. I know that has been a big adjustment for them to make."

And defendants and their lawyers sometimes react unfavorably when he takes a tough, hard-nosed approach to a case, especially in negotiating plea agreements. "I know that some probably regard me as harsh, that they expect a minister to be a more forgiving and merciful man," Mills said. "I sometimes get strange looks when I don't meet their expectations. And that does make me feel a little uneasy, sometimes."

Uneasy, perhaps, but not unswerving. "More than once, I've talked to him about forgiveness, turning the other cheek, I've even quoted scripture to him, and none of it works," said Greenville lawyer Roger Woolsey. "You can't use that to undermine his obligation to

represent the people of Greene County. But, if he believes that a defendant truly deserves a break or leniency, he will consider it."

Mills said he was more nervous about his first sermon than his first lawsuit. "I wanted to make sure I was preaching what God wanted me to preach," he said. "I take that very seriously."

As an assistant district attorney, "I want the victims of crime to feel they have received competent representation."

Woolsey recalled when he and Mills faced off in two jury trials in one day, and two more the next. "Cecil was just as well-prepared for the last case as the first," Woolsey said. "He never loses his composure, never gets personal."

Lurking beneath Mills' ever-pleasant demeanor, however, is a fierce competitiveness.

"I really hate to lose, at anything," Mills said. "I am known as a terrible loser."

More than once, after losing a case he